

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 23
Kamala Das (1934 - 2009)

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Hello, welcome again to the course Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. We are in the 5th week and we have been discussing Indian English Poetry. Well, there is a view that in response to our agonizing cry for meaning all that the world gives as a kind of response is deafening silence. There is a deafening silence in response to the piercing cry of meaning. So, probably this is where poetry comes in and tries to offer some kind of solace. Herein, we can ask the question why do most poets write or you can say, how do you distinguish a good poem from not so good a poem. Well, of course, we must understand that there is also a theory that basically poetry involves wordplay, it is the playing of words. Well, that is not entirely true, though there is a wordplay involved that is just the structure of it. Unless how to add soul into those wordplays, you will not be converting your play of words into extraordinary poetry. I have reason to recall all these things because we are going to discuss one of the exemplary poets of Indian English poetry Kamala Das, one of the most intense poets. And while discussing her poetry we need to know what distinguishes her poetry from the poetry of the rest of the people. In fact, her poetry emerges as very intense.

because well she tears out a part of her flesh and adds it to the word she writes and unless that happens, well it does not become great poetry. In order for us to elevate our wordplay into great poetry, we must be willing to tear a part of our flesh, metaphorically speaking remember figuratively speaking. We must be willing to tear a part of our flesh, we must be willing to fragment our soul and be able to join in with the words. Unless that happens, we cannot create great poetry. So, probably that is why Kamala Das is one of the greatest poets today because she could accomplish that so most of the times when she felt deserted when she felt desolate when she felt let down, she went back towards time and again. And therefore, she considered words more as her companion, more as her sole companion, that is why there is a lot of power in her poetry, there is a lot of intensity, there is a lot of emotion in her poetry and most of the time when you read you feel she is writing about yourself. Because of course, we have an interesting poem where she talks of how a poem is not a poem unless the reader feels that the poem is his piece or her piece. It is something that the reader should have written and instead, we have someone else writing it unless the reader feels connected in this way well it does not become great poetry, well that is true of great literature too.

So, before we discuss further and before we delve deeper into her poetry, let us quickly recall what we did in the previous class. in the previous class, we began with the second phase in Indian English poetry beginning with Nissim Ezekiel and then we moved on to discussing Arun Kolatkar's poetry and the Bombay circle of poetry and how in the '60s or from the '60s through '80s Bombay acted as a literary capital attracting talent from various parts of India. And how it became it became a kind of a literary plexus or a literary node that went on attracting artists from different parts of the globe and even different parts of India. So, that is when we introduced Arun Kolatkar and his poetic genius, we discussed *Kala Ghoda Poems*, we discussed *Sarpa Satra* and of course, we discussed *Jejuri*. And how *Jejuri* transforms the mindscape of the literary mindscape of bhakti tradition altogether in a new direction. And how through *Jejuri*, a new lineage of Indian English literature begins and all that. So, in this class, we are going to take up another major poet probably as important as Arun Koladkar, but whose mode of expression, literary techniques and outlook towards poetry were different of course, each poet is different. So, we have an equally significant poet in Kamala Das. That is why in fact, the tagline you can see the tagline A fierce poet who revolves who revolutionized Indian English Poetry.

