

Gender and Religion in Kamala Das' Poetry

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Abstract: Kamala Das was one the illustrious poets in the history of Indian English literature. She represented a typical middle class Indian woman's dual conflict of ideas through the portrayal of her own persona with the backdrop of Indian life and culture in her versatile poetry. Kamala Das was a champion of woman's secret longings, aspirations and desires. Her poems are full of her personal feelings as a woman and the realization of own self. The present paper focuses on the voice she lends for every woman agonized in marriage and the reawakening of her soul, which she submits to God.

Keywords : Aspirations, biographical elements, versatile poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, Indian society and its men have confined the women to kitchen and treated them as a sexual entity, a play toy, a material, a source of wealth, a status symbol, an unpaid servant, a machine to produce children, a burdensome creature etc. The renowned poet Kamala Das too experienced these ill-treatments personally and her life was entangled around these labels.

Kamala Das has been considered one of the most illustrious contemporary Indian woman poets who expressed a typical middle class Indian woman's dual conflict of ideas through the portrayal of her own persona in the backdrop of Indian life and culture in her versatile poetry, especially elevating or discussing the psycho-sexual aspects of her middle-class womanhood and her conjugal life very candidly and boldly. Usually Indian women dared not speak on these issues.

II. DISCUSSION & RESULT ANALYSIS

Most of her poems depict men and women in common Indian scenario. In this context, Dr. K. M. Pandey wrote in his essay "Kamala Das: A Study in Evolving Vision" as:

Born in Kerala, and brought up in Calcutta, while living in Delhi and Bombay at present, in a sense, she has felt the pulse of the whole India. Thus being rooted in Indian soil, she

grapples with ideas and abstractions, images of men and women on several planes, the complex of emotions centering round the human activities and problems relating to her own art.

Das deeply craved for love and affection, which was of course a mirage in her life. She suffered under a lustful husband, who never cared for her desires. She dreamed about love and security from the husband like every common woman, but in her case it remained an unfulfilling dream. Because of her man's refusal to yield love, she continuously experimented to obtain love by embracing one man to another man's arms. She found nothing. Her quest for love was futile; besides this, she realized that physical lust never compensated pure love.

It is clear that she has no sexual passion, but her deep disgust towards her husband's prime importance for it drifted her to make up her mind to maintain extramarital relations and to be disloyal to him at least physically. Her frustrated heart was poured out in many of her poems in her first three collections of poetry *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Play House and Other Poems* (1973) vividly.

On the whole, many of her poems reflected her personal life. Kamala Das' autobiography *My Story* was so close to her poetry in theme and treatment. Both the genres, in fact, were the records of her life's trials and tribulations. She lightened her heart through writing her life's story and her own feelings in the form of poetry. So, one could observe that her poems consisted her personal elements and impressions. Some of her poems spoke of her attachment with people, and places that had surrounded her and influenced her personal life, and some other poems spoke of her inner psyche and its conflict for undigested issues in her life, and a few poems revealed her ambitions and poetic mission.

Mrs. Das' poignant saga began with her early age which was neglected by her parents. Only the cook and her elder brother took care of her, the former in the case of food and the latter in carrying her to the European school. At school, she was discriminated by her fellow White boys and was sent to wait in the corridor behind lavatories when the White dignitary visited it. During her childhood, she remained lonely and depressed. When she was fifteen, her parents brought her marriage proposal with a man who was an employer in the Reserve Bank of India. She was mortified by the lustful advances and sexual talks of her soon to be husband. She found him ungentlemanly, dispassionate and uncouth in his approach to her. He pleaded with her to bare her breasts and if she refused to do so, he turned brutal and crude. Besides, he told her of his sexual exploits, which he shared with his maidservants at his home. All these shattered her dreams she had of her husband; she longed to have a man with traits of motherly love and fatherly concern, especially a good companion who would drive her loneliness away. In this context she wrote:

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I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life... (My Story, P 80)

Her life was planned by her father and her relatives even without considering her feelings on marriage and the bridegroom. In other words, she had no choice and the marriage was held against her wishes. In her own words, Das described her deliberate hopeless situation in My Story as, "I did not know whom to turn to for consolation." and the very essence of marriage institution as, "Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours....The bride was unimportant and her happiness, a minor issue."

Kamala Das revealed in the poem *An Introduction* about her pathetic predicament as:

...I was a child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I 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. (The Old

Playhouse and Other Poems, p 26)

In this way, she was forcefully drawn into the matrimonial bond, and she surrendered herself to her husband physically without mental union.

