

Resurfacing of Thanatos: Understanding Kamala Das' "Smoke in Colombo"

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Abstract

Kamala Das is one of the most important female poets in the genre of Indian English Literature. She is a poet who can melt the singularity and exemplarity of an "instant" into an ethical and psychological critique of the community, unlike Browning who makes a fanatical jubilation of the "infinite moment". In "Smoke in Colombo", Kamala Das describes her traumatic experiences in Sri Lanka following a spell of terror and violence that takes place during the LTTE insurrection.

KEYWORDS: Kamala Das, Smoke in Colombo, Thanatos, Indian English Literature

"Two deaths, one outside, the other inside. Which call each other back to one another."

"I am alive. No, you are dead."

Jacques Derrida,

Demeure

Kamala Das is a poet who can melt the singularity and exemplarity of an "instant" into an ethical and psychological critique of the community, unlike Browning who makes a fanatical jubilation of the "infinite moment". In "Smoke in Colombo", Kamala Das describes her traumatic experiences in Sri Lanka following a spell of terror and violence that takes place during the LTTE insurrection. As the poet and her companions ride back home, the smoke seems to follow them like a real haunt /, coming from the ruins and rubbles of the violence inflicted areas. The violence has been almost over, but the aftermaths loom large like a lingering nightmare of suspicion and emptiness. On the road, they encounter a group of gunmen who stop their car and point their gun at them. The poem climaxes in the frozen arbitrariness of that moment where two groups of people, strangers to each other, face each other without any emotions:

"They stopped us, a somnambulistic

Daze in their eyes . . .

. . . but we were

Too fatigued to feel fear or resist"

The poem is autobiographical is in most other poems of Kamala Das. Her husband was posted in Sri Lanka at the time when the history of ethnic strife in that nation was getting the most violent. But more than an autobiographical reminiscence, the poem becomes a confessional lyric on the suspension of human emotions at the

unrepresentable instant of mortal trauma, like Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of my Death*. The primary themes of this lyric are thanatological:

- i. External violence (like political conflict, devastation of property, fire)
- ii. Internalization of external violence and the psychological lingering of trauma (that reveal to us the fragility of human existence)
- iii. The inertia of the moment of 'my nothingness', that supervenes fear and freezes all human autonomy to will and act (the 'strange meeting' with the automation-like armed men at the end of the poem).

Initially, the mind of the poet registers the documents of external violence – the horizons wrapped in smoke, the dying flames in the debris, the grief-stricken mother. But these perceptions are eclipsed by the haunt of an inner anguish, represented by the phrases like "following us" and "lingering on", suggesting interminability of anguished memory. Although there is no overt event of violence and loss around her, the poet has entered the dreadful zone of her own pity and fears, which she cannot catharsize or "mourn off" adequately as Freud would have called it. To eliminate the lingering trauma, her mind would require an encounter with what Levinas would call the ontological void. These emotions are finally wrecked into the dreadful Lacanian "Real" of an un-representable and image-less absolute moment – the moment of confronting something beyond the control of cognition, will, action and understanding altogether. Neither can the poet comprehend the motive of the armed men, nor can she will to rationally negotiate the situation. She just lapses into momentary nothingness of thought and action – too "fatigued" to either 'feel' or 'resist'. But it is quite apparent that the men-in-weapons are simple automations without any rational choice or action of their own – they look hypnotized by some alien ideology, with a sleep in their eyes. This, then is the limit of inhuman encounter, with 'no space' between 'us' and 'their guns', an absolute contact yet absolutely unfriendly, hostile and thanatological. With this concluding stasis in the psychological flow in the poem, Kamala Das gives the testimony of Heideggerian condemnation to freedom, since this nullity of thought at the fearful moment, evacuates all fears, fires and smokes from the poet's mind, "as though of hemlock" she "has drunk". It is ironical that an authentic and immediate exposure to death's otherness catharizes the self, even though it might have been the self's final moment of existence.

Das uses a number of objective correlatives and imageries to build up this climax. The "silenced streets" stand for both the exterior political oppression and her own interior suffocation. The "smoke following us" is an objective correlative for the poet's own anxious train of thoughts. This haunt is given a pathetic imagery of a mother's breast-milk flowing in a futile, automatic way even after her cradle is emptied, i.e. that is the baby has perished. It is noticeable that all the images and symbols are of a melancholic nature aptly sustaining the formal balance with the psychological content of the poem.

Works Cited

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