

I Too Call Myself I: Journey of Kamala Das towards Longing and Belonging

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Abstract

The conflict between 'othering' and belonging has always been a major topic of debate and discussion of feminism. Phallocentric ideology with a conscious and careful effort, has manipulated women to make a hollow belongingness, which in reality, is a confinement within suppressed and marginalized 'othered' identity. With this 'othered' identity, a female is not represented as a female self; rather she becomes the projection of what patriarchal culture wants her to be. Thus her identity gets reduced to what Kamala Das says in her poem, 'girl', 'wife', 'embroiderer', 'quarreler with servants'. Kamala Das, the mother of modern English Indian poetry, introduced herself not as a feminist but as a humanist; still the feminist world accepts her as a true feminist as she is faithful to her own existence as well as truthful to expressions as a part of female entity. Her 'I' existence destabilizes the patriarchal ideology, breaking the myth of 'true women' portrayal as doll, princess, chaste girl. Her poetic creation unveils the deep core feminine sexuality, sensuality and sensibility expressing which are considered taboo. Her confessional verses are stronger when it comes to declaring boastful existence as 'I' of the society who is no 'saint' and also who has emotions that she can 'call mine'. 'Womanhood' has found new expression in her poetry. Her newly defined woman identity comes out with fiery outburst when she places herself in the position of viewer putting male body on display either as an object of 'aesthetic' pleasure or repulsion, securing the control of defining masculinity herself. For an 'othered' persona (who is expected not to be vocal that may cause threat to her passivity in the society), her neglectful acceptance and recognition of male sex as the superior one invokes sarcasm and makes her feminine consciousness and existence insolent. Thus Kamala Das has left the world startled with radical alteration of the female Other.

Keywords: 'othering', self, gaze, panopticism, identity, female subjugation

"All the pain unexpressed and the sad tales left untold made me write recklessly and in protest." Kamala Das

Kamala Das (also known as Kamala Madhavikutty and Kamala Suraiya), the unapologetic poet, still continues to lure readers with honest and raw depiction of her deepest yearnings and anguish that were taboo those days. Her poetry is confessional and auto-biographical to a great extent, but the most fascinating thing about her poetry is that it echoes the unheard suppressed voices that are crying out loud in silence. Both in writing and in personal life, being an iconoclast who defied

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all conventions with excessive openness and pervasiveness, she had to survive endless controversies and criticisms. But her achievements are unyielding proof of her worth and might. She received prizes and awards like the Pen Asian poetry prize, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for fiction, Asian World Prize for literature, Kendriya Sahitya Academy award, and many more. She was also short-listed for the Nobel Prize along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Leasing and Nadine Gardiner. In recognition of her contributions, The Times announced her as “the mother of modern English Indian poetry”. Her major poetical works include, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *Only the Soul knows How to sing* (1997) and her fictional biography *My Story* (1976).

Female as an individual self has always been absent in history as well as in literary creation. She exists only to portray her feminine self or femininity which is a political perception that serves the agenda of establishing male superiority. This perception initiates social and mental mechanisms that construct, perpetuate and normalize gender inequality and creates a world of ‘others’ holding women captive within a fake bubble of belongingness. As a result of this hegemonized concept, women accept their subordinate position and let men have the uncontested higher place in gender hierarchy without any protest and denial. They feel the urge and urgency to fit in the boundary set for them. They fear to lose their femininity (which they consider to be the root of their identity and only way to ensure their existence in this male dominated society) and therefore, remain pleased with the role of the ‘Other’.

Human beings have a natural tendency to make categorical distinctions. The categories and meanings associated with them are socially constructed rather than natural. Here comes the role of ‘othering’. ‘Othering’ is the process of casting a group, an individual or an object into the role of the ‘other’ and establishing one’s own identity through opposition to and vilification of this ‘other’. Therefore, the representation of the others is a crucial and essential component for making the perception and description of the Self. ‘Othering’ denies people the right to speak for themselves, instead projects identity turning them to below human.

In patriarchal society, being, subjectivity, consciousness, and rationality are the terms by which humanity is defined, but these are most specifically used to the understanding of Man. This is the process by which patriarchal configuration of woman becomes a useful tool to uphold the dominance of man. The idea of “Woman as Other” was first presented by Simone de Beauvoir in her remarkable creation *The Second Sex* (1949). In it, de Beauvoir presents a relational theory of

femininity which asserts that the category of woman is defined by everything man is not. This gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and also, the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. Simone de Beauvoir describes how woman "is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other". She also focuses on how control of women's sexuality and reproduction has historically subjugated them to men, and argues that gender is not an essential characteristic of people, but something that one becomes through socialization. "One is not born, rather becomes a woman." So the very concept of 'woman', de Beauvoir argues, is a male concept: woman is always 'other' because the male is the 'seer': he is the subject and she the object – the meaning of what it is to be a woman is given by men.

