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## Letting It All Out: Kamala Das and Confessional Poetry

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### Abstract

This paper intends to bring out Kamala Das's unconventional way of letting her mind out by composing poetry in an uninhibited, confessional and courageous way. Das is considered controversial and often misunderstood for her confessional poetry, a poetic genre which exhibits poet's personal involvement as well as secret life. She boldly brings out her intensely personal experiences including her journey from girlhood to womanhood, her quest for true love both in and outside of her marital bond, her eternal feminine sexual hunger and man-woman relationship as she has perceived. Her autobiography *My Story* (2010), in which she narrates her private and secret stories, clearly backs up her confessional poetry. This paper endeavors to interpret Das's poems as confessional poetry by referring to relevant scholarly articles and interpreting a few poems of Das.

### Keywords

Kamala Das, confessional poetry, female sexuality, female sensibilities, secret life, quest for true love

Born in a traditional, conservative, conformist and patriarchal Malayali family at Punnayurkulam in the Southern Kerala, Kamala Das (1934-2009), one of the most prominent, albeit controversial, Indo-Anglian poets and fiction writers, emerges as a poet of unconventional and confessional poetry. Das, who is known as Madhavikutty to her Malayali readers, ventures into the realm of poetry with utmost grace and courage. Despite being considered as one of the postcolonial iconoclasts such as Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Dr. P. Lal and Pritish Nandi, she is remarkably remembered for her ground-breaking poetry which is personal, challenge bearing and confessional.

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Blessed with in-born and innate poetic talent which she inherits from her renowned Malayali poet mother Nalapat Balamali Amma and influenced by her uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon who was a prominent writer too, Das has stood out as representative voice of the twentieth-century Indian poetry. Her poetic expressions are remarkably open, frank and personal. She writes about the female writers of Nair family and their reluctance of mentioning “sex” in her autobiography *My Story*, “No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed” (Das, 2010, p. 23). Unlike these female writers from the previous generations, Das has been quite expressive about speaking out her own sexual experiences.

Avoiding conventional education which “dumps a lot of junk into the minds of people” (Raveendran, 2009, p. 65), Kamala Das emerges as self-taught genius and a radical thinker who, as Lal and Kulshreshtha mentioned in their article, “felt freely, thought freely, and expressed her ideas and feeling freely” (2015). She charms her poetry with eloquent images and unconventional attitude in her books *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *Descendants* (1967). Her other collections of poetry books like *Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1976), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *Anamalai Poems* (1992) showcase her “secular spiritual concerns.” While writing the introduction to her collected poems *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, K. Satchidanandan comments that he finds the “unnoticed nuances and muted voices that transcend the narcissistic obsession with the body and with herself often attributed to her” (2009, p. 53). Her poems are her spiritual journey stemmed from body to the “Supreme Being” as she confesses in her poetic works.

Kamala Das writes in both English and Malayali language with much ease, boldness, frankness and courage making her a controversial feminist and a prolific writer. She never claims to be a feminist though she always voices femininity, female sexuality and womanly issues which are “unimaginable, unmentionable and lackadaisical” (Lal & Kulshreshtha, 2015) in that particular spatiotemporal context. The poetry she composed “candidly and challengeably” (Lal & Kulshreshtha, 2015) is defined as confessional poetry.

Confessional poetry emerged in America in the 50s. This genre of poetry gathered its concerns from “two cultural forces: the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologizing of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor” (Molesworth, 1976, p. 163). During the fifties, a new post-industrial understanding of mass man was found in American society for which the terms like “alienation,” “lonely crowd,” “inner-directed” were coined. Poets started rejecting “the grain of social atomizing” and focused on “inevitable, distorted enlargement of individual psychology” (Molesworth, 1976, p. 163). Confessional poetry is also seen to be emerged from the degraded branch of the late Romanticism mostly influenced by John Keats. However, confessional poets “deromanticized and liberated poetry from its earlier flamboyance and verbosity” (Satchidanandan, 2009, p. 53).

and writes mostly in verse. The verses are free like the thoughts and emotions of the poet. There is a string of words that reveals poet's psychological state robustly and expressively. Sylvia Plath, Anne Bexton, Judith Wright are the famous confessional poetess in the West.