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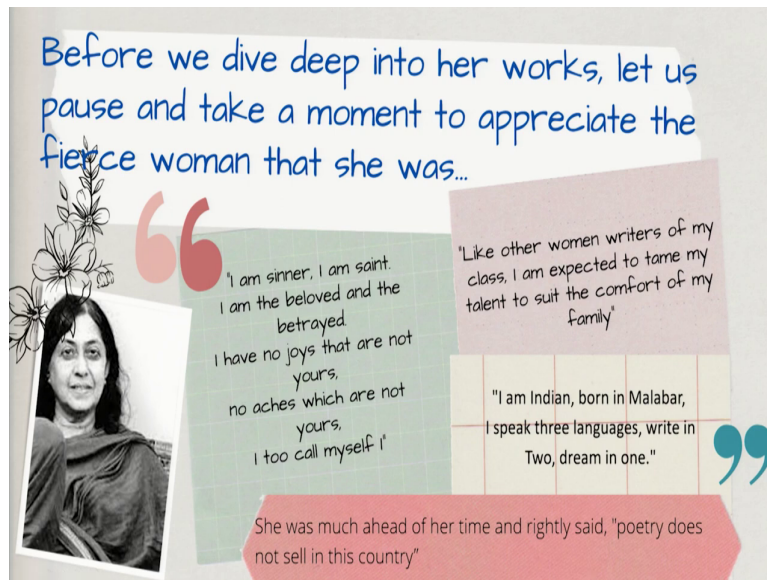
Here is a brief snippet of her life of course, in the form of an interesting collage. Of course, figuratively speaking all our lives are one huge collage. So, this might as well depict the collage that she had in life. She was born Kamala in 1934 and right at a young age she began, she was drawn towards poetry it is said that she composed her first poem when she was hardly 12 years. So, maybe a class 6 or class 7 girl, imagine being lured to the world of words, experimenting with it and eventually finding a kind of a companion in the words. So, everything happened very early in the life of Kamala Das, you could say because she married quite early. She married Madhav Das at the age of 15, of course, the relationship itself was one roller coaster ride while of course, it had a lot of ebbs and flows. Initially, she began writing her works under the pseudo name Madhavi Kutty. And of course, later, of course, she began writing under her own name Kamala Das. Interestingly she was a bilingual poet like Arun Kolatkar, Vilas Sarang and other poets we discussed in the previous class, she too was a bilingual poet. In fact, it is said that Indians are multilingual; it is there as part of their blood because India itself is again a linguistic plexus. Therefore, it is in all our blood that we are bilinguals at least bilingual or multilingual. So, in her case, she stretched that capacity a little deeper and she began practising, she began writing both in Malayalam and English. And her contribution to Malayalam literature is as good as her contribution to English literature, we can say that. In one of her poems, she famously declared “ I am an Indian born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two, and dream in one.’

Now, well the poem may appear reductionist, but it is definitely far from that. Now, look at what happens, irrespective of how many languages you write in, but what operates behind those languages is one dream right, it is your personality. So, your personality finds an expression in different languages. So, when one of the interviewers asks her, how is it that she is able to write so fluently and so meticulously in both languages, she seems to have given a kind of a classic response. She seemed to have said, "...when I write in Malayalam I forget that I know English and when I write in English I forget that I know Malayalam."

You need to phase a part of your identity in order to express yourself completely in another identity, that is when you will be able to write equally intensely in both languages. Because it is something like when you close one nostril, the other nostril has to take the volume of air double the volume of air; so something like that. So, when you close your one nostril, let us say Malayalam then, of course, the English nostril has to double up its function and it is the other way around as well. Probably that is why we find her poetry and her literature expressed intensely in both languages. And her life itself was again one big roller coaster ride, she all of a sudden at the age of 65, Kamala Das embraced Islam and she assumed the name Kamala Surayya. Well, the reason that she felt was, that she felt trapped in the kind of society she lived in, in the kind of religion she lived and she felt trapped and she even gave a kind of a controversial statement that she feels liberated in Islam. And of course, that created a lot of controversy and all that, but she was unphased, she has almost turned a blind eye towards all those clamours and assumed a new identity with full vigour. She adopted a couple of Muslim kids and all that, she did it full-fledged way, and whatever she did, she did it in a full-fledged way. Earlier if you recall in one of our early classes, we said immortality has a different meaning - immortality is not to live forever well, that is one of the misconceptions we have or one of the popular conceptions we have about immortality. That means, to live forever, no; immortality means to live every moment of our life as intensely as if that is the last moment. To live each and every moment of our life as intensely as it is the last moment. So, in that sense Kamala Das is immortal. Like her poetry is immortal she too is immortal because she chose to live her life with total devotion and she lived in the moment, she lived in that moment. So, in that sense recall the poem we discussed in the previous class *The Butterfly*, which is it is pinned to no past and it just hinges around itself, her life and her works, it hinged around the present.

So, it is a kind of poetics of the present, her works can be called the poetry of the present and again she died in 2009, leaving behind a very impressive collection of poems, short stories, memoirs and other remarkable features. So, this is in a nutshell her life for us.

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Yeah, before we delve deeper into her works, of course, let us quickly get a taste of what she wrote and of course, this should give us an idea about intensity, the intensity with which she wrote. Now, again these are excerpts from some of our well-known poems,

“I am sinner, I am saint.
I am the beloved and the
betrayed.
I have no joys that are not
yours,
no aches which are not
yours,
I too call myself I.”

