

**N. PRASANTHA KUMAR, WRITING THE FEMALE: A STUDY OF KAMALA DAS**, Kochi Bharatiya Sahitya Pratishthan, 1998, 120 pp Rs. 125

Kamala Das's name has always been linked with one of the burning issues of humanity—the enslavement and exploitation of women by an autocratic, androcentric society. In spite of the magnificent progress man has made in science and technology and in garnering the resources of nature, he has never been able to control his own primitive urge to subjugate his fellow beings. This predilection for self-aggrandizement takes on different hues as well as forms as is instanced even in the most recent journalistic pieces.

In the second week of January this year, newspapers in India carried reports about the latest developments in two gruesome incidents—one of national and the other of international interest—that have been engaging public attention for quite some time. One, the gang rape of Anjana Mishra that capped the climax of a decade-long history of marital misery as well as her brutal molestation by an advocate-general. Two, the U.S. President Bill Clinton's settlement of the Paula Jones lawsuit with his \$850,000 cheque. According to the *The Washington Post*, a sizeable chunk of this amount was the contribution made by the First Lady, the major breadwinner of family during Clinton's twenty-five year long political career.

On the face of it, there appears to be no common element in these stories to justify a comparison. They are two separate incidents that occurred at the opposite ends of the earth, as it were, involving people whose lifestyles and range of influence are equally distant from each other. Behind these differences, however, one can see painful similarities. Despite innumerable conferences conducted to promote the empowerment of women despite the

declaration of the International Women's Decade (1975-1985), despite the signing by over 150 countries of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, women continue to be exploited in one form or the other. But their agony is either forgotten in the reporter's pursuit of tangible facts or distorted in his attempt to titillate the readers. The effect is the same—the misery of the victim vanishes from public memory in no time. It is in this context that the empathetic and enduring response of an internationally acclaimed poet like Kamala Das assumes importance and studies on the relevance of her works deserve notice.

Dr. Prasanth Kumar's monograph on Kamala Das—*Writing the Female*—focuses attention on the feminist element informing her poetic corpus. It is an attempt at reading her against the backdrop of contemporary Western theories and, in a limited measure, the Indian cultural context. This double perspective affords the readers a bird's eye vision of Das's feminist sensibility. Firstly, the study maps the extent to which the poet's concerns regarding the oppressive patriarchal dominance echo, wittingly or unwittingly, those of her international peers. The poems authenticate Dr. Kumar's observation that Kamala Das succeeds in transcending the personal and embracing the universal. This is also perhaps the most significant factor that has contributed to her wide popularity as well as critical acclaim abroad. Secondly, the exegesis suggests how, as a confessional poet, Kamala Das goes beyond the traditionally accepted suggests how, as a confessional poet, Kamala Das goes beyond the traditionally accepted frontiers of self-revelation and bares her heart to the world. To a culture, prone to sweeping creative women's admission of their amorous liaisons under the carpet of bridal mysticism, Das's fresh draught of honesty is a novel feature. This literary dare-devilry perhaps accounts for the bemused reception, at least initially, of her poetic works in India.

Dr. Kumar identifies the vain quest for an ideal, life-giving love as the recurring motif in Kamala Das's poems. Like most feminist writers the world over, Das considers marriage and maternity the most potent weapons that society uses in order to sustain and perpetuate male autocracy. Man, according to her, is essentially a creature of lust whose priapic adventures cannot be reined in even by a satisfactory conjugal relationship. Selfless love rather lies in the innocence and security of childhood. But here, Dr Kumar's study reveals how Kamala Das eschews mysticism and symbolism and remains rooted in realism.

The study further illustrates how Das's closeness to her Western counterparts is to be seen in the forms of isolation experienced by the 'I' of her poems as well as in the postures of penitential attitudes the self assumes in order to adapt better to the bitter realities of life. Kamala Das's poems appear to fit neatly into the four categories of isolation (generally seen in women's poetry) as posited by Deborah Pope in her work, *A Separate Vision*. They also present the five penitential stances that Merriman Cap discovered in her analysis of Anne Sexton's poems. Such a critique seems to suggest that feminist creative writers, even without consciously or directly influencing one another and even while retaining their unique voices, are yet bond-with their strikingly similar responses to the world around them-into a mysterious circle of sorority. This concept of literary sisterhood is rein-

forced when Dr Kumar observes that the origins of Das's creativity-like that of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton before her-can be traced back to her neurosis.

*Writing the Female* succeeds in giving a comprehensive and in-depth study of the feminist-confessional preoccupations in Kamala Das's poems. However, one cannot help feeling that instead of drawing upon *My Story* alone (where the distinction between fact and fantasy is confounded) a parallel analysis of her memories-*Neermaatala Pootha Koalam* and *Balyakala Smaranakal*-would certainly have added punch to Dr Kumar's exegesis. Besides, a serious consideration of her active involvement in such fields as Environmental Education and Child Welfare, which is also in one sense, her reaction to the male ethos of ruthless exploitation, would have thrown more light on Das's resistance to patriarchal values. With a revised bibliography-*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, for instance, appears to have been overlooked in the list-and a personal interview with the author (notwithstanding Dr Kumar's professed fears that it would affect his critical response to her poetry) the work's contribution to the canon of Kamala Das studies will, not doubt, be enhanced.

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