



The Theme of Love In The Writings of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Of all the Indian - English Women Poets, Kamala Das has received maximum critical attention. More often than not, she has been acknowledged and accelerated as an outstanding love-poet. Her poetry, in the main, deals with the various facets of love-experience.

Love is an authentic phenomenon both conceptual and perceptual simultaneously. In the conceptual context it is Platonic and a Chimera. In the perceptual context it dwindles into what can be called the creaturely evocative dimension. There is no possibility of reconciling both. They both are simultaneously felt experiences, hence the love-hate tangle is towards the very prospect of love in life. The essential dilemma in Kamala Das's poetry emerged out of this simultaneous predominance of love in its highest and lowest dimensions, that puts her on verbal excruciations flaring into object ravings of a thoughtless creature wriggling under the ideological pressures of life. So her felt condition is like that of the cockroach of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'. Hence, life as given for Kamala Das is a Kafkaish unending agony through a trail.

The expressions 'wants' and 'seeks' are illusions to man's superficial attitude towards love which is probably in contrast to woman's search for totality and permanence. The categorical distinction and differentiation between man and woman as naturalistic creatures puts man as a self-serving conservative agent, serving his own purposes and cold shouldering his feminine counterpart into a state of negligence and unwantedness.

Keywords: Critical, Obsession, Theme, Isolation Complex, Authentic, Platonic, Distinction Dimensions, Expressions, Metaphysical Profound, Phenomenon, Confessional, Endeavour, Conservative, Companionship.

Introduction:

Kamala Das is a popular, contemporary Indian writer. Her *My Story* was published when she was convalescing in a nursing home. It is the first autobiography from an Indian woman writer and it was the sensational best seller of the year. She was born at Punnayarkulam in Malabar in 1934. Her father was a staunch Congress Worker and mother a traditional housewife. Narayan Menon, her maternal uncle, was a renowned name in Kerala and her mother too was a poet in her own right and had written many poems in Malayalam. Influenced by this atmosphere, Madhavi Kutty, that was her maiden name, started trying her hand at writing poems from a very young age. She was educated mainly at home. Her father had a fancy for English language and sent her to a prestigious missionary school. Though she did not like the “English” environment, she emotionally responded to English language. Her early marriage with Madhava Das, her three children and their shifting from Kerala to Mumbai proved a major turn which effected her life.

Kamala Das is a bilingual poet like many other Indian poets. She writes in Malayalam, her mother tongue. She was given the poetry Award of The Asian PEN for her Anthology in 1964 and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for her story “*Thumpy in Malayalam*”. Other than *My Story*, she has two more novels to her credit – *An Alphabet of Lust* and *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*.

Kamala Das can be termed as child prodigy. She inherited her literary taste from her mother. For Kamala Das, childhood was not a disjointed process but a continuous experience. She was scared of growing old and could not accept it till was reminded about it. She never excused her father for putting an abrupt end to her childhood by pushing her into a hasty arranged marriage, when she was just content with tenderness. It shattered all her dreams of childhood. Her search for love in more than one person lead her to more complexities. She is able to present her themes, raw, naked without clothing it with symbols nor concealing it with imagery and metaphors. She lived and loved like a “Radha”, like a queen and could not take the disillusionment of living in one room apartment of Mumbai. She writes in her novel that from every city I have lived I have remembered the noon in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a home sickness.

Her experiments with love take many turns and in the course, given birth to more frustrations. She wanted a love of her kind and become “the prisoner” in that gladly. The search for ideal love is continued through out her writings. Her concept of love takes a new turn very often. She was sick of love which was just skin-deep. Her ideal love which is

sought had her grand mother's love, her parental love and also the soft love which she had experienced at school. She failed miserably but quiet gracefully and poetically at that. This helpless feminine anger on her husband lovers and society made her passion cruel. She declares that she had shed the casual desire as a snake might shed its skin on one hand and in the same breath says":

I was ready for love-Ripe for an sexual banquet.

Kamala Das's bold experience of her frenzied love, expressed without any restraint, got her both bouquets and brick bats. But no critic could complain against her technique "Her technique is perfect however ferocious the passion is". Sometimes she ignores, sometimes gives a befitting rejoinder through her articles.