Whatever one perceives, including other people, is rendered as an 'object' to gaze and gets defined by that created perception. Gaze is one of the closely associated ideas regarding the process of 'othering'. Gaze is defined by the act of seeing and the act of being seen. The way one looks at other is significant because there are systems of power that are activated when one can see or be seen. In general, the person doing the looking has power. Being in the active role, the person who sees holds the power over the passive one who is seen. One of the central concepts connected to the practice of looking is the 'Panopticon'. This is a concept created by Jeremy Bentham that refers to a plan for a prison tower. It is designed such a way that the prisoners can be monitored all the time by the guards in the watch tower, but they can't see into the watch tower. As a result, they feel like they are being watched all the time, and they modify their behavior as a result. Basing on this, Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975) developed the social theory named Panopticism where he presents how the idea of Panopticon has become a metaphor for the relentless gaze, where an omnipresence of a spectator is assumed at all times. This spectator serves as a constant guard to monitor what to do and what not to do in order to force people to 'fit in' the social standard. It disciplines to modify as well as to rectify behavior if anyone opts to deviate from the society determined and permitted norm.

The gaze is also used as a mechanism of gender based 'othering'. The theory of the male gaze is based on the idea of a deprecating portrayal of women in culture. It is described as a means for men to denigrate the female identity; "reducing" a woman through the male gaze demotes women from human equals to subordinate sexual objects. The concept of the male gaze was introduced by scholar and filmmaker Laura Mulvey in her famous essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative

Cinema' (1975). The "male gaze" invokes the sexual politics of the gaze and suggests a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. In the male gaze, woman is visually positioned as an "object" of heterosexual male desire. Her feelings, thoughts and her own sexual drives are less important than her being "framed" by male desire.

The distinction between self and other is just the difference into inferiority with imposed stereotypical projection. Women, as the 'other' group falls prey to not only objectification as sexual being; but also a social panopticon due to the perceived threat of surveillance. Thus they feel both socially and morally obligated to confine themselves within the boundary set for them. They take the place designated for them by the patriarchal society as the original one deviating from which can make them an outcast, being unaware of the fact that they are already made an outcast long before they consciously enter into this patriarchal politics which is another mechanism to keep them in forever never changing subordinate place to ensure their own perceived superiority. That she exists solely for the man, a mechanism to serve his ego, his libido, and his sense of possession is thus legitimized.

Kamala Das is outrageously bold in her expression when it comes to her poetic creation. She uses the 'self' as a poetic symbol to talk about her love and longing, fascination and frustration with aggressive honesty. In her poetry she uproots the perception and convention that women mistakenly take as their root of being and sense of belonging. She lived her entire life her way. In her own way, she rebelled against patriarchy, and the boundaries set by society. She repeatedly questioned male claim and creeds which instantly made her an outcast to the society she lived in. Still she struggled in order to assert her individuality and sustained. Kamala Das's poetry is the continuation of that constant struggle against female subjugation by patriarchal politics. The subject of her work comprises of "woman" as a being and the unconventional revelation of female experiences, be it trauma of an unhappy marriage or pleasure in a desireless sex. All Das's poetic creations are intertwined with experience of both body and mind. Since the beginning of history, women are subjugated both by body and mind altogether; therefore, female emancipation is not possible keeping any of these two out of focal concentration. She dismantled the so-called conventional submissive and domestic image of an Indian woman and breaks the silence inflicted on them.

"An Introduction" is one of the best known and critically acclaimed poems of Kamala Das which can also be considered her representative one. It is like a summary of girl's life in a straight predictable line. It's a story of how a woman's attitude towards her body and bodily functions forms and changes over the years, and of how society influences this attitude. The poem contains a lot of biographical

elements like her political consciousness, choice of languages, physical growth and marriage as well as her bitter experiences in married life, her desire for love, eventual frustration and loneliness. The poem voices the concerns of a woman rebelling against the norms and dictates of a patriarchal society that asks her to 'fit in' and 'belong' against her own wishes.

"I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power ..." (An Introduction 1-2)

The opening part of the poem clarifies the traditional way of positioning women in the male chauvinist society. Since, 'knowledge' is a discursive formation and men have historically been holding onto all the significant position of rulers and writers; acceptance of politics as a man's domain is normalized. Women don't have any share of it, nor do they have the ability and understanding to do so. Knowing what happens is enough for them; understanding 'why' is out of their grab and grip. The surprising part is that she starts the very poem not by introducing her individual self with proper identification; rather by presenting herself with 'weaknesses' which clearly shows the neglected marginalized female position in the society. Her admitting that she doesn't know much about politics though she knows very well about the political history of 'power' like the names of days in weeks or names of months actually strengthens that she is well aware of the fact that there is more to what male chauvinistic society imparts as 'knowledge' through education and that a woman lacks in attaining knowledge is a discursive formation.

