

***“THE LANGUAGE I SPEAK BECOMES MINE”*: THE STYLISTIC FEATURES OF  
KAMALA DAS**

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**Abstract:**

Kamala Das is undoubtedly one of the most popular woman poets. The canon of Indian poetry remains incomplete without her. She carved a niche for herself with her stylistic features which differentiates her from the Romantics as well as the Modern poets of English literature. Her feminine sensibility sets her apart. When it comes to women writing she is indispensable. Her stylistic features range from free verse or verse libre to subtle use of simile and metaphors. Her diction is curated to not miss the essence of her oration. Her fluidity and fluency of the language in which she writes commands attention. Her poems and prose have revolutionized the form and content of Indian writing in English. My paper aims to trail the terrains of her language that she uses and seeks to develop an understanding of the techniques and the stylistic features used by the poet that led to the auto stylization of this lyric speaker which sets her apart from the rest.

**Keywords:** Canon, free verse, feminine sensibility, metaphor, simile.

Kamala Das was born on March 31, 1934 at Punnayarkulam in South Kerala. She belongs to the clan of the first generations of the modern Indian English poets who had carved a niche for themselves with their indomitable nationalist sentiment and an undying desire to be heard, thus, she is rightly praised for being the forerunner of an evolved poetic aura where her writings came across as the most powerful voice rehashing the postcolonial reality. She remains to be the most accolade and most celebrated poets as the din of her pen jolted the complacent patriarchy and solidified the space for ‘feminine writing’.

The kernels of her poems are derived from the various wakes of her life. She wrote her first poem at the age of six and it revolved around a doll that had lost her head and thus remained headless for “eternity”. Thus, K.N. Daruwalla rightly says, “ She seldom ventures outside the personal world.” Her verse does not polarize rather equates the

mind and body . The body then becomes the altar for the free spirited mind that allows her release into the world of literature. Her bodily experiences are fundamental to her bildungsroman.

Ecriture feminine or “women’s writing” is a term coined by Helen Cixous. This genre of literary writing dismantles the phallogocentric style or masculine style of writing and sets forth a space for female writing where the “other” (i.e. woman) in the masculine logos breaks the shackles and re creates a world by engaging with themselves and the world outside their mind and consciousness. Kamala Das’ ecriture feminine has revolutionized the form and content of Indian writing in English. According to Bruce King she “ is a natural poet with an excellent feeling for sound , rhythm ,phrasing, image , symbol, world play and drama.” H. M Williams in “ Indo Anglian Literature” praises her ability to identify with her feelings and structure it adequately.

Her artistry has excelled without compromising the spontaneity of her confession- we find a curious amalgamation of the poetics and politics, personal and the political, the stylistic experimentation and the ontological reality. Her style of writing reveals her out of the way creativity which is bound to delight the readers.

N.V Ravendran rightly labels her poetics as “ The Aesthetics of Sensuality”. Her feminity is articulate and dares to speak without inhibitions. It combines resistance with the rebellious both thematically and stylistically. In most of her poems the auto stylization of the “lyric speaker” comes across as a “freak” combating a conventional society where the reigns rest in her hands and she emerges as the centrifugal force. The figure is “love lorn” but is critical of the andocratic norms and the nuptial norms. She depicts a female body which is victimized yet hospitable. The persona is unhappy with the restrictions imposed on females but is vitalized by an innate alternative spiritual zeal which patriarchy does not appreciate or comprehend. She scorns at moral , behavioral restrictions which the male gaze does not seem to register. This auto stylization forms the base of Kamala Das’ stylistic endeavors .

Her first and foremost stylistic feature is the sexual/ textual freedom elaborated through bodily imageries, metaphors but they never become pornoglossic as these figures of speech are chosen with a moral, political and emotional purpose. The references at once celebrate the bodily pleasures and ridicule the exploitations or displeasure. This space of body writing where the mind /body binarism is thwarted for emergence and self assurance of the women writer is also a space for ecriture feminine :

“ It is I who laugh, it is I who make love  
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying  
.....I am sinner,

I am saint...  
 ....I have no joys which are not yours, no  
 Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I." (*An Introduction*)

The figure of speech used in the above lines is antithesis. She uses this feature to hint at the ambiguity and lays bare the traditional, polarized stereotypes – the dichotomy of woman as a saint/ sinner or a angel/whore. She is a sinner when she revolts against the frozen sexual norms and a saint in her pure form of a lover seeking joy . She looks into herself for evidence to challenge the dichotomy. Her goal is to reinforce the “aesthetics of (female) self fashioning”. She accomplishes this goal by expressing the personal as political. She coalesces her confessional mode with her autobiographical reminiscences.

Another important stylistic feature is the foregrounding of the first person pronoun “I”. In “An Introduction” it has been used recurrently, twenty nine times including twice in six lines of the verses. She even uses time intelligently to suit her political agenda. In “An Introduction” she juxtaposes the past with the present to depict the relation between personal and the contemporary. She uses present tense and certain verbs to depict the condition of the female amid social paradoxes.

Another important stylistic feature used by her is repetition which gives a velocity to her poems. In “The Descendants” and “The Old Playhouse”, “ It will be all right” and “ Ask me” have been recurrently applied respectively. The repetition of “Lingering on” in “ Smoke in Colombo” and “ In me” in “ Forest Fire” are few more of such instances.

Apart from these stylistic strategies one cannot miss the other figures of speech in Kamala Das’ oeuvre, such as alliteration, similes, imagery, paronomasia, euphemism, innuendo, irony and metaphors. Her metaphors remind us of the metaphysical conceits of Donne and some bathos are more satirical than Pope’s:

“ Life is quite simple now-  
 Love, blackmail and sorrow.” (*The Descendants*).

Through her similes she exposes the misogynic crux of phallogentric norms. The use of simile seems to be her strongest point –

“ He was like a bank locker  
 steely cold and shut  
 or a filing cabinet that  
 only its owner could unlock  
 Not for a moment did I own him.”

Kamala Das had set a standard for herself and her stylistic features used in both her prose and poetry depicts the sensitive woman's plight into a male dominated society. She raises her voice against patriarchal norms that binds the woman and becomes a spokesperson for every woman seeking liberation.

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