The language I speak becomes mine.

In Memory of Kamala Suriaya (1934 - 2009)

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In her memoir, My Story, Kamala Das writes: "Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their thoughts in their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment." Later in the same book, she speaks of writers as "those dreaming ones, born with a fragment of wing still attached to a shoulder." It was her genius that she was able to turn her predicament into a body of powerful writing that will last a long time.

I feel a great sadness that she has left us. She was my friend. In 1995, when she visited New York for a reading, we walked through the streets, sat in cafes and when she came to my apartment, she told me about a sari she had with her that needed to be washed. So I got down on my knees and soaked her sari in the bathtub, then hung the floral length of it upon the shower rack to dry. At that time I was working on a memoir which I called Fault Lines. I asked Kamala’s advice. She was candid. "Don’t write it down," she said to me in Malayalam, then switching to English "It will only land you in trouble. Look at me." Somehow, and perhaps with good reason, she attributed a great deal of difficulty in her life to the species of fictive truth telling she had employed in My Story. I say fictive advisedly, for the nature of memoir is such that one must invoke An Intimate, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks the truth, but that memory is such that one must invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—

In the beginning and end of this title poem, there was rage in her words: "You were pleased with my body's response... its usual shallow/Convulsions... You drudged spitting into my mouth... You called me wife... Covering beneath your monstrous ego..." But she did not get stuck at the rage but flew through the looking glass of the chosen script into an impossible, deathly freedom.

It was this febrile and fluid Romanticism, allied to a feminism—what else could it—that she loaded her lyric voice with. But her material was not just the present, it was the past, the ancestral past of a woman in search of who she might be, not a fixity or definite future but the constant reinvention of identity that she believed in, so that even at the end—her conversion to Islam at the age of 65 that left several of her friends behind—it became part of the same passage, the search for a praxis that could shield the body and soul in an impossible quest for union.

But it was not just the body in its tumult that gripped her imagination. With the living body comes language. Well before the great flowering of Indian writing in English, on the subcontinent and in the diaspora, Kamala Das who made her poems in English and her prose in Malayalam had claim to the language she needed. As far removed as one could imagine from the academic anxieties about what Commonwealth Writing might or might not be, it was also a rebuttal of nautivist political correctness. In a poem aptly called ‘An Introduction’ her voice cuts through the miasma of decorum and faces the intimate nature of a poet’s need, the gathering up of words to create a self:

I don’t know politics but I know the names Of those in power, and can repeat them Like Days of the week, or names of months, Of the Nethr. I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in Two, dream in one. Don’t write in English, they said. English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in Any language I like? The Language I speak Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses, All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest, It is as human as I am human, don’t You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my Hopes and it is useful to me as curing It to cross or roaring to the lions, It Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is Here, and not there, a mind that sees and hears And Is aware.

What does it mean for a poet to be aware? It means to clarify the use of the language. It means to search out the roots of the self in what lies before and all around. But what lies behind us? Adrienne Rich has written: "We think back through our mothers and fathers—women." Kamala’s mother was the Malayalam poet Balanamianma who wrote poems of a spiritualised maternity, poems of great delicacy and power. She also wrote ‘The Story of the Axe’, the epic tale of Parassurama who...
took up the axe and at the command of his father killed his beautiful mother Renuka. The voice tells of the sage’s sexual jealousy, the terrible remorse that strikes Parasurama, a son betrayed by dharma. Where Parasurama’s bloody axe falls, the land of Kerala rises up. But this generative myth only goes so far in the recuperation of matricide. In her Preface to the poem Nalapat Balamaniamma speaks of how in her poem she has tried to show “the utter futility of strength and power based on violence.”

Late one morning many years ago, I visited Kamala in Kochi. This was in the years before her conversion to Islam. It was her mother’s 80th birthday and gently Kamala led me into her mother’s room. “Don’t worry”, she said to me, pointing to the frail white haired lady who sat in the chair, “her mind wanders”. Nothing had prepared me for the wraith-like beauty of the elder poet. She took hold of my hand so tenderly. “I know you”, she said, “you are my friend from those days of the tharavaad, I’ve seen you then?” Listening to her, there were tears in my eyes. All I could do was nod, silently. Then I sat next to her on her bed as she talked to me in a quiet liting voice about the house, about the great banyan tree and the rooms filled with children. Someday I thought, I must write this, write this into a poem.

In ‘Blood’ a poem from The Old Playhouse volume Kamala Das turned to a theme that has allowed her to delve deep into the nature of ancestry, being and love. She evokes her mother’s mother’s house, the ancient tharavaad in Kerala, the snake shrine, the courtyard, the sand where two children drew the patterns of birds and animals, the idea of a bloodline that bound the speaker to the very old woman dying in the family house, to a memory that haunts being, without which the self could not exist:

When we were children
My brother and I
And always playing on the sands
Drawing birds and animals
One great grandmother said one day,
You see this house of ours
Now three hundred years old,
Its falling to little bits
Before our very eyes....

She told us
That we had the oldest blood
My brother and she and I
The oldest blood in the world
A blood thin and clear and fine...

In Kamala Das’s work, the lines of blood, the genealogy of violence and slow decay, lead forward into the freedom of the poet, the capacity of words to tell of the most intimate longing, the deep desires of soul. A wooden doll stands on my writing table, a woman cut in rosewood, her legs upright, arms pitched to either side of her head as if she were foretelling the wind, trying to listen to speech that is hard to get. She has a long face, clearly defined eyes. Around her middle is a piece of mottled red cloth. “I tied it there”, Kamala had said, handing the doll to me, many years ago in Tiruvananthapuram. Speaking of the doll, Kamala said: “She has survived a long time and whom the freedom of the poet is the freedom to sing of love, love that can only come to us in these fragile passionate bodies we are born to.”

Kamala Das’ voice cut through the mist in which so much poetic composition seemed to be shrouded. There was something in the passionate lift of that voice, its utter freshness, its fierce, unashamed quality that made me stop still in my tracks. It was a full throated woman’s voice, sexual, claiming the rights of desire, but more than that even, claiming freedom.

I want you to have her. I found her naked and tied the piece of sari round her middle. She has suffered a lot. Keep her near you, Meena. Keep writing your poems.

Now the lovely woman who spoke those words has become part of memory. The poet has become part of our history, part of the world. She has enriched Malayalam literature, allowed many writers, women and men to search out their own voices. Then too, we need to read her poems by the side of the poems of Amrita Pritam, who went before, and others like Fahmida Riaz, who come a little after. Like Fahmida’s, Kamala’s work is part of a larger movement of South Asian women poets in the second half of the 20th century who fuse the claims of poetry and the claims of desire, making poems where the injustice of the world is illuminated, where the imagination can work. We need to read her poems by the side of the poems of Lorca, Gabriela Mistral, Adrienne Rich. We need to read her poems by the side of her natural forebears, the great women poets of the Bhakti movement: Akkamahadevi, Mirabai and others for whom the freedom of the poet is the freedom to sing of love, love that can only come to us in these fragile passionate bodies we are born to.