Das boldly questioned her physical union with her husband in the poem *In Love*:

Million questions awake in
Me, and all about him, and
This skin-communicated
Thing that I dare not yet in

His presence call our love. (Summer in
Calcutta, p 14)

In another poem named *The Freaks*, she asserted herself as a freak, as she failed to derive love from her companion, but only she and her mate satiated their physical thirst. Their lives exemplified with empty relationship, devoid of love. The man only moved to her to quench his unending physical thirst. The woman was burning too with such desire, but her sexual hunger remained unfulfilled as his touch made her feel nothing more than 'skin's lazy hungers'. The following verses depict a thorough deprivation of love and the resultant emptiness in their lives:

..., his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire....
And further:
...The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting

Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence.... (Summer in
Calcutta, p 10)

The love-less physical union with her husband made her pregnant. She was sent to her parental home, Nalapat House in Malabar, when her health declined due to continuous vomiting. But later she gave birth to a lovely male child. She expected her husband's visit eagerly, but his arrival made her unhappy and restless, as he paid no heed to her or their newborn son. Besides, he talked to her for only a moment and with indifference, and spent most of the time with his cousins and sister-in-law.

In the poem *Composition* from the anthology of *The Old Playhouse and Other Stories*, Kamala Das described her attachment with her grandmother who awaited the whole day to share her affectionate heart with her sick granddaughter.

Traditionally, a woman was confined in the cage of family life by her dominant husband who always tries to put her under his control by coaxing her charm, cleverness, and patience and by reminding her dependence on him. He always strives hard to remind her of discharging her physical duties for him, but the man never bothers to fulfill her psychological or emotional needs. But, the woman tries to co-exist with him whether she likes it or not under the umbrella of celebration of domesticity and motherhood. For example, the personality of her husband in Kamala's own words reads as:

He was obsessed with sex. If it was not sex, it was the cooperative Movement in India and both these bored me. But I endured both, knowing that there was no escape from either. I even learnt to pretend an interest that I never once really felt. (My Story, p 121-122)

Kamala Das pitied her life, which she led and compared her quest for love as "Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which only sought for it a receptacle" (My Story, p 112). She compared her life and beauty with the bougainvillea flowers that last and shine briefly during full bloom of spring. Autumn makes its grandeur vanish. Soon, the bees leave those plants, until then they were around them.

During her gloomy days in Bombay, Kamala was visited by a wealthy handsome person who was her old pen friend Carlo. He pleaded with her to marry him in order to forget the scents of gymkhana friend and her indifferent husband. She refused to do so, as she was against escaping from her responsibilities of motherhood.

Later, she experienced severe blows in her life, especially her declining health which took her close to death. Also the death of her loving grandmother had shattered her to pieces. The physical advances of a man of the Spanish blood, who tried to move close to her and her husband made her restless and felt like 'an easy prey' (My story, p 139). Meanwhile, she found immense pleasure in writing. She adopted it as a hobby and started writing stories and poems to the Mathrubhumi and the Illustrated Weekly.

When Kamala and her husband moved to Calcutta on transfer, she perceived it as "It was from Calcutta that I lost my faith in the essential goodness of human beings."²¹ There were more reasons for assumptions. Some of them were: the morally corrupted atmosphere, baseless scandals on her personal life and and lecherous hugs by her elderly cousins, whom she called uncles. She showed concern for an old man who misunderstood her and showed sexual interest by bringing her pornographic book wrapped in a brown cover.



Her husband paid no heed when she asked him to take her away from a lustful place as this. In order to sooth her restless mind of such awkward impressions; she adopted alcoholism on the advice of one of her close friends. On the other hand, she grabbed Calcutta as her poetic material which triggered her poetic sensitivity; moreover it introduced her to so many strange things. She wrote:

And yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw for the first time the eunuch's dance. It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute, gaudily printed like a cheap bazaar toy. It was at Calcutta that I saw the ox carts moving along Strand Road early in the morning with proud heavy-turbaned men, their tattooed wives with fat babies dozing at their breasts like old drunkards in clubs at lonely hours (My Story, p 151-152).

Perhaps, this was the reason why she titled her first collection of poetry as *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965. The poems like *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Dance of Eunuchs*, *A Phone Call in the Morning*, *Visitors to the City* etc are a tale of her experiences she had at Calcutta. She sighted her attentive glimpses of life and her own mechanism of sensitive responses on the bitter realities she tasted and perceived from others in Calcutta.

In *Summer in Calcutta*, the poet asserted her deep longing for love and someone's attention to escape from her sense of loneliness and harsh realities around her.

In *The Dance of Eunuchs*, Kamala Das described the pathetic lives of the eunuchs, who suffered from sterility, poverty, and lack of identity. Their ecstatic dance reminded the poet about their apathetic, melancholic and marginalized lives; and the sorrow beneath their endured lives with rottenness and death.

