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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 14: Kamala Das

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Existentialism

- Western understanding of Existence of man, (his place and function in the worlds, his relationship with God.
- Soren Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre
- Existence precedes essence
- Sartre- *Being and Nothingness* (1943)
- A sense of meaning
- Indian sense of existentialism

Poets:

- Kamala Das (1934)
- Adil Jussawalla (1940)
- Gieve Patel (1940)
- Pritish Nandy (1947

Introduction

- Born in Malabar, Kerala on March 31, 1934
- Born as Hindu but converted to Islam (1999)-Kamala Surayya
- Malayalam writing – ‘Madhavikutty’
- Mother: Balamani Amma (royal Nalapat clan)
- Her father felt that she should stop studying and turn to marriage and domesticity. She got married to a bank Officer – Madhav Das, at the age of 15.
- Wrote in English and Malayalam
- Died in 2009



Life and Achievements

- Das lived her life in
  - Kerala,
  - The metro cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi
- 1963: Won the PEN'S Asian Poetry Prize
- Short-listed for Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984
- Won Sahitya Akademi award in 1985 for her Collected Poems
- 'The eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity'- Naik



Confessional Poet

- ✓ Emerged in early 1960's
- ✓ Private experiences in autobiographical style
- ✓ Often focusing on traumatic experiences
- ✓ American Poetry: Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell
- ✓ Poetry of 'I'- Capturing and remaking the 'self'
- ✓ Autobiographical – Her ethnic identity and Culture

..you cannot believe darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and Was proud, and loved ...I who have lost My way and beg now at strangers' doors to Receive love, at least in small change?
("My Grandmother's House")

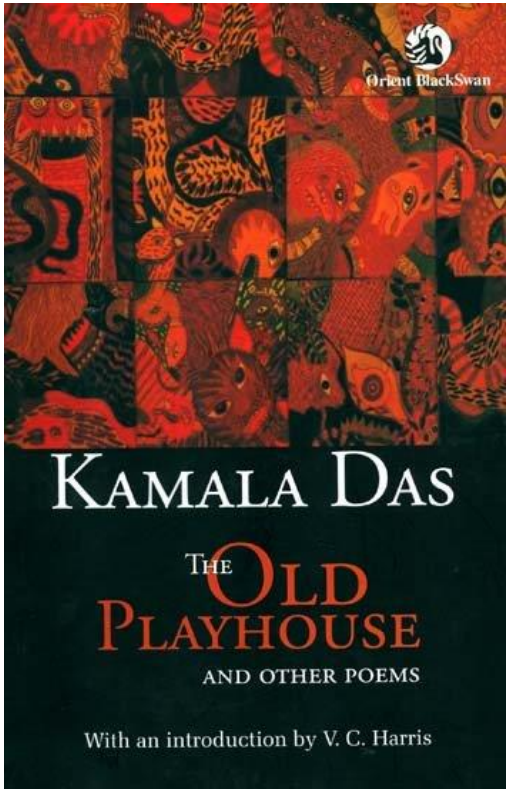
Das on her own Muse

- ‘There is some discovery that I have made recently that while I live I cannot write and while I write I cannot Live. Either live or write poetry. I cannot do both at the same time. There is no audience here for English poetry.’ –Kamala Das
- She felt ‘education was full of things that are of no use to you in real life.’
- ‘A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.’- Kamala Das
- Her 50’s poems are subjective and lyrical but her 60’s poems are metaphysical.

Das' Poetry Collections

- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965)
- *The Descendants* (1967)
- *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973)
- *Collected Poems Vol. I* (1984)

- Regularly published in *The Century*



“An Introduction” (From *Summer in Calcutta*)

Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half-Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see?

Contd...

I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.
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.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank Pitifully.

Then … I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a Nympho.

“The Dance Of The Eunuchs”

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... There were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some
Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and or children left unborn....

Contd…

Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children wide-eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....

