

Gemeinschaft: Kamala Das's Quest for Love

- D. C. Chambial

Abstract: Kamala Das, who is well-nigh labelled as a confessional poet in Indian English poetry, has, throughout her poetic career, striven for *gemeinschaft* in love. The word “*gemeinschaft*” comes from German language which, according to *Webster New World Dictionary*, means “a social relationship between individuals which is based on common feeling, kinship, or membership in a community.” She, in her poetry, has number of times reiterated this quest of her life. This paper aims to study her poetry, especially the poems in her book, *The Descendants* (1967), for her quest for equitable love.

Keywords: love, psychic turmoil, feminine sensibility

In her poem 'The Suicide', the persona “converses with the sea and is momentarily taken in by a desire for death by merging with the sea. ... The body's expressions are linked up with the poet's exploration of love and lust,” holds Kiran Sharma (84). The Protagonist, in Das, expresses her deep agony for love. She cries:

I want to be simple | I want to be loved | And |
If love is not be had, | I want to be dead ... (8)

Her anguish for love is quite apparent in these lines. She wants to be loved intensely. She has an open heart for love; love for the man, love for the humanity. Here, it is not restricted to any one person. Her wail is not that she wants to love, but she craves the love of the world. She feels hungry for love; she feels starved of it. In this act, she doesn't want any fanfare, but simplicity; the simplicity of an ordinary common person. The very first line: “I want to be simple” smacks of her rusticity. In the last two lines, she puts a condition that if she cannot get the kind of love, yearned for, she would, rather, prefer “to be dead” to avoid the ignominy of unrequited love. The same anguish later emerges, when she wails: “In him I swim / all broken with longing. / In his robust blood I float / drying off my tears” (9-10). In these lines she alludes to a man who offers her wine, but she considers it only water. Nonetheless, in his company, she is lost in her imagination of true love that is shattered. Her unshed tears, she tries to dry. She does not let her psychic torment be revealed by shedding tears. She remains all quiet and sedate. She also discloses that to keep her man to her was difficult and he “required drinks” for that. She avers: “To make him love.” To seek his love she had to serve him drinks, as if, drink was more important than love that she longed for. She further adds: “But, when he did love, / believe me, / all I could do was sob like a fool” (10). These lines emphasize the crux of her suffering in love: in his

love, her man was never gentle, compassionate, realising the significance of love, but, perhaps, more brutal that he did not know the import of true love. So, she did not enjoy this act of love, but sobbed and suffered it “like a fool.” Perhaps, the poet uses the word “fool” to suggest her foolishness in longing for love from a person whom she tried to placate with his “drinks”. He remained totally unconscious to her demands of chaste