She says she was never a nymphomaniac and rejects that her poems are pornographic in tone. Her over anxiety to expose dark areas hidden in her subconscious and also expose the society of its inhibitions, some of her poems are turned out be crude and hasty compositions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she is the first Indian Woman who could use "love" as a theme, so sustaintingly through her poems, in multi-coloured dimensions. Kamala Das knew the answer for the question as she was aware that her soul has been killed and only she wanted to get rid of her physical body. But the streak of love was stronger which pulled her from the jaws of death.

A desperate obsession with love is one of the prominent features of Kamala Das's poetry. The failure to arrive at it leaves her in the claustrophobic world of the self, the wounded self. "The Freaks", "The Old Playhouse", "An Introduction", "The Looking Glass", are some of the poems in which the wounded self, which has to struggle hard to achieve its own identity is not only the central theme but the principle of organisation as such. Erotic indulgence keeps the self within the orbit of a relationship without making it lament over its wounds. Isolation leads to despair through fear. In "The Freaks", the speaker says" "*who can help us who have lived so long and have failed in love*". The speaker says that she is a freak and the freakishness is an internabisation of the of the speaker's urgently felt need to save her face. "The Old Playhouse" seems to provide the key to her dialectical attitude to the male-oriented discourse, and helps the reader familiarise himself/herself with the poet's complex calculus associated with love and lust the title of the poem constitutes its control image, and the speaker feels that love-making has made her mind an "*Old Playhouse with all its light put out*". The self is blocked and choked, and it finds itself in a state of emotional darkness. The main is presented as a deliberate tactician

in taming a free bird, his plans succeed in making the bird forget her nature i.e. the urge to fly. The male ego reduces her to the level of a dwarf. Her contact with him makes her aware of her body which is not an asset to her but liability.

The awareness of the impending defeat of the end in the pursuit of consummate love, makes the battle all the more difficult to comprehend. This failure in reaching the summit makes the human existence not greater than that of any other creature on earth. This creaturely approach enables Kamala Das to observe the self more objectively. This is the mind that sees and hears and / Is aware, which is rather a curse than a relief to her sensitive consciousness. In this context Devendra Kohli's remarks about the poem "An introduction" are worth quoting:

"It is a part of the strength of Kamala Das's exploration of Love-theme that it also follows compulsions to articulate and understand her the workings of the feminine consciousness. Her best known poem in this category, "An Introduction is concerned with the question of human identity," and "is perhaps at the heart of any attempt at self-exploration and self-integration".

Kamala Das is predominantly a poet of love. The all pervasive spirit of the whole poetic world of hers is of love and its vigorous manifestations drawn from life-experiences, both exhilarating and agonizing about the referring themes in Das's poetry.

A.N. Dwivedi observes "The frequency of love theme may evoke from men and spinsters and breed boredom repudiation in the minds of general readers, but like Sappho in Greek

Literature, like Elizabeth Barret Browning in English letters, and like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath in modern American poetry, Mrs. Das offers us a feast of vivid images of love couched in felicitous

language. No doubt, love is her 'forte' in poetry".

But for Kamal Das love is not an end in itself; the culmination of it is the achievement of a meaning for life that is not to be found in the present modes and modalities of living. Since the genes is of love is our being in the world, her concept of love does not reject the seat of it, that is the body. She favours expression of love in its fullest measures in the interpersonal relationships. This belief in the reciprocity of the physical and the metaphysical aspects of love is clearly expressed in her poem 'The Suicide' wherein she says"

*'Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.*

(The Suicide – The Descendants)

Love for her, is an invitation between two personalities with an intention to measure the mutual depths of each other. Not that the depth is measurable, but then, the whole world is made of an intention. So Kamala Das makes her poetry a profound poetic expression of an intention only. What she violently pleads for is a possible understanding between men and women as equanimously independent personalities in an atmosphere of what the Christian fathers call 'agape'. But for the poet, her ideal lover is nowhere to be found. On Kamala Das's search for such a lover, Sunanda P. Chavin rightly observes:

"Kamala Das's search for ideal love and the resultant disappointment seem to involve the psychological phenomenon of 'the amicus' struggling to project the masculine imprint as interpreted by Jung. The attempt to seek in every lover, the perfection of masculine being is destined to end in failure because of the impossibility of realising the ideal in human form". It is in this light that an attempt is made to examine Kamala Das's love poetry or at the theme of love in her poetry.

