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EMERGENCE OF KAMALA DAS IN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

After independence, a healthy tradition of Indian English poetry has established itself nourishing and being nourished by contemporary writing, and being sufficiently subjected to critics' scrutiny and evaluation. The pre-independence Indian poetry in English was the voice of the contemporary Indian spirit. For Toru Dutt it was dramatic, for Aurobindo, mystical and for Sarojini Naidu, lyrical. The spirit of modernism manifests itself in the new poet's rejection of the ossified remains of the colonial past. The new poets had to take upon themselves a new challenge and pioneering a new poetic tradition. In India, the literature of protest of the thirties, termed as 'progressive' and 'proletarian' got disillusioned enough to turn away from romance to satire and from idealism to cynicism. This new movement, sustained by the social tradition, influenced by both Europe and America, gave a new stage and poems became new. The new poetry was new because it abhorred the old conventional jargon and rejected romantic or mythic generalization that reflected attention from everyday life. The post-Independence scenario presents a richer and more fertile crop of Indian women poets, who through their wonderful creation have carved an abiding niche in the temple of the Muse. Amongst such women poets a new metaphor (Kamala Das) stands out for sweep of lines and great urgency of poetic purpose. In fact, Kamala Das goes deep into her own self revealing in the process those mysteries which are known to an Indian woman in an orthodox, custom-ridden conservative society. She shows how an Indian woman tries to create a place for herself in a public world, even in her own bedroom, in her home, where she lives, in restaurants, colleges, schools, markets and streets; but every time, she finds herself facing repulsion and horror. Kamala Das herself has faced frustration, disillusionment and disturbances that she has expressed through every square inch of her poetry in bold and candid idioms, which is known as the confessional poetry.

Key Words: Multi-cultural, Nationalistic Politics, proletarian, modernism, surrealism, nihilism, confessional.

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Nearly one hundred and seventy year have passed since Hurry Lewis Vivian Derozio and Kashiparsad Gosh wrote what are considered to be the first Indian English poems. Indian English poetry was once described as

"Mathew Arnold in sari" ( Bottomley Gordon 07) and later "Shakuntala in skirts" (Gokak, 162) with third critic noting "the stamp 'Made in India' on the Fabric" (Naik 267). In other words, English poetry is born in and responds to the multifaceted, multi-cultural Indian society. But now a healthy tradition of Indian English poetry has established itself nourishing and being nourished by contemporary writing, and being sufficiently subjected to critics' scrutiny and evaluation.

In terms of literary ethos, modern Indian poetry in English is claimed to be a conscious effort to liberate itself from excessive concern with nationalistic politics and mysticism. Yet many of the modern Indo- English critics considered the pre-Independence Indian poets in English as 'derivative romantics' or 'late Victorians' with hardly any core of significance. But it is highly noteworthy that most of the pre-Independence Indian poets in English lived and wrote when Indian freedom struggle had become for the first time a deep-rooted nationalistic upsurge. Thus, the prevailing political and social conditions and the general emotional climate were highly conducive to the growth of a typically romantic art. Thus, in its matrix, the pre-independence Indian poetry in English was the voice of the contemporary Indian spirit.

Technically, the pre-Independence poetry is considered of little interest to the contemporary Indo-English critic because of its basic stance of being derivative and mediocre, its total unconcern with the significance of language and art in poetry. Added to this was the fact that the pre-Independence poets in English do not form a literary tradition by sharing amongst themselves a common definition of their art or by striving together to perfect a personal idiom for their own style of poetic communication. For Toru Dutt it was dramatic, for Aurobindo, mystical and for Sarojini Naidu, lyrical.

After independence, however, Indian English poetry has shifted "from such colonial and nationalistic themes as the reuniting of legends, praise of peasants and from general ethical statement to writing about personal experiences" (Bruce King 147). From the historical perspective, the sixties of the previous century is regarded as the most crucial point of departure when the Indian poetry in English took the form of a conscious creative enterprise engaged in building up of its new tradition. The spirit of modernism manifests itself in the new poet's rejection of the ossified remains of the colonial past. The new poets had to take upon themselves a new challenge and pioneering a new poetic tradition. They could not fall back upon their predecessors because, to quote Bruce King, "Poetry of the pre-independence period was, the writers felt, a mass of sentiments, clichés, outdated language and conventions, the ossified remains of a colonial tradition badly in need of a new start through grafting on a vital body of contemporary verse and contact with contemporary life and speech" (King Bruce 11).

It was too much sentimental in its tendency to exhibit interests of nationality and propagation of patriotic fervour. Naik quotes Longfellow who once said.