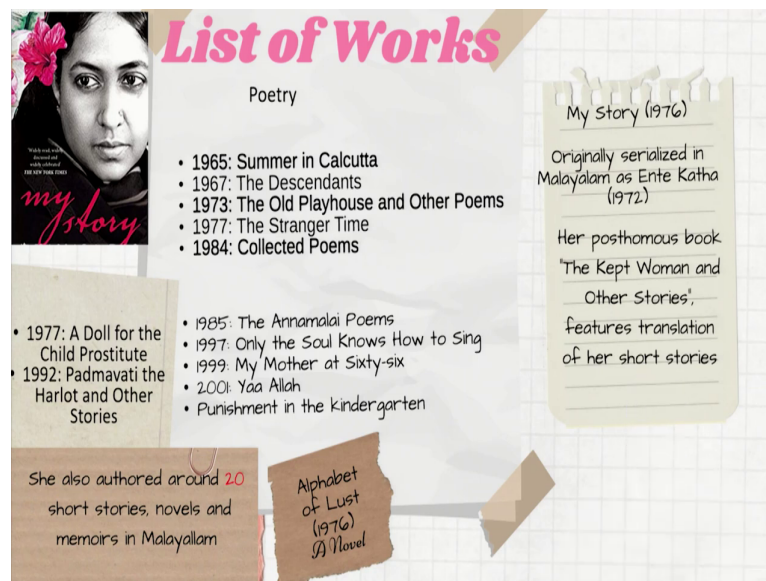
Remember such an extraordinary and look at, of course, you have already learnt different figures of speech, different poetic devices. Now, look at how in this particular excerpt she goes on playing the opposites, on antithesis right.

Sinner, saint, beloved, betrayed, joys, aches, it is a kind of a play on the word I mean play a play on the binaries, it is playing it is a play on the binary, but of course, it is not just a play. it is a play in a metaphysical sense like you call it the 'Leela', like that it is a kind of a verbal 'Leela'. So, like all of us are because when a person realizes that before one passes on a judgment about others one realizes that one also has a lot of shady background that is when one avoids passing on judgment. So, when you realize that before branding others as sinners when you realize that a part of you has also sinned. So, therefore, you have no right to pass the judgment pass on the judgment. Of course, you can recall the famous story of Jesus, the parable where Jesus says when the mob is throwing pelting stones at a woman thinking that she is a sinner, Jesus goes forward and stands himself before that furious mob and says well, of course, those of you who feel that you have not sinned at all in your life please pick your stone and throw at me first. That is when the mob realizes that everybody has sinned therefore, they have no right to castigate others. So, you can hear the distant echoes of that parable, and this is precisely what I was saying why is her poetry relevant to all of us in her poetry we find shades of our own joys, shades of our own aches, shades of us that are why most of the times you might as well feel you wish we wish we had written these lines. Because to that extent, you can own her lines and when does that happen? When one goes deep down within oneself, that is where one realizes that deep down it's only externally that you find differences between human beings. Well, somebody wearing Kumkum, somebody not wearing Kumkum, somebody wearing a particular style of clothes, somebody in a different style of clothes or the skin colour or shape of the nose, the thickness of the eyebrows, all these things. I mean I mean the differences are there in the external features. Whereas, when you go deep down that is when you realize all of us are one, all the entire world is one, of course, this is where the as the great Upanishad say the [FL] right, this is precisely what poetry makes you realize deep down all of us are one, the entire world is a family, [FL]. the entire globe is one single-family and poetry is capable of making us realize it, not making us understand it because understanding has a temporal value. In fact, it is very fleeting. Well, your mind may understand it and you may fail to realize that, realization is a deeper understanding. Poetry has the capacity to create that kind of a deeper understanding alright. "Like other women writers of my class, I am expected to tame my talent to suit the comfort of my family" probably it is an excerpt from her autobiography.

Some kind of extraordinary or controversial statements where she almost bears the kind of depressing conditions in which she had to live, she lived throughout her life and things like

that and it is true that she was much ahead of her time. And therefore, even when she chose to write as honestly as she felt, she was not appreciated. On the other hand, her poetry was branded as populist or deliberately seeking controversies and all that. But of course, she did not bother with any of that criticism because like a true poet who is only true to one's self and oblivious to the criticism of the world, one has to be true to oneself that is when one becomes honest not when playing to the gallery.