In India, Kamala Das has been the trendsetter. Although she wrote in two languages – English and Malayali, her words are rooted in her own cultural context. Das was well-aware of her limited vocabulary as she confesses in the interview with Raveendran. When Raveendran asks her whether she faces problems with English language, she asserts, "I face problems quite naturally because my knowledge of word is quite inadequate" (Raveendran, 2009, p. 66). Satchidanandan writes about Das's use of rhetoric in his article, "Her vocabulary was limited as she had little formal education and had mostly grown up outside Kerala, but she turned this limitation to her advantage by her deft and economic employment of being fragile" (2009, p. 51). Like other confessional poets, Das too uses public languages in her poetry to make it sound more real and practically perceived.

In a patriarchal society, where men are free to express their thoughts and repressed desires, Kamala Das has often been misunderstood for playing with words in a very explicitly sexual way. However, her poetry is autobiographical and her autobiography *My Story* backs up her poems as a strong evidence of confession. The poems are sensual yet confessional. Satchidanandan comments, "Here was a voice that was feminine to the core, often confessional in vein, that spoke uninhibitedly about women's desire and her unending search for true love" (2009, p. 53).

Kamala Das exclusively confesses things related to her quest for self as a woman, her overt and covert sexual encounters and her ultimate quest for true love which she searches for both in and outside of her marital bond. She started writing fearlessly after her marriage. As a young wife, Das had many romantic imaginations about her marital conjugation which all ended up in a loveless relationship. She valiantly writes about it all in her poems. Poetry, as Satchidanandan mentions, to her "becomes an organic extension of the body as also a means to ultimately transcend it" (2009, p. 54). She writes boldly about her private life that includes vivid description of male-female body and sexual relationship.

Kamala Das is considered a leading light in Indian confessional poetry as she pompously breaks all the prejudices and stereotypes of the patriarchal society. A well-known poet and critic comments (as cited in Das, 2010, p. 241)

It seems that the past two decades or so have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of longing for freedom in our women's outlook. They have not only claimed parity with men but have vehemently questioned certain age-old social practices and prejudices. This is the predominant theme in Kamala Das's poetry which exposes male chauvinism, its persistent endeavor to play the role of the stronger sex.

She does not claim herself as a feminist the way the idea is perceived in the West. However, she has been very vocal about expressing and confessing her feminine sentiments.

Kamala Das is compared to another confessional poet from the West. Bijay Kumar Das quoted Davendra Kohli in his article. Kohli makes an apt comment on the similarities between Kamala Das and Anne Sexton. He states, (as cited in Das, 2010, p. 243):

The analogy between the lover and water is a vehicle of the poet's symbolic swimming in forever changing and elusive realities of life. In its sexual connotations the image can be compared to the nude swim in a poem by the same name by Anne Sexton:

I lay on it as on a divan  
 I lay on it just like  
 Matisse's Red Odalisque  
 Water was my strange flower  
 One must picture a woman  
 Without a toga or a scarf  
 On a couch as deep as a tomb.

Indeed, one might link Kamala Das not only with Sylvia Plath, but with Anne Sexton who is a truer example of the confessional mode.

Anne Sexton, who is called the "mother of Confessional poetry," writes about "private humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems" (Gill, 2004, p. 272). Kamala Das and Anne Sexton share the similar thematic subjects and formal patterns. Both poetesses dig out the mysterious female selves which explicitly reveal the erotic and libidinal female experiences. The focal point of composing confessional poems for these two poetesses is to break the barriers between the self and self-expression. To express their selves, Das and Sexton both use colloquial language and simple diction in their poems without being much concerned about the rhyme schemes. In "To Bedlam and Part Away Back," Sexton combines the themes of identity, self-doubt and guilt. She writes at the end (as cited in Gill, 2004),

I, who was never quite sure  
 About being a girl, needed another  
 Life, another image to remind me  
 And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure  
 Nor soothe it, I made you to find me.

