

Feminine Sensibility and Self-Discovery Through Love as Pictured in the Poetical Works of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to project how Kamala Das's poetry and prose reflect the restlessness of a sensitive woman moving in the male-dominated world and how she appears as a champion of woman's causes. The feminine images in her works tend to center around strong and independent women who defy culturally imposed patriarchal conventions as they strive to discover and make heard their voices. It attests to the fact that Kamala Das is primarily a poet of feminine longings and her lyrical narrative is eloquent and that marks her poetry as the best in poetic form and examines how Kamala Das searches for her own identity and self-creation amidst a world that strives to define, identify and label people. No doubt, this article opens a window to the true spirit of Kamala Das's poems.

Key words: English fluency among Indian youths, significance

The Post-Independence Indo-English verse has gained in both strength and variety in an appreciable manner owing to the salutary efforts of its skilled practitioners. Indo-English fiction that had earlier earned recognition and acceptability is now being supplemented by this indigenous verse, thanks to the talent and craftsmanship of Nissim Ezekiel, Shiv K. Kumar, R. Parthasarathy, A.K. Ramanujam, Pritish Nandy, K.N. Daruwalla, Kesha Malik and a few others. The stature of Kamala Das among these 'new' Indo-English poets may be judged from the fact that she has been included in all the important Anthologies and special issues of various journals and magazines the world over. She also finds a place on the syllabi of several Indian and Foreign activities. And she comes next to none in points of popularity and recognition as a poet.

In the words of A.N.Dwivedi, "Although Kamala Das has produced only three slender volumes of verse to-date, she stands out as an Indian poet writing in English today by virtue

of her lyricism, openness and frankness. In her case, quality steals a march over quantity. There are so many Indo-English poets with a number of volumes to their credit, but they do not possess the quality of Kamala Das. One gram of gold is certainly more valuable than one kilogram of copper. One has to tread very continuously in the field of contemporary Indo-English verse" (Preface, i). He further adds:

"Kamala Das is verily a celebrant of the human body and her poetry is glutted with images and symbols of love and lust. Her exemplary candour and sincerity of tone renders her verse highly readable and enjoyable, and one simply can't stop without reaching unto the very last. What adds pungency and authenticity to it is the distillation of her own experiences into it, the recording of her personal concerns and predicaments in it. There is a strong autobiographical touch in it, which makes Mrs. Das a 'confessional' poet of the first order – somewhere near Anne Sexton,

Sylvia Plath and Judith Wright among women poets and Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass and John Berryman among men poets". (p.x)

Kamala Das, like Jane Austen, in English fiction, moves in a narrow range in her poetry with her range of themes being limited very often there is witnessed repetition and consequent monotony in the body of her political works. However, she moves in her circle with grace and skill she does not try to transgress her self-imposed limitations and this accounts for her success in poetical endeavours. In fact, broad political, financial and social issues were beyond her reach, but whatever she wrote was born of her own experiences which immediately make her an integral poet, a poet of 'felt thought'.

Kamala Das is primarily a poet of feminine longings. Her poetry and prose reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male-dominated society K.R.S. Iyengar rightly says:

"Kamala Das' is a fiercely, feminine sensibility that dares without inhibition to articulate hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man made world" (p.41)

Kamala Das is the greatest exponent of the feminine sensibility among the Indian writers in English. She herself confesses in her poetry her ignominy, her disgrace; her humiliation, her sexual and domestic exploitation and her wild despair. She arouses among the women folk the feminine sensibility by making them conscious of the tyranny of men heaped on the women folk. She arouses the feminine sensibility by stating the tyranny of man and by protesting against it. Then she paves the way for the womenfolk by rebelling against it. But in spite of her determination to change the male-

dominated society, she finds the society unchanged. Therefore, she ironically asks the women folk to submit themselves to the tyranny imposed on them by the men folk. The poetess states in **The Sunshine Cat** that the men folk are selfish and lewd. The women persona of the poem is sexually hungry and longs for love. But her husband neither loves her nor satisfies her sexually. The helpless woman turns to the acquaintances for love and sex, but they, too, disappoint her. She then develops a love affair but her lover turns out to be a coward and selfish. She then turns to a band of cynics who are prepared to use her sexually but cannot love her. The problem of the woman arises because her husband neither gives her love nor sex. Willingly she resorts to adultery. But as the men folk know that she is an adulterous, they cannot love her. When the husband of the woman learns that her wife is committing adultery, he locks her in a room where, for lack of sunshine, she is reduced to a mere skeleton and becomes half-dead. The woman suffers severely on account of her husband's ruthless attitude. This naturally arouses anger among the womenfolk. The boy husband of the poetess in **An Introduction** assaults her sexually and almost rapes her on the honeymoon night. This naturally hurts the feminine sensibility of a woman.