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So, here is a list of her important works: her first poetry collection major collection comes out in '65 again, you can think of the Bombay Circle, the second phase of Indian English poetry, the 1950s to 80s we identified that already. The second collection comes out in '67, *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and other poems*, *The Strange Time*, and again in 84 her *Collected works* come out. And apart from poetry, of course, her contribution to poetry is significant, but her contribution to even the form of autobiography is also quite immense, life writing we call it life writing. So, she takes her life right to a different level. So, she is honest to the core and even when she was honest to the core much to the discomfort of a hypocritical society around her, she again chose to ignore and then continue to write whatever she felt like writing, whatever she felt was honest. Well, she also has many novels to her credit and short stories, as I said she also wrote in Malayalam and later, of course, she wrote *Padmavati*, the *Harlot and other stories*. You can see the I mean the boldness of the theme is quite evident in the title itself, *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*. Her works also explore the agony of the other

gender, so-called the other gender, the ignored gender and tries to give vent to their anxieties, their suppressed feelings and all that.

In other words, literature tries to reinvent through the language of her poetry. Literature itself tries to reinvent its shade you can say. Her autobiography, *My Story*, is a very bold and daring kind of work where she bares everything to whatever the minimum stage is there. So, originally it was called *Ente Katha* in Malayalam, it came out in 1972, a few years later she published its English translation.

And of course, posthumously “The Kept Woman and other stories” was published in fact, including her translations of short stories from Malayalam and all that. So, this is a brief aura of Kamala Das, .

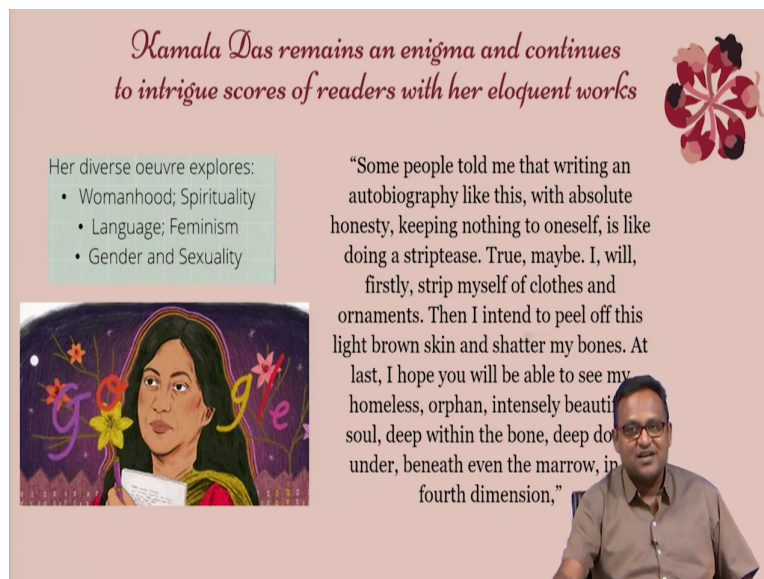
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Kamala Das remains an enigma and continues to intrigue scores of readers with her eloquent works

Her diverse oeuvre explores:

- Womanhood; Spirituality
- Language; Feminism
- Gender and Sexuality

“Some people told me that writing an autobiography like this, with absolute honesty, keeping nothing to oneself, is like doing a striptease. True, maybe. I, will, firstly, strip myself of clothes and ornaments. Then I intend to peel off this light brown skin and shatter my bones. At last, I hope you will be able to see my homeless, orphan, intensely beautiful soul, deep within the bone, deep down under, beneath even the marrow, in the fourth dimension,”



Yeah, so I was saying that her works, be it poetry, novel, memoir or stories in Malayalam are deal with the concept of womanhood, spirituality, sexuality, language, feminism, gender, you find these concepts finding riveting creative turns in her works. Yeah, of course, here it is; it's a Google doodle. In fact, Google celebrated the significant, significance of her autobiography by creating a doodle for her. And it is been more than 10 years since she breathe last, but to this day she continues to be an enigma and she intrigues us through her writing, anybody who is drawn to her writing is felt mesmerized and finds a need to go back to it.

And this is the kind of response that some people criticize when she comes to know that people are criticizing her for exposing her own life, marital life discards there the kind of sexual exploitation she felt. So, when people criticize this is how she responded. Now, this is an extraordinary insight, it offers an extraordinary insight into understanding her mind into understanding the writing as well.