Similarly, Kamala Das manifests her identity and existence which projects women's position and destiny in a male dominated society. Both Das and Sexton had multiple affairs which they courageously wrote in their autobiographical and confessional poems. Both of them sing of human body, the beauty and ugliness of women's body, the unspoken and tabooed aspects of women's biology. These two confessional poetesses are alike in both structural and thematic composition of the poems.

In the same article, Bijay Kumar Das again quotes Vrinda Nabar who compares Kamala Das with Sylvia Plath. He writes about Plath that she "transforms her confessions into poetry of the most extraordinary complexity and variety. It is ultimately the poetry that matters, with all its direct and metaphorical implications. In Kamala, it is confession that matters and sometimes it seems poetry in incidental" (Das, 2010, p. 243).

Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das—all had gone through massive physical and psychological turmoil since their childhood. They all took refuge in poetry. Plath, like Das and Sexton, is also obsessed with the idea of death which she takes a life force. She writes, “Dying is an art like everything else/ I do it exceptionally well” (Plath, 2015). Similarly, Das also embraces death as she also sees death as an escape from the reality and involvements. Plath, like Sexton, is one of the most prominent confessional poetesses who deals with the idea of love, sexual intimacy, identity and death. Kamala Das, in her own way, composes poems on the similar subject matter and with the similar kind of manner. Therefore, Das’s poetry is confessional in nature and she herself becomes one of the most prominent Indian confessional poets.

Kamala Das, in her confessional poem, “An Introduction,” takes the readers on a textual ride to her personal world and experience and reveals the unspoken and delicate facts about her bedroom secrets. In this poem, she courageously exhibits her uninhibited feminine sensibility. It starts with a postcolonial “dilemma of language and ends with an assertion of identity” (Mishra, 2015, p. 35). It is a journey of an individual that speaks of the general as she writes,

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,  
I speak three languages, write  
In two, dream in one.

Her self-mastered capacity of using two languages to express herself has been questioned by the mass that tried to shackle her identity into a stereotypical box of a brown Indian woman. Since English is not her mother tongue, she is suggested not to use it in her poems and creative works. Nonetheless, she turbulently tells her “Critics, friends, visiting cousins” to leave her alone and let her squeeze out her thoughts and unveil her experiences in whichever language she wants. Das confesses that she owns English as she writes (Raveendran, 2009, p. 65)

The language I speak  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness  
All mine, mine alone.  
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps,

Her bold confession of being an amalgamated postcolonial Indian exclusively diminishes the postcolonial tension of the Indian writers. She, then, sketches her journey from childhood to womanhood by portraying her physical features. As an Indian woman of the mid-20th century, it is a bold expression that articulates the suppressed voices of many women. She writes,

I was child, and later they  
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.

Das, in her other poems too, writes about her menstrual blood and pubis. Her confessional assertion not only represents her as a bold female writer but also encourages other female writers to talk out the feminine sensibilities.

Kamala Das confesses that her “early marriage seems to have given a rude jolt to the sensibility as woman” (Raveendran, 2009, p.65). She was 15 and married to a man of 35. She enters marital life with an ideal and romantic notion of union which made her confess about her bitter sexual experience with her husband. She writes in “An Introduction” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p.07),

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
 Bedroom and closed the door, he did not beat me  
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
 I shrank pitifully.

Das could not endure the pain of the sexual intercourse as it never brought her pleasure. Moreover, her husband Madhav Das was a gay who shut the door in front of his wife while taking his male lover to his private zone to enjoy a moment of sexual union. It shattered her from within and she started looking for true love. She narrates this experience of betrayal in the chapter “A Desire to Die” of her book *My Story*,

At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like old lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rupture, but after some time my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through (Das, 2018, pp. 98-99).