Search for love is the principal pre-occupation of Kamala Das poetry. She confesses with utmost candour that she "beg to write poetry with the ignoble aim of wooing a man". As a result love becomes the pervasive theme and it is through love that she endeavors to discover herself. As she concerns herself with various facets of love, her love poetry can be divided into two phases, while in the first phase her obsessive concern with physical love is quite prominent, in the second, her drift towards ideal love can be discerned. By ideal love she means the kind of relation that exists between the legendary Radha and Krishna. She yearns for such a love which does not impede her impulse to freedom. Her concept of ideal love is embedded in the poem "The Old Playhouse".

.....Love is Narcissus at the waters' edge, haunted
by its own lovely faced, and yet it must seek at last
And end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

In the narcissistic phase, the lovers do not outgrow their egos which stand as hurdles preventing their merger. They are chained in self-admiration. But it is not a permanent phase as it undergoes mutations seeking “total freedom”. It is the second phase of ideal love that the lovers transgress the boundaries of their egos or narrow selves to merge with each other, as such merger ensures total freedom. The poet beholds such an exemplary relation in the love between Radha and Krishna. She surmises herself as Radha who goes in search of Krishna, the ideal lover, in spite of her marriage. This brings into her poetic context the Abhisarika tradition of Sanskrit poetry. Besides this her uninhibited treatments of love and sex reminds one of Sahaja tradition.

But in Kamala Das the element of bhakti is absent. Her relation with Krishna is purely human. She confesses, “I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha”. Thus the poet lives simultaneously in two worlds, the actual world, where love usually is a synonym for lust, in her words “skin communicated love”, and the mythical world of Vrindavan.

Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near neurotic world. The publication of *Summer in Calcutta* changed the history of Indo-Anglican poetry, especially of women writers. Earlier poets looked at the Holy Books, Historical characters for their themes, while she looked into her own self. Her poems were like the parcels of dynamite. It could explode on your face, specially spreading its contexts all around bringing to naked eye the oppression and enslavement of women in our own Modern age.

Bruce King is right when he writes “Das’s themes go beyond stereotyped longings and complaints. Even her feelings of loneliness and disappointments are part of a longer than life personality obsessive in its awareness of its self, yet creating, a drama of selfhood.

She can never persuade her to forget that she is a woman, who craves for love, companionship and understanding when she published her poems, “on the one hand it produced derisive laughter but on the other, more scholarly people often appreciated it as a maiden effort of an Indian woman to express herself without much inhibition circumscribed by the false and hypocritical rules of a conservative society.”

A closure look at her poems will show that love, sex, marriage and companionship were important subjects to her. She often feels that love is a hollow word as the male dominated society, shows no understanding of a woman’s aspirations. Throughout her writing career she searches for love, genuine and understanding love. It is, therefore, clear that she feels crazy, hungry and unhappy, in the absence of the love in her life. In her poems

love is depicted in various forms, more often than not the sterile aspect of it, the absence of love and the deprivation of it, by the society, by the relations and by the cultural traditions and customs.

Love and sex are the leitmotif of her poetry but her profound frustration seems to have left perpetual biting in her soul. Love for Kamala Das meant not sex but conversation, companionship and warmth a blissful experience that could remove “the loneliness of my life”.

CONCLUSION

As Keki Daruwalla rightly says “The intensity of feeling, ably controlled in her better poems, and the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex, immediately won for her a big audience. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love the lazy animal hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliation are the warp and woof of her poetic fabric world”. In fact, she goes diving deep into her own self, unraveling mysteries which were never known to Indian women, or more honestly speaking, none dared to unravel them in the past, in such a way, in such an orthodox, custom—ridden, conservative society.

Thus Kamala Das’s love poems stand apart as they fruitfully combine the indigenous traditions such as Abhisarika and Sahaja and the confessional tradition which is Western. Her love poetry is a fine blending of the two different literary traditions. Kamala Das lends a new dimension to her love poetry by revealing her kinship with an anterior Indian tradition which has its roots in Indian epics. Apart from this, her Nayar background not only provides a suitable background but also strengthens the confessional streak of her poetry. Thus the significant aspect of her love poetry is the merger of two traditions – the Indian and the Western.

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