The poem *A Phone Call in the Morning* brought out her poet's understanding of life with a practical bent of mind. She receives a phone call from the stranger in the early morning in Calcutta. She was panic stricken and questioned herself whether she looked like 'a harlot' or 'an easy prey'. Through her poetic mission, she analyzed the doom of the participants (predator and prey or player and toy) in a sexual act by reminding man's ephemeral life on earth. It showed her philosophical mind too:

...What is new? Not this body,
Now slightly worn, that was both
The player and the toy, not this
Hunger to set mouth to mouth and
Limb to Limb, not this love, but
Only the blue morning, dew-drenched,
Bruised with bird sounds and the whir

Her family being shifted to Delhi brought her relief. In the due course, she gave birth to a male child third time, who was born lovely with thick hair and long eye lashes. Kamala's father named him Jaisurya. A sturdy sardarini was appointed to look after him when her health failed. She prayed fervently for her recovery from illness and promised to God that she would lead an exemplary life if he had spared her life. But, she forgot her promises and once more intoxicated her life in seeking love outside marriage. She fell in love with a dark man; of course it was her last trial for love making and spiritual realization. She felt that He was her Krishna. He too enjoyed their meetings, but scolded her for writing letters to

him. She always thought of leaving him, but she could not. She discovered beauty and the very meaning of life in this new relationship. She felt the amalgamation of her sensual experiences and conscience, which led her to a better spiritual journey:

Physical integrity must carry with it a certain pride that is a burden to the soul. Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change (My Story. p178)

Kamala Das realized the perishable nature of the human body and the eternity of the self and its union with God. So, she gradually moved away from human bondage and corporal involvements, turned to Lord Krishna, and questioned the very existing relationships with her husband, children etc. Ultimately, she believed that her love for him was "just the writing of the sea, just a song borne by the wind..(My Story p 179) and her relation with Him remains everlasting:

Her writings too depicted this philosophy. She identified herself with Radha, an archetypical beloved and a symbol for the human soul and a deep longing for a union with God (Lord Krishna). In the poems *Radha*, *Radha Krishna* and *The Bats*, she expressed her alienation as a human and her deep yearning for her union with the eternal soul:

And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains
You... (The Descendants, p 7)

and

...for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality...(Summer in Culcutta, p 37)

Kamala Das surmounted the stage of indulging into corporal involvements and being of fond of the physicality. Her endurance of inconsistent health and emotional pain for years led her to maturity and spiritual realm. She became more religious. She forgot the art of localizing her love. In her own words:

All the ancient hungers that had once tormented my lithe body were fulfilled. Not even the best-looking man in the world would any longer arouse in me appetite for love (My Story, p 204).

She even forgave her husband who was the chief cause of her ceaseless pain in her matrimonial life and further, he was the root cause for her drifting away from him and finding solace in extramarital relationships. She treated him with motherly concern and felt sorry for his premature ageing. Besides, she responded very emotionally when she knew that her husband was insulted by his superior. All these incidents proved that she had great concern for her husband. She only sought a little love and kindness from her him in return.

Kamala Das perceived her body which had undergone several operations as "a cloth doll that had lost a few stitches here and there" (My Story, p185). She was even hurt for the reactions of some male readers about her poetry which mainly dealt candidly with 'love' and 'sex' themes.

They misunderstood her as a wronged woman and tried to pull her into the same hatred web (sex), but her courageous spirit made her speak of these issues once again boldly in her autobiography and the narrow mindedness of some people.

In many of her poems, Kamala Das showed her apathy towards worldly love and its resultant sexual union. With a great practical bent of mind, she hated the physical body which was the prime source to fall in the traps of sin. In the poem *A Request*, she saw the human body as a mere combination of "meat and bones" (*The Descendants*, p 5). In the poem *A Relationship*, she described the constrained scope of a typical Indian married woman as "/ that I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace / and even death nowhere else but here in / My betrayer's arms //"*(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, p 41). In the poem *Gino*, she saw herself a mere object: / This body that I wear without joy, this body / Burdened with lenience, slender toy, owned / By a man of substance...// (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, p 41)

III. CONCLUSION

Kamala Das learnt many things out of her life's experiences and perhaps this made her vision wider. She did not want to conceal anything in her life. She wanted to be as clear as a crystal to the readers who may learn something good and useful from her life and experiences. In one of her poems *Composition*, she advised married ones as: / Husbands and wives, / here is my advice to you. / Obey each other's crazy commands, / ignore the sane. / Turn your home into a merry / dog-house, / (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* p 8)

She once used 'Sea' as a medium to escape from the bitter realities in life and loneliness by drowning into the sea, but she found the thought was useless and be like a warrior in the battle. Her poem *The Suicide* witnessed this very idea as: / I tell you, sea, / I have enough courage to die, / But not enough. / Not enough to disobey him / Who said: Do not die / And hurt me that certain way. // (*The Descendants*, p 42). In *The Old Play House*, she was tired of the physical love which she obtained from her husband and sought for / An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors / To shatter and the kind night to erase the water. // (*Old Playhouse and other poems*, p 2). In *An Introduction*, she decided to call herself "I" which showed her emancipation from all the confinements which are imposed by both society and the members of the family on the identity and scope of a woman. In *I Shall Some Day*, she dreamt of freedom from the life which is devoid of love as:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
you tired lust. I shall someday take
Wings, fly around...(*Summer in Calcutta*, p 52)

With brutal honesty and candidness, Kamala Das has captured her life, feelings and glimpses in her works, especially in her autobiography *My Story* and her poetic collections.

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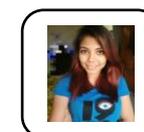
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