

The language I speak becomes mine

In Memory of Kamala Suraiya
(1934 - 2009)

MEENA ALEXANDER

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 shop is 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 1990, 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 up on 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 *mol*", 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 invent, dramatise, in order to reveal the truth—not that one speaks false, far from it—but that memory is constituted in the present and the best of such writing comes from what one has forgotten and needs to invent afresh. The following night she electrified the audience at the Kaye Playhouse. She stepped onto the stage in a red silk sari, her long hair loose, a flashlight in her hand for the lights had failed and in her rich voice read out her breathtaking poems. The applause was long and sustained.

The last time I spoke to Kamala was in May, a year before her death. I was in Kerala, visiting my mother who had fallen ill. Those were days of rain. That warm sweet rain that comes upon the land, clattering twigs in the trees, spilling leaves, even bird call magnified in that soft curtain of water. Kamala had left Kerala. Through a poet friend I was able to get her phone number and reach her in Pune.

"Ah, *kuti*", she said hearing my voice, "it's been so long". She told me of how she liked living near her son and his family; she also spoke about the health difficulties, the political difficulties that had driven her from her home in Kochi.

Then she said: "Poetry, it's what keeps us going, lets talk about it. What have you been writing?" She wanted me to read a poem from my new book so I chose a poem called 'House of Breath' and read it out to her. "The past, it suckles us. That's how we live", she said in response. She added that she missed the rain of Kerala and as best I could I recalled the sounds of the rain, on the roof and in the trees, the scents of earth, the noise of the wind in the trees, the colour of the sky.

The Old Playhouse and Other Poems was the first book of hers that I read

and it took me by storm. I was 22 years old and had just returned to India after my years as a student in England. I was casting about for poems that would speak to me. Kamala Das' voice cut through the mist in which so much poetic composition seemed to be shrouded. There was something in the passionate lilt 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. That she was from Kerala, writing accomplished poetry in English, fascinated me. There were lines I repeated to myself in the months I lived with my parents in Pune, liquid lines with the stain of tragedy that I learnt to see as part and parcel of her stage set, her theatre of words:

*You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky....*

*.....
For love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.*



Kamala Das at her residence in Cochin, 2004. Photograph by Madhu Kapparith

In between 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 dribbled spitting into my mouth ... You called me wife ... Covering beneath your monstrous ego..." But the voice 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 to call 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 laid 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 nativist 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,
beginning with
Neburu. 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 cawing
Is to crows 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, if we are women." Kamala's mother was the Malayalam poet Balamaniamma 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 Parasurama 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 the old 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 lilting 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 mother's house, the ancient tharavaad in Kerala, the snake shrine, the courtyard, the sand where two children drew the patterns of bird 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 fronting 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

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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. ■



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