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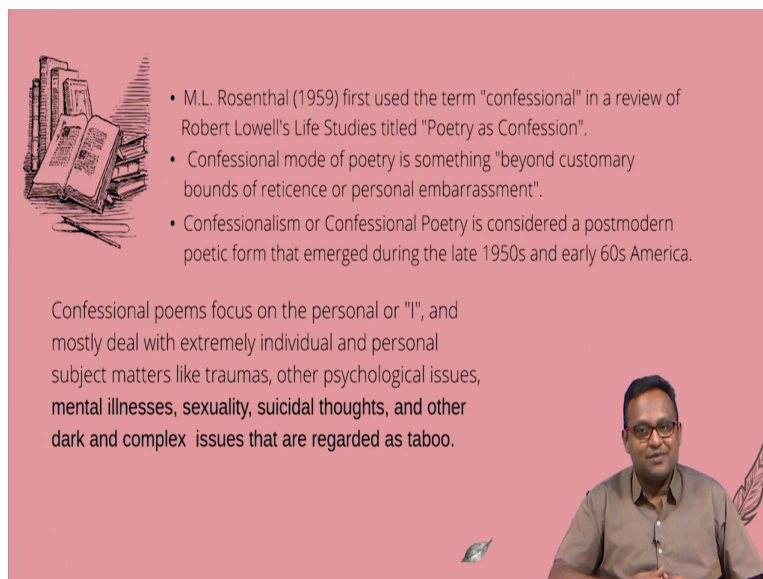
The society that saw that she bared her personal life could not go beyond a few scenes in her autobiography, they did not go beyond probably they just saw that it is true she bared herself, but probably many people just saw in that act of bearing physical bearing, the poet nudging herself out. But she said; no, I went further, a sensitive reader would see how she goes on peeling not just her clothes, her body, her bones, bone marrow everything and baring the soul out, because unless you do that your soul will not come out, you will not be able to see the soul. So, therefore, I mean she bared everything, but people unfortunately did not see this and that is that reflects the sad state of affairs we live in. This is her classic response to her critics.

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Before we end her discussion, of course, there is an argument that Kamala Das's poetry can best be read as confessional poetry. It is true of course, confession the very word confession has a kind of religious overtones there, but of course, here it is not religious as such of course, like what you do in a confession, you go and bare yourself to the priest or anybody who is listening to you. Therefore the purpose behind it is not just psychological of course, psychologically it is true that when you try to bare yourself when you try to share your inner feelings, that is also one of the important things that we need to learn in life. When we start sharing our problems, we feel our burden is being lifted off that is the beauty of sharing. When you share with others your pains, you feel relieved and when you share your joys with others your joys are doubled. Your pain is halved and your joys are doubled, that is the beauty of sharing therefore, please share. Confession has the tone, that is why she went on sharing, she did not find probably or she found the pages, words as a better space to confess therefore, she went on confessing. Words for her were priests or places of confession, she went on doing that.

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- M.L. Rosenthal (1959) first used the term "confessional" in a review of Robert Lowell's Life Studies titled "Poetry as Confession".
- Confessional mode of poetry is something "beyond customary bounds of reticence or personal embarrassment".
- Confessionalism or Confessional Poetry is considered a postmodern poetic form that emerged during the late 1950s and early 60s America.

Confessional poems focus on the personal or "I", and mostly deal with extremely individual and personal subject matters like traumas, other psychological issues, mental illnesses, sexuality, suicidal thoughts, and other dark and complex issues that are regarded as taboo.

So, she can be read like a confessional poet in fact. To quickly recall what confessional poetry is, it was a term that was first coined in 1959, by Rosenthal with a particular context. Confessional - mode of poetry which is beyond the customary bounds of reticence, there is no holding back, there is no reticence here. In fact, you go beyond that and whether it embarrasses, whether or causes discomfort for you or to society you go on and bare everything out. So, that is the philosophy behind confessional poetry. Confessional poems

focus, therefore, on the interior monologues, the interior monologues the monologues that happen within a solid lock ways or when you start speaking with yourself those kind of thoughts. Therefore, traumas, psychological issues, such as mental illness, sexual problems, suppressed feelings suicidal thoughts, and dark and complex problems are considered taboo for discussion. There is nothing that is not touched in confessional poetry. Of course, in that sense, you cannot find a better confessional poet than Kamala Das. As I said for her words were a space words offered her a kind of a literary space through which she chose to be honest to the core. Let us discuss let us continue discussing her poetry and maybe the poetry of her fellow poet in the next class.

But so far before we conclude, please think of significance of poetry, the significance of confessional poetry, why Kamala Das is important, how she causes discomfort through her bold treatment of the subjects that were considered taboo, . How she exposes hypocrisy on the one hand and find some kind of solace in the words, keeps all these things and we come back in the next class and continue discussing her poetry.

Thank you.