The 'I' in this poem asserts her female persona which suggests her strong sense of possession—possession of her own self as well as the identity of a 'brown' 'Indian'. She speaks "three languages, write in Two, dream in one." What language she dreams in invokes many interpretations. The language she dreams in is the language that she can call her own, which is capable of expressing her true self. The idea of a language that is solely for women, was termed as *Ecriture Feminine* by French feminist Helene Cixous in her celebrated essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976). She modifies the language according to her needs. She refrains from correcting the language; she makes it her own with all its 'distortions' and 'queernesses'. While phallocentric ideology is consciously attempting to put 'deaf, blind speech' onto women, her language justly expresses her 'mind that sees and hears and is aware' and gives voices to her 'joys', 'longings', 'Hopes'. She rejects to conform to cultural phallocentric language and norms.

... The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. (An Introduction 11-13)

Then the narrator discloses her experience that is entirely feminine; therefore, only a woman has the right to talk about it. As part of belonging to a patriarchal society she must eventually undergo a further traumatic event – initiation into sexual intercourse which is physically more traumatic for girls because it involves penetration and some corresponding pain. At the age of sixteen she got married just because ‘they’ told that she grew. The word ‘they’ here symbolizes those society people who serve as social panopticon keeping an eye on women to ensure their stay within limit. The loveless hollow matrimonial bondage made her feminine existence even more painful and cursed. When she 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. (An Introduction 28-30)

As a girl’s bodily development occurs, each new stage is experienced as traumatic and demarcates her more and more sharply from the opposite sex.

,,, I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. (An Introduction 24-26)

As the girl’s body matures, society reacts in an increasingly hostile and threatening manner which Beauvoir clarifies in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) as the process of ‘becoming flesh’. This is a process whereby one comes to experience oneself as a sexual bodily being, exposed to another’s gaze. Thus the girls are forced to become flesh against their will.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank Pitifully. (An Introduction 31-32)

Thus the female body becomes a pain and embarrassment. The poet finally seeks shelter from dissatisfied existence in her poetry. She chooses to ignore her ‘womanliness’ breaking up all the set gender codes and comes out with a new look with ‘shirt’ and ‘Brother’s trousers’ abandoning sari. Even if a girl tries to forget that she has a female body, society soon reminds her of that with its constant criticism regarding her body and posture, making her self-conscious and thrusts stereotypical gender role into her.

... 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.(An Introduction35-38)

Das then talks about a man whom she met and loved. But she doesn't give him any name rather calls him "every man" to reflect his universality. He defined himself by the "I", the supreme male ego. Not giving the man any name allows her to confine him to a stereotypical category the same way women are being categorized for centuries via pen and paper. Men objectify women as sexual possessions and nothing more. She exists solely for the man as a tool to serve his male ego and his sense of possession. Now she typifies that man as 'every man Who wants'.

... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants (An Introduction 45-47)

Men have purposefully created an aura of mystery around women to keep them away from normal position in the society barring them from expressing every need which is universal. That women are mysterious and impossible to understand is just a manmade myth. Das breaks this imposed mystery announcing herself as no exception from normal being who bears both the instincts of a 'sinner' and also a 'saint'; and feels the warmth of love and also the bitterness of betrayal. She comes out of the patriarchal identity of an 'ideal woman' as uncomplaining, non-demanding, all-tolerant, humble, coy, conformist being. She declares her joys and pains are no different than those of men. Like men, she is also sinner and saint, beloved and betrayed. Therefore, she can also own the title of 'I'. Hence she emancipates herself to the level of 'I' breaking 'the myth of femininity'.

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. (An Introduction 58-61)

'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' – John Berger, Ways of Seeing.

This famous quote by John Berger strongly asserts the power in looking. Male gaze has always been considered a source of power that objectifies female entity treating them merely as a source of voyeuristic pleasure for the male persona. In her 'Looking Glass' Das shows what the picture might be if happens otherwise by putting the male persona in front of a looking glass (that serves the role of female gaze for the readers) to portray them as a subject to female gaze.

A superficial reading of the poem may express Das's life-long quest for true

love, yearning for emotional fulfilment and 'drab and destitute' aftermaths due to absence of the person whose tone and touch once made the poet 'gleam Like burnished brass'. Even with this traditional subject matter based poem, Das manages to keep up her iconoclast image with the use of her language to place herself above him in the power dynamic.

The very starting line is much shocking that minimizes the status of a man as 'something' easily attainable. The poet sarcastically says that getting a man is easy; one just needs to be honest of her 'wants as woman' which is again a striking blow as very few poets talk so openly about satiation of 'female hunger'. She also admits that in this male-dominated society, it is her responsibility to feed the male ego of her partner by establishing as well as admiring his masculinity presenting her 'feminine weakness' side by side. There is no harm in accepting the conventional role that a woman is expected to play. Only her feminine softness and loveliness can be a proper foil to form her partner's masculine strength and firmness.

Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so... (The Looking Glass 3-6)

Her use of language is very noteworthy here. The poet is not saying that he is stronger, rather she is saying that she needs to admit his superiority to make him 'see' and 'believe' himself as the stronger one. Then again, she needs to gift him the things that makes her 'female', but she is not making her female self an offering to the person. The use of the word 'gift' gives her the power of getting a strong hold over the male persona. It's her to give. She possesses her own self. It is she who has the power to offer gifts that can make his desired identity complete.

Tearing apart the 'phallocentric' gender-based role of language, she makes her feminine consciousness and sensibility bloom to the fullest through her own use of language, overcoming the power struggle inherent in gender stereotypes. Women voice is almost mime in the field of literature when it comes to sexual urge of female. Kamala das, in her poetry has given it voice talking about things that are considered taboo in patriarchal civilized society. Now that she has got her own brush and canvas, she portrays her own thoughts with her own color. She does not feel shy talking about her urge as a woman, nor does she feel shy about describing a man's body and being fascinated with it. She admires the 'jerky way he urinates' as well the 'shy walk' he takes. She keeps no secret of her sexual requirements. She doesn't feel hesitant to stand naked before a mirror with her partner and talk about it. She doesn't feel ashamed to talk about the 'the scent of Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts, the warm shock of menstrual blood'.

This poem is a vivid attempt to show that the masculine identity cannot be

interpreted separate from the image of men projected by women, that men's identities are closely tied to their perceptions of what they think women expect of them. She subverted the idea of male gaze and used the idea of gaze as gesture of resistance and challenge to the authority. And the word 'notice' suggests her power in looking. In this poem she is not the one being looked at, rather she is the one showing herself, presenting herself before others holding them captive to her very own feminine portrayal. This seems to be her way of maintaining the power placing influence of the "female gaze" on the construction of masculinity.

Kamala Das is not only bold enough to talk about her female hunger but also to talk about her unfulfillment in sexual gratification. 'The Freaks' is another freakishly outrageous poem. The poem starts in the first person point of view, with a confessional tone. The narrator is someone 'failed in love' who reflects upon her disappointing sexual experience as a married woman in a society where enforcing fakeness is the only way to prove normalcy for a pleasure deprived woman since the purpose of her being is to serve male ego. While 'The Looking Glass' is all about the manliness the narrator enjoyed in her partner, 'The Freaks' is the other way around. The narrator portrays the male persona in the same way women are portrayed with every little minute detail. She talks about his physical features, downsizing him almost to an object to watch and loathe. The poem starts with, 'he talks' but what he talks about is never mentioned. This time she doesn't give him voice to speak. His whole presence creates a dark cavern that the poet cannot get out of. She admits that both their minds are eagerly waiting to reach towards consummation of love, still all she can think about is his 'sun-stained Cheek', 'dark Cavern' like mouth, 'Uneven teeth', 'Nimble finger'. Their desire is only worthy of satisfying 'Skin's lazy hungers', but the heart remains an 'empty cistern'. The narrator cannot talk about her dissatisfaction to save her 'face'. So, mockingly she declares that she is the freak.

To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (The Freaks 19-20)

This can be interpreted from two different perspectives. The narrator cannot talk about her sexual dissatisfaction because the society does not expect her to since it is her duty to save the masculinity of her partner. Her disappointment due to her partner's sexual deficiency is not supposed to find voice. She is not expected to ask for pleasure because asking for it may reveal her partner's lack in satiating it. But what makes Das different from many other writers is that she declares herself a freak since she tolerates this frustrating experience with an unflattering company just to save her own 'face', not to save his sense of masculine dignity. She denies her passive role and liberates herself from the conventional society's definition of womanhood.

“Self” and “other” duality has existed since the dawn of consciousness itself. It is through a manipulation of history and nature that the self-other dichotomy has become sexualized, favoring men presenting the male as history’s subject and the female its inferior object, the “other”. Kamala Das emancipated herself as well as the whole female entity from the imposed stereotypical status of ‘other’ through her fiery words. She rejects to bear the identity given by the patriarchal phallogocentric society and snatches away what is her own; recognition as ‘I’. She explicitly shows male’s dependency upon the female’s “inferiority” for his status, power and sense of masculinity. She shows how the unequal duality is continually reinforced through the difference in socialization processes that men and women endure. Unlike men, a woman’s self-consciousness is constructed through process in regards to the qualities they lack; therefore, women feel burdened with her body. But Das chooses not feel oppressed by it, rather she uses it to satiate her urge for freedom. She lets loose her body and bodily experience and celebrates her womanhood. She stands firm as a free subject rather than as the object of society’s gaze.

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