The feminine sensibility is aroused with Kamala's remark that whereas a man seeks a woman for lust, a woman seeks a man for lover. The crux of the matter is summed up in the lines that follow:

"In him.... The hungry haste
Of rivers, in me... the oceans'
Tireless waiting"

She speaks of the deception of the part of the men folk when she says:

"I am the beloved and the betrayed'

The poem “Captive” describes Kamala Das’s love as ‘an empty gift’, ‘a glided empty container’ and herself as the prisoner of ‘the womb’s blinded hunger, the muted whisper at the core’. The poem “The Old Playhouse” brings home the point that love is perhaps no more than a way of learning about one’s self or the completion of one’s own personality. It is addressed presumably to the husband and is largely personal. It lodges a protest against the constraint of the married life: the fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort and male domination. ‘You’ in the poem is possibly the husband, who wants to tame the swallow who is the woman and thus deprive her of her natural freedom. As a result of his egoism, she feels emptied of all her natural mirth and clarity of thinking:

“you called me wife, I was taught to break saccharine into your tea to offer at the right moment the vitamins. Covering beneath your monstrous ego, I ate the magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason to all your questions, I mumbled in coherent replies”.

Here the woman suggestively protests against the male ego and assertion. In the erotic poem, ‘The Looking Glass’, her frustrations and quest for love are dealt with in the guise of a woman who is subjected to suffer in a male dominated world. She is considered merely an object for the satisfaction of man’s lust. Kamala Das uses unusual words in this poem which becomes revolutionary thought. ‘Ferns’, shows the disenchantment by physical love. Intensity of maternal love and feminine sensibility are the predominant themes in ‘Jaisurya’. The poetess describes the pain of a woman who forgets even the sufferings of her sexual exploitation in the child birth:

“Love is not important that makes the blood carouse nor the man who brands

you with his lust, but is shed at the end of each Embrace. Only that matters which forms as Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft” (Jaisurya, 21-25)

In another poem, ‘Gino’, Kamala Das expresses the terror of sex and also its attraction. She realistically depicts the burdens of domestic life, sickness, her aging and decaying of body and death in this poem. “The Stone Age” expresses a note of rebellion against male domination. The husband is described as “an old fat spider weaves walks of bewilderment” (The Stone Age, 2) around his wife and confines her within the four walls of domesticity. Her writings mainly reflect woman’s longing for love and the restriction she faces in the society. As R.S.Pathak has put it, “He who touches Das’s poem, touches a woman” (Pathak, 44) To project feminine sensibility in her verse, Kamala Das is the first Hindu woman who writes honestly and openly about her quest for true love in her verse. It is obvious of Das’s poetry, love and sex from the main theme. When she grew up from a child to an adult, she began to think about the need of real love. Murali Manohar quotes:

“What the woman hungers for is not lust but love, simple love, which Kamala Das considers a necessity of life” (Manohar, 21)

Kamala Das regards love as an attachment and a deep one between a man and a woman and also regards sexual relationship as secondary. She believes that love is a central emotion in woman’s heart. She craves for union with man for the fulfillment of love. But she is disillusioned and frustrated when it is degenerated into lustfulness and bodily pleasures. Dwivedi says about her longing for true love as “she is primarily a poet of feminine longings and unquestionably poet of love and sex” (p.20) ‘Gino’ begins on a note of

warning and fear, comparing the kiss of a lover to the bite of a Krait who 'fills the bloodstream with its accursed essence'. This makes her think of the all pervasive essence of love, and of the essence of death which is also the sense of life:

"... a July, full of rain and darkness
Trapped like smoke, in the hollows of
the sky and that lewd, steamy smell of
rot, rising out of the earth" (p.18)

The poem "Glass" focuses the attention on the fragility love-experiences ('half an hour') and also of the body. The poet says with a sense of pathos:

"I went to him for half an hour
As pure woman, pure misery

Fragile glass, breaking Crumbling...."

