

## Language Issues in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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In the poem entitled 'An Introduction' Kamala Das speaks candidly about her writing, linguistic problems and personal life which she found at times difficult to negotiate with. Kamala Das has been described as a confessional poet. Confessional poetry is the reverse of Eliot's dictum that poetry is an escape from emotion and personality. In matters of technique also Kamala Das rejected the Pound-Eliot school's tendency to use words, phrases and lines borrowed from Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, French, German and Spanish languages. She did not also look towards those Indian languages for borrowing words which she used freely at home. Her poems remain free from such inter-textualities. This poem has been written in the first person and therefore strikes an intimate note with the reader who is treated as a dear friend or confidant. Kamala Das through her poetry has tried to disrupt and subvert the phallogocentric order and system. At the very outset the poetess tells us that she neither understands nor is interested in politics. However, she knows the names and the political positions adopted by influential politicians like Jawaharlal Nehru clearly. Since politics and politicians are inescapable in India, Kamala Das takes care to know so well the powers that be or the people who matter in the country's life that she can rattle off their names as fast as she can speak days of the week and the names of the months. This is to say that her not being interested in politics does not mean that she is innocent about whatever the destiny makers of India have been up to because their decisions and deeds, rather policies, indirectly or directly cast a shadow on her own life. She gives a very plain introduction by describing herself as an Indian and distinctively brown, and as being born off the Malabar coast in Kerala. Then she tells us about her linguistic abilities in three languages, including Tamil, and her capacity to write in two languages, namely, Malayalam and English. She also informs us that she dreamed in one language and this particular language has not been clearly specified in the poem although one can guess that it is not English.

Kamala Das says that when she started writing in English, many people asked her to desist from doing so because it was not her mother tongue which comes most naturally to all people. English for her was a cultivated language as it has been in the case of most Indians who have chosen to write in this tongue gifted to us by our colonial masters. All sorts of objections have been raised against those wishing to practice creative writing in English, including the

charge of artificiality. Writing in such cases becomes an act of translation and is never as spontaneous as it ought to be. There is always an element of drag and some kind of imaginative resistance offered by the mother tongue which keeps on subverting the imagination from below while it struggles to free itself in the English language. Poetry or creative writing comes out best when the mind is free or devoid of any linguistic burden. Kamala Das inhabits a paradox for three languages simultaneously worked within her; and each language being so powerful inside her that it would never allow one single language to flourish. It is the conflict between these three languages within her that perhaps stultified her writings, making it more of a struggle and less of a release. A woman whose unconscious mind works in Malayalam cannot perhaps give her best in English if the process of writing has anything to do with the unconscious. It is perhaps because of this reason that the poetess received plenty of unsolicited advice from favourably inclined critics, friends, and cousins who called on them frequently. In the choice of English as a medium of poetry the impact of colonialism is unmistakable.

One of the most potent influences on Kamala Das was *The Feminine Mystique* which was published by Betty Friedan in 1963. *The Feminine Mystique* was supposed to be a trap for women formed by men to encourage women to remain within their traditionally sanctioned role of wife and mother. It was supposed to be much more also and so widespread in its outreach that Friedan described it as a problem which has "no name", with sexual and biological roles at the core of the amorphous plight. Like Friedan, Kamala Das also rejected the limitations of this complex. To negate the assertion of women as individuals who wanted to make careers for themselves Freud's conception of "penis envy" was pressed into service and women's traditional roles were granted the colour of a scientific religion. It was against such thoughts that Kamala Das reacted strongly and much of her intellectual strength came from Friedan. Kamala Das's rejection of patriarchal thought was not a simple affair. It was to turn out to be as Alvin Toffler prophetically said like pulling "the trigger on history". But it must be remembered well that the gun was loaded in the English language.