Characteristics of Her Poems

- Confessional mode such as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell
- Frank confession of dissatisfaction, Iconoclasm
- Childhood memories triggered
- Intense sexual desire followed by guilt,
- Characteristically Psychological with tendencies towards 'depression, self-consciousness and flamboyance'.
- Full of fantasies, startling images and a sense of self
- Traumatic frustration in love and marriage.

'-woman as sweetheart, flirt, wife, woman of the world, mother, middle-aged inatron-and above all, woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of the psychological processes behind both femininity and masculinity.' - Naik

“The Old Playhouse”

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
Lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions.

Contd…

You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer
Begins to pall. I remember the rudder breezes
Of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves. Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always shut.

Contd...

Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,
For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

Analysis of “The Old Playhouse”

- Disenchantment with married life
- Emotional Vacuum
- Protest against egoistical husband
- Figurative Language
- Male dominated society –Power Politics
- Use of Mythical allusions – Narcissus
- Feminist element

“She seems to have shed almost all her inhibitions both as a Woman and as an Indian Woman.”- Naik

“The Sunshine Cat”

They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh, to forget, and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.

Contd…

They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears,
She said, walls to shut me in. Her husband shut her
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like
A yellow cat to keep her company.
But soon
Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a half-thin line, 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.

Analysis of “The Sunshine Cat”

- From the collection *Summer in Calcutta*
- Highlights disastrous consequences of lust leading to destruction.
- Forlorn woman : Physical and Mental suffering
- Emotional and spiritual satisfaction?
- Cynic men
- Extra-marital relationships
- Frustration in love

Das' Concern for other Women

A woman wearied
by compromise
Her legs quilted
with arthritis
And with only a
hard cough
For comfort.

I asked my grandmother
One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark
Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?
With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends thus with a query. It is this designated
Deafness that turns mortality into
Immortality, the definite into
The soft indefinite. They are lucky
Who ask questions and move on before
The answers come, those wise ones who reside
In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubts
For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
In life, like music in the Koel's egg,
Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree....
(From Nani)

Natural style

Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman…. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. 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 had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.

("The Looking Glass", from Descendants)

Language and Versification

- Lines ending in unstressed syllables
- Stress –based and conversational on occasions
- Deliberate dropping of definite and indefinite articles
- English creolized at times

"Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs, and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English."
- (Bruce King)

Kamala Das's Assessment

- "As Ramanujan's poetry suffers from an excess of intellectual control, Das's poetry is harmed by a lack of intellectual moulding. (Vilas Sarang)
- Like Browning's women, her persona too sees herself in different situations against a concrete background, reacting to 'incidents in the development of the soul'. (M.K. Naik)
- "Das has occasionally maintained that her poems have nothing to do with her, but merely a poetic persona that resembles her, she has, in truth, vacillated on the issue, and has sometimes willfully suggested (especially in her autobiography My Story) that the poems are factual and autobiographical".

  (R. Raj Rao)
- "Even when critics of the future expose the weaknesses of Das's poetry she will miraculously transcend the criticism and appeal directly to her readers." (Vrinda Nabar)

Contd…

- “Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near-neurotic world. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love, the lazy animal hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliations are the warp and woof of her poetic fabric. She seldom ventures outside this personal world.” (K.N. Daruwalla)
- … Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that she is obsessed with sex and marriage and social roles. What she is intent on is honesty of impulse and a sense of direction to the flow of her wants and feelings. (Mehrotra)

Conclusion

- ✓ Das is an existentialist and searches for meaning and self.
- ✓ There is a dualism between the body and the soul in her poems.
- ✓ Her frank assertion and free flow of conflicting emotions are her weapon to respond to the patriarchal dictates in society.
- ✓ Her poetry has a feminine sensibility.

Summing up

The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth,
The child growing into an adult
And, growing out of needs,
Discovering
That the old have black-rimmed nails
And scalps from which emanates
A sweet, moldy smell.

("Composition")

Thank You

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