"Nationality in literature is good  
but universality is better" (lynger) .

Appealing to poets to develop their own "individual voice", 'The Manifesto' (Lal P. in 1950) recommended a path of experiments to them, provided that it did not lead to excessive vagueness and eccentricity. Finally, real poetry is proclaimed only the poetry, which is free from propaganda, and is equivalent to poetic honesty.

Literature is taken to the most inclusive record of a community's very being – its hopes, fears, aspiration, nightmares, visions and confusions in a medium that captures the very contours of its soul. Indian English poetry has flourished in gay abandon in all luxuriance, becoming in the process a living and evolving literary stream subsuming form, substance and expression that is recognisably Indian even as it carries the indelible stamp of universality. It (Indian writing in English) has emerged as "an offshoot as well as recordation of Indian Renaissance" (Prasad G. V. K, 12).

It was during the sixties that the Indian English poets tried and stood on their own feet. In the introduction to his anthology, P. Lal emphasized "the need for private voice" P. Lal (Modern Indian Poetry) in Indian English poetry. P. Lal became very vocal to champion the cause of contemporary Indo-English verse and launched almost a cultural crusade against the age-old taboos and doubts associated with it.

Emergence of Pound, Yeats and Eliot in British poetry in Modern Age may remind us that modern English verse owes much to American poets also. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that the most vital poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in English has been written by Americans and that it is the American rather than the English writing which has over the past fifty or sixty years displayed linguistic vigour, experimental boldness and imaginative daring. We may detect also in modern verse in English a passionate simplicity of emotional coexisting with intellectual complexity and technical sophistication, a blend rarely found in English poetry since the Metaphysical poets. Donald Davi declares that there is a “logical and chronological connection between modernism in the art and fascism in politics” (Davi Donald 03). In India, the literature of protest of the thirties, termed as ‘progressive’ and ‘proletarian’ got disillusioned enough to turn away from romance to satire and from idealism to cynicism. This new movement, sustained by the social tradition, influenced by both Europe and America, gave a new stage and poems became new. The new poetry was new because it abhorred the old conventional jargon and rejected romantic or mythic generalization that reflected attention from every day life. In this movement “Classicism replaced Aurbindo and Tagorean romanticism, and symbolic and the surrealism of Dylan Thomas quickly occupied the place directed by the fairly simple, uncomplicated muses of the precise decade” (Davi Donald).

Post independence poets found themselves in line with the modern British and American poets whose poetry is characterized by a desire to explore the meaning of existence through everyday life, or in the words of Ionesco, “a search for an answer to most unanswerable questions about life and death: how to conquer the anxiety, to learn how to endure life and face death sustained by memories of moments of vision” (Davi Donald). Modern art has indeed been actually conscious of nihilism, the violence and the anguish which permeate our society.

But the influence of the western poetry, mainly of the modern poetry, manifests itself quite distinctively in Indian Poetry in English. Prof. Gokak admits that Indo-Anglian poetry right from the days of Derozio- to this day has always been influenced by the trends and movements in British poetry. However, he does not believe that “Indo Anglian poetry is nothing than a wagon hitched to the engine of English poetry” (Gokak V. K. 194). The Indian poets in English of the post independence era are thus poets of transition on the threshold of a literary renaissance and a grand possibility of awakening to the possibilities of new medium. The poetry of post-independence era is as R. Parthasarthy points out, a “tongue in English chains” (Parsad G V K 13).

Political independence is said to have marked a break in the concerns of new Indian English poets. The context seems to have undergone a drastic change with the removal of the colonial masters. Bruce King observes, “By 1947 the situation had changed and with it the concerns of new poets became their relationship to the alienation from the realities of their society” (King Bruce 35).

The colonial context may have disappeared; but the dilemma of the Indian English poets remains and is perhaps to be seen even more sharply: now that the British have left India. But independence then has not changed the agenda for the Indian English poets; rather, it has perhaps only made it more urgent and manifest. This task is made doubly important because of the “challenge from nationalist intellectuals and from regionalists who have demanded a renaissance of the culture of pre-colonial language of India”, as Bruce King points out (King Bruce<sup>1</sup>)

Freedom movement demanded greater participation of women and with their enthusiasm and courage, planning and understanding, they proved their worth. In the post-Independence scenario with the slogan of equality, liberty and justice for all, it was difficult to suppress the voice of women. Margrate Dickie adds, “if voices of women are not mute, neither are the voices of their culture. They are rather new voices at the fringes of society, where languages changes and develops, woman poetry has always been a channel for such voices” (Margret Dickee 128). It was only in the sixties that things began to settle down when a new generation of young poets took control of the new literary scene and then one:

Finds on a lucky day, a metaphor

Leaping from the sod (Bhatnagar38)

The post-Independence scenario presents a richer and more fertile crop of Indian women poets, who through their wonderful creation have carved an abiding niche in the temple of the Muse. Amongst such women

poets a new metaphor (Kamala Das) stands out for sweep of lines and great urgency of poetic purpose. What Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Judith Wright, Anne Sexton, Margaret Avison, Rosemary Sullivan are doing in the British, American, Canadian and Australian poetry was begun by Kamala Das in Indian English poetry. These women poets' gesture of defiance and self-assertion snowballed first into a movement and later on into a genre. Das emerges on the Indo-English poetic scene more as an anachronism and iconoclast, presenting through her writing in general and her poetry in particular, a critique of culture, worn out values, customs and canons of poetry. She opens out, "If I had not learned to write how would I have written away my loneliness or grief? Garnering them within, my heart would have grown heavy as a vault, one that only death might open, a release then I would not be able to feel or sense" (Bhatnagar 38 ).

It is, "rather the Nair Maiden unburdening her collective nightmare". Kamala Das who looms large over the poetic horizon of today's India, hails from the South, precisely from the southern Malabar in Kerala, where her grandmother, Nayer father and Nalapat mother used to live peacefully beside the fathomless sea. She was born on March 31st, 1934 and bred in the Nair family. Hers has been a family of literary luminaries and intellectuals. Her father V.M. Nair worked for a British automobile company. Her mother Balamani Amma was a poet of great distinction. Her maternal grand uncle, Nalapat Narayan Menon, was a famous poet, theosophist and an outstanding scholar of Malabar. Despite the highly intellectual family set-up, Das received only negligible amount of formal education. As her autobiography tells us, Kamala Das whose maiden name was Madhavikutty first attended a European school in Calcutta. But most unfortunately, marriage was forced on her before the sixteenth birthday by her "autocratic father" simply because she "slipped in arithmetic". It was the first crushing blow of patriarchy to an extraordinarily sensitive girl, just on the threshold of womanhood.

As an untutored genius, Kamala Das derives the notion of rhythm and cadence from the sounds of marine waves, moaning winds, pattering rain, thumping of blood and beating of heart. She was terribly disgusted with the stifling social set up. When the poet takes the world so seriously and experiences so deeply its inner contradiction and its mystery that cannot be put into words, she is no longer able to express herself in ordinary speech. She is bound to use extraordinary means of expression:

God is in heaven and all

Is right with the stinking word (Bhatnagar).

One word 'stinking' used here is enough to open new words of association, from the God of Browning to the God of India. Kamala Das makes her poetry a painful poetic expression of an intension only, not the violent pleading for a possible understanding between man and woman as independent personalities in an atmosphere of what the Christian father called agape. The pulls and pushes of cultural restriction, family background and the traditions of an orthodox family have often shaped her feeling and ideas. Here Kamala Das' protest is not merely against the superficiality of married life but against the essential nature of Hindu domestic life, which 'trains' a 'swallow' and permits free exhibition of the male ego. Bruce King rightly observes, "Das opened areas in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling" (King Bruce 152).

In fact, Kamala Das goes deep into her own self revealing in the process those mysteries which are known to an Indian woman in an orthodox, custom-ridden conservative society. She shows how an Indian woman tries to create a place for herself in a public world, even in her own bedroom, in her home, where she lives, in restaurants, colleges, schools, markets and streets; but every time, she finds herself facing repulsion and horror. Kamala Das herself has faced frustration, disillusionment and disturbances that she has expressed through every square inch of her poetry in bold and candid idioms, which is known as the confessional poetry. That is what Pashupati Jha means when he says, "The poetry of Kamala Das is unconventionally bold and shockingly 'autobiographical' where the confessional mode is fused with a feministic slant" (King Bruce).

The repeated unabashed sexual love or frustration and incompatibility with her male lover may be partly responsible for her feeling of loneliness and isolation. 'An armful of splinter' designed confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experiences with the outer world as it is. Such struggle is evident in the poem of Kamala Das from a very early stage. M.K. Naik sees it thus: "The total impression Kamala Das' poetry provides is

one of all bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitude to reveal the quintessential woman within" (Naik 210).

This paper shows the emergence of Kamala Das who like those of Sylvia Plath took confessional mode of writing along with a lurking streak of revolt against patriarchy and a gloomy death-wish resulting out of their helplessness before the constricting circumstances of their respective lives as rendered through their writing.

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