Kamala Das's poetry has a texture of its own but her plight can be seen in the context of Luce Irigaray's belief that those who choose to use language as women have to perform function within the father's symbolic "system of language"

which, according to her, amounts to living under a "death sentence". Kamala Das was confronted by such situations and her victory as a successful poetess symbolises her eventual dismissal of the death sentence in her own court and the credit for having broken many prison walls must unstintedly go to her. While she goes through the dilemma of self-definition, her strong ego is unconscious and her fight for independence also appears to be primarily personal though it was understood by the readers in a universal way. V.K. Gokak raised an important basic question several years ago: "What is the vision of the Indo-Anglian poet?" (Gokak 30). What Gokak had in mind primarily were the themes and, perhaps, language also. When we examine this question with Kamala Das in focus the answer is an obvious one: she wanted to express the inner furies, discontents and the possibility of change for the better in the lives of women. She wrote in a borrowed language after Indianizing it, tempering her poetry with her own individual traits and tried to defy the traditional norms of her society under feminist influence. She did not bother about, as Nalini Kanta Gupta wrote, 'our shrinking from an intense and unwelcome delight' (Gokak 177) She got pleasure out of the pain that a good fight with patriarchy gave her, celebrated the scars that she got in her skirmishes with the male dominated system.

There is yet another aspect to our thinking, conscious or unconscious, that we find it difficult to think purely in one single language and very often be it in our dreams or everyday conversation happen to use loan words from English easily. The number of loan words that we use invariably depends on the level of familiarity we enjoy with the English language or any other. English has permeated our collective unconscious and cultural practices, we do not know very often that we are using loan words from English while employing our own mother tongue. With the progress of modern civilization and the penetration of the imperial regime, English language virtually became inescapable for the educated middle-classes. Lexicologists and linguists have tried to work out equivalents for English words in Indian languages, including Hindi, but most of these words have been rejected by the people as artificial. When we reject English we very often do it for political reasons. In Kamala Das's case we give equal importance to both Malayalam and English and forget linguistic politics, I think the choice of the medium should best be left to the poetess herself. She resented being told which language she ought to be writing in. Kamala Das says that the choice of language is best left to her and should not be dictated by any critic. It may well be the case that the inspiration to write in Malayalam or English in her case was purely a subjective case, a matter of mood and chance or just perhaps personal preference which ought not to be interfered with. It must not be forgotten that those who possess a good knowledge of English or feel comfortable thinking in it very often have the syntax of their mother tongue introjected by English constructions. In the case of bilinguals where both languages have a stronghold in the mind of the user it could

also be vice-versa, depending on the situations. This explains Kamala Das's candid claim that the language she uses becomes hers and like herself with her own angularities and peculiarities of use. Just as we are individuals and like nobody else, similarly our use of language in some crucial way is also unique as Kamala Das says is the case with her. The distortions can be explained as some form of Malayali English.

Kamala Das's sensibility was never English nor could it have been that way spend that she did most of her life in India. Yet the hold of English on her personality and imagination was such that she could never truly be native, therefore, she chose to describe herself as "half Indian", the remaining half pointing towards the westernised side of her being. Kamala Das thinks that it is perhaps a joke that has been played on her by history and that whatever the joke might be the fact of the matter is that she never compromised on her integrity as a writer. To err is human and human Kamala Das calls herself one acknowledging her shortcomings and the blemishes in her writings. However she has no regrets about writing in English because through this language she feels that she could communicate effectively her happiness, desires, hopes and aspirations just as animals and birds communicate with each other by making sounds, similarly she feels that through the English language she could communicate her feelings instinctively. A century and three quarters ago Kasisprasad Ghosh also wrote about his own singing in "caw caw numbers" in his poem entitled "To a Dead Crow". The cawing of crow is the opposite of mellifluous and in this case as also in Kamala Das's case it amounts to accepting and owning up the unsonorous lines as one's own, the way one owns up the oddities and angularities in one's own personality. English had become a part of her mental make-up and her mind unconsciously also worked in it. Speech and sound come before writing and therefore it is through them that our deepest feelings are put across. The poetess tells us that rustling of trees, thunder and lightning during the monsoon, pattering rain and the crackling wood in a fire also make sounds which are devoid of any intrinsic meaning. Here the poet does not seem to bother about any symbolism which poets have read in the sounds or noises that the poetess mentions. When Kamala Das talks about her choice of language she is actually attacking the problem of discursivity and posing questions before those who regulated the discourse of power in her surroundings. One of the important purposes which Kamala Das's poems serve is to reveal, as Showalter says, "the misogyny of literary practice". Women did not have a language and form of their own.

Naipaul says that "because we have been far from authority for many centuries it gives us a special point of view. I feel we are more inclined to see the humour and pity of things". (Naipaul 194) This is perhaps true of Kamala Das also because women in Kerala never did enjoy any authority as such in their society and this deprivation ended with the growth of westernisation and spread of education. The

realization that they were powerless made them angry and Kamala Das's poem entitled 'An Introduction' is an expression of that belligerence with some sense of humour also. The humour is not an innocent one and it is aimed at the society to which she belonged. Kamala Das never seemed to fail to see the pity in her pathetic life and in the lives of Indian women. Like other women she never succumbed to the pressures which the system itself generated and on the contrary reacted sharply against it. In Kamala Das's poem there is some wry humour and plenty of pity along with a liberal dose of self-pity.

The poetess in the next few lines rushes through her development from a child to a mature lady. This process was not an innocent one because the moment feelings of love and sex started developing in her due to the biological compulsions of her body, she was married off much against her wishes. Kamala Das says that marriage meant emotional starvation and sexual exploitation leading to motherhood in her case. It entailed challenges for which she was not prepared, physically and mentally, for they had been simply thrust on her. The result was that she was smashed from within. She withdrew within herself pathetically, all the while indulging in self-pity, instead of fighting it out. Whenever the politics of the sexes is involved, power takes the form of hierarchy. Kamala Das does not merely attack the externals, the symbolic manifestations of patriarchy, but tries to purge herself of what Foucault described as the internal regime of power. Edward Said commenting on 'Foucault and the Imagination of Power' says that: "Power, he writes in his last phase, is everywhere. It is overcoming, co-opting, infinitely detailed, and ineluctable in the growth of its domination." (Hoy 150). When we look at Kamala Das's poetry in this light we discover that inherent in her assertion of independence was her being overpowered by western feminist thought into which she was assimilated by the global feminist movement due to the strength of Europeanized gynocentric discourse. She was soaked in feminism so much that it surfaces and resurfaces all over her poems.

In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in French and its huge success prompted its hurried English translation and soon the good word spread around. Kamala Das was deeply impressed by the ideas contained in this book; and de Beauvoir tried to prove that women had been historically portrayed as deviant and any attempt on their part to gain some freedom was considered abnormal. De Beauvoir's ideas spread through the mediation of the English language in India and reached Kamala Das as they did several other women. She talked about authentic selfhood and said that existence preceded essence. In this sense de Beauvoir tried to prove that women were not born but made, or, rather, one became a true woman through individual action. It was accepted after the publication of *The Second Sex* that gender was a social and historical construct and Kamala Das subscribed to this opinion that women were always treated as the other by patriarchy and it was by strenuous engagement that women could find their true selves. Many of the issues which are embedded and appear in their latest form in Kamala Das's poetry have their roots, theoretically speaking, in *The Second Sex*. It was in *The Second Sex* that de Beauvoir had sought to argue against the repetitive and uncreative existence which had been forced on women that reflected itself in the structures and presuppositions of the society. It was further argued that "the eternal" feminine was a myth and a ploy of the males who historically had invented impossible ideals for women which they were supposed to pursue. Thus, it resulted in a guilt complex which forced women to bear the blame for existence passively. Self-assertion, de Beauvoir, advocated and she also believed that those who pursue an independent course in life among women must also bear the burden of their mistakes, consequences and uncertainties. Striving for independence, which is precisely what Kamala Das attempted, came at a price which very often led the adventurer into "the ambiguity of existence". Kamala Das was not the one to be scared and on the contrary she remained belligerent throughout, contesting as it were, with the pre-assembled and cobbled up values and beliefs of the culture and civilization that had given her birth.

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