Das’s struggle as a woman is not only with her sexual life but also with the attires she chooses for herself. In the guise of attires, she speaks of voicing her choices. Since her husband is addicted to male body, she wants to be unsexed and chooses to wear shirt and her brother’s trousers. She writes in “An Introduction” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 07),

I wore a shirt and my  
 Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and  
 Ignored my womanliness.

She never wants to be domesticated by blindly following the stereotypically constructed and imposed tradition. Everyone says to “fit in.” She calls them “categorizers” and says that she does not want to be categorized as someone else. She wants to establish her own name and identity. She writes in “An Introduction” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 07),

Be Amy, or be Kamala, or better  
 Still be Madhavakutty, It is time to  
 Choose a name, a role. Don’t play  
 Pretending a game.

She identifies herself as men identify themselves. In search of true love, she meets many men and asks them “Who are you?” All of them reply, “It is I.” Lastly, she also calls herself “I” as she identifies the binary, individual and lonely self in her too. She writes in “An Introduction” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 08),

It is I who drink lonely  
 Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,  
 It is I who laugh, it is I who make love  
 And then feel shame, it is I who lie dying  
 With a rattle in my throat, I am sinner  
 I am saint, I am beloved and the  
 Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours.  
 No aches which are not yours.  
 I too call myself "I".

Kamala Das is bold enough to confess her sins, guilt and vices. It seems she is no different than other human beings. She acknowledges her failures. She criticizes men as they are only concerned with their sexual needs as she writes, "In him...the hungry haste of rivers. In me...the ocean's tireless waiting" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 10). In her opinion, man thinks of physical desires whereas woman seeks true love. In the other poem "The Freaks" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 19), Das writes about the shallowness of a man that hurts woman's emotional urge. She begins the poem,

He talks, turning a sun-stained  
 Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark  
 Cavern, where stalactites of  
 Uneven teeth gleam, his right  
 Hand on my knee, while our minds  
 Are willed to race towards love;  
 But they only wander, tripping  
 Idly over puddles of  
 Desire.

The poetess confesses that "this man with nimble finger-tips unleashes nothing more than the skin's lazy hunger" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 19). She posits her disgust to her lover when she fails to find love. She calls herself a freak that has been waiting endlessly—an act that seems illogical, unnatural and abnormal. She writes,

.....the heart,  
 An empty cistern, waiting  
 Through long hours, fills itself  
 With coiling snakes of silence.....  
 I am a freak. It's only  
 To save my face, I flaunt, at  
 Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

Here, Das calls herself "a freak," because she is well aware of her creative personality that requires more emotional supports. In her interview with Raveendran, she says that "A creative person has more needs—more emotional needs—than a well-adjusted person" (2009, p. 67). She, through her poem, seeks love which is more skin-deep and emotion bearing.

Das's noteworthy use of language glorifies her poetic sensibility. She talks about her experience stoutly and candidly when she depicts the realistic picture of man-woman relationship. In a sexual union, the man dominates and exploits the female body as he thinks of himself to be the "stronger sex" in the binary. In "The Looking Glass" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 20), Das first exhibits the physical features by showing the mirror-images of two bodies. She writes,

Getting a man into love you is easy  
Only be honest about your wants as  
Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him  
So that he sees himself the stronger one  
And believes it so, and you so much more  
Softer, younger and lovelier.

Das describes the man's limbs and the way he urinates. She offers him "the scent of long hair, the musk of sweat between breasts, the warm shock of menstrual blood and all the endless female hungers" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p.20). These are the things, she opines, men desire from women. Her ironical approach to give pleasure to the man ultimately makes her confess about the tough and dejected aftermath of a pleasurable sexual union. She knows it very well that the passionate momentum does not last longer and a woman has to live without him afterwards. To her, love is the essence of life and thus one has to face the life living without her lover. She writes in "The Looking Glass" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 20),

A living without life when you move  
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that  
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only  
His last voice calling out your name and your  
Body which once under his touch and gleamed  
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.