Kamala Das is primarily a poet of feminine longings. Her poetry and prose reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male-dominated world and in them she appears as a champion of woman's cause. She raises her forceful voice against the male tyrannies in such poems as "A Relationship", "Summer in Calcutta", "An Introduction" and "Marine Drive". The following poetic passage reveals the monotony and tiresomeness of a hollow married life:

"I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
you built around me with morning tea,
love-words flung from doorways and of
course, your tired lust. I shall someday
take wings flu around..." (Summer in
Calcutta, 52)

Being unquestionably a poet of love and sex, she is not so much pre-occupied with the metaphysical quest of a restless soul nor with the formulation of any theory of poetry. She writes almost invariably about the power of love and the appeal of the body. As an honest poet of love, she looks very frank and naïve,

without the 'intellectual pride' and the domestic air of the well-known Australian poetess, Judith Wright. Her poetry is "as honest, it is as human, as she is" (Sophia, 7)

In most of her poems, Kamala Das expressed her unfulfilled love and also her need for love. Mishra points out that Kamala Das writes in disgust as "I fell in love with a husband, who did not want love" (p.261) She reveals the quest of woman for love in general terms. For attaining true love, she admits that she goes for everywhere but in vain. As she deeply feels for true love, she generalizes the truth in writing about love:

"... He is every man who wants a woman,
just as I am every woman who seeks
love" (An Introduction, 44-45)

She feels so much grieved that she is not able to win true love from her husband; instead, sexual assault and loveless relationship from him. The woman in "Luminol" wants to sleep for ever by taking sleeping pills to avoid the sexual assaults on her by her clumsy lover. The woman persona in "The Invitation" ultimately decides to commit suicide by accepting the invitation of the sea because her lover, after using her sexually, has deserted her. This will arouse indignation among the women folk. The poetess has reiterated in several poems that the men folk enslave the women folk in the name of the institution of marriage for using them sexually and for burdening them with household drudgery. Sometimes the poetess protests against the lust and tyranny of man. In the poem "Love", she protests that her husband does not love her and that there is for him even no need or excuse for love. She lodges a strong protest against him that sex, is for him, the be-all, and end-all. She complains in "The Looking Glass" that the man expects his beloved to stand nude with him before the mirror and to offer him all

those organs of her body from where sex oozes out. She strongly protests against the man who has clipped the wings of her swallow freedom so that she may forget her urge to fly to the countless pathways of the sky.

Kamala Das ironically asks the women in "Composition" to surrender themselves to the ego of the men folk because the superiority of the men folk is implicit in the institution of marriage. The fact that the 'right' kind of man she wanted has never met her is at the core of her tragedy:

"..... for long I've waited for the right one
To come, the bright one, the right one to
live in the blue. No I am still young
And I need that man for construction and
destruction"(The Invitation, 14)

And again stated as:

"..... For years I have run from one
gossamer lane to another, I am now
my own captive" ("Captive", 17)

The kisses of her husband on her cheeks are the 'maggot's rolling over the 'corpse' (p.22). He knows only the 'physical' kind of love, without trying to make any emotional or spiritual contact with her. This is clearly expressed in poem "Convicts":

"That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other's parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon". (p.26)

This kind of love is bound to generate and drift lovers apart who feel the necessity getting relieved by some other sources. "The poem The Joss-Sticks as Cadell Road" elaborates this inherent idea. In the poem namely "Sunset, Blue Bird", the poetess lodges a strong protest against the instinct of possessiveness incarnate in her husband:

"You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her in the long summer of your love so that 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".

Here the husband stands all for suppression and cruelty, while she wishes to 'fly', to attain freedom. As a proud husband conscious of his glittering gem called 'wife', he has totally annihilated her identity and individuality. She is treated as no more than a domesticated woman who is required to look after his house and children and attend to his whims and freaks.

As Kamala Das was not able to find really true love anywhere except in her own grandmother's house where she spent most of her happiest days before the death of her grandmother. She said,

"I lived in such house and was proud and love" (My Grandmother's House, 13)

The warm memories of her grandmother make her feel the sense of insecurity in terms of the purest kind of love. The poetess seeks pure love and complete freedom. She has, therefore, determined to break the selfish egoistic and the Narcissistic image of men.

To conclude, let it be said that Kamala Das is a delightful poet of love and sex. Such poets as Shiv. K. Kumar, Pritish Nandy, Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra and A.K. Ramanujam have sung. Songs in honour of Love but Kamala Das surpasses them all in her emotional sweep and lyrical rapture and 'love' is the citadel where her personal cares and anxieties, her own dilemmas and predicament are safely anchored. By advocating free sex as an instrument of self-discovery, she has raised her voice against the persecution of women in a male dominated society. In the words of M.K. Naik, "Das' poetry produces one of a bold, ruthless

honesty, tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within” (p.24)

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Your thoughts are the architects of your destiny.

~ David O. McKay