Das has experienced this kind of glumness because her eyes stopped searching for true love when she meets an elderly man. In her book *My Story*, she talks about this man and calls him Krishna—the icon of love—which she has been fantasizing all her life. She kisses on his eyes and says, "You are my Krishna". She looks at the sea and says, "Oh Sea, I am in love at last. I found my Krishna" (Das, 2018, p.175). In the same book, she confesses to find out her true love when she writes her poem "Krishna" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 12). The verse is taken exactly from her book. She writes,

Your body is my prison, Krishna,  
I cannot see beyond it.  
Your darkness blinds me,  
Your love words shout out the wise world's din.

Falling in love is easy for the poetess because she is just to pretend a role. She admits it in her poem "Suicide" (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 26),

I must pretend  
 I must act the role  
 Of happy woman.  
 Happy wife.

However, she asserts with utmost repugnance of pretending a role that she wants to be loved. She writes with an apostrophe to the sea in “Suicide” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 26),

O sea, I am fed up  
 I want to be simple  
 I want to be loved  
 And  
 If love is not to be had,  
 I want to be dead, just dead  
 While I enter deeper,  
 With joy I discover  
 The sea’s hostile cold  
 Is after all skin-deep.

Hence, her quest for true love has been a skin-deep staple. In search of this skin-deep love, she even puts a pretentious smile as if it were a disposable ornament or make-up. She writes in her poem “The Testing of the Sirens” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 30),

I smiled  
 A smile is such a detached thing, I wear  
 It like a flower.

The poetess experiences pain every time she falls in love. Therefore, she falls out of love and later laments. Molesworth writes, “To return to the feel of reality, to restore some sentiment of being, even at the cost of hellish pain, stood out as a major confessionalist tool” (Molesworth, 1976, p.165). She searches for love, fails to find it and returns to reality with a hellish pain in her sentimental being. She still confesses and writes,

Ah, why does love come to me like pain  
 Again and again and again?

Her failure makes her confess that man’s love is cheap and he does not deserve a woman’s glorified love. She writes in “A Losing Battle” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 06),

Men are worthless, to trap them  
 Use the cheapest bait of all, but never  
 Love, which in a woman must mean teas  
 And a silence in the blood.

Those who claim to love her forgetting their wives are also taken under Das’s poetic scrutiny as she writes “A Losing Battle” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 06),

What I am able to give  
Is only what your wife is qualified to give  
We are all alike,  
We women in wrappings of hairless skin.

Confessional poets write about their personal experiences about sex, death, diseases and destruction. Das, too, confesses to have mental illness due to living with a loveless conjugal relationship. She writes in “The Sunshine Cat” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 29),

Her husband shut her  
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books  
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door  
And in the evening when  
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and  
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

Still Das’s thirsty soul never stops seeking true love even in her betrayal’s arms. She writes in “Relationship” (Poem Hunter, 2012, p. 16),

My body’s wisdom tells and tells again  
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace  
And even death nowhere else but here in  
My betrayal’s arms.

There is too much anguish in Kamala Das’s poems. Her “love is crucified in sex and sex defiles itself again and again” in her poem (Iyengar as cited in Kulshreshtha & Lal, 2015). Her uninhibited frankness, bold confession and courageous portrayal of the private let her “self” out and make her a confessional poetess.

Kamala Das successfully established a canonical status in Indian-English poetry. In the famous book, *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom asks a question, “What makes the author and the works canonical?” Bloom then answers, “the answer more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange” (as cited in Das, 2010, p. 248). Kamala Das, in a way, assimilates her readers. Indian readers can take her poetry as a strong representation of women’s problems related to their feminine sensibility and even sexual lives. Living in a patriarchal society, she ignites the courage in women by daringly confessing things related to female body, sexuality and love in a straight-forward public language. She lets her “self” all out by composing confessional poems which will remain timeless, eye-opening and thought-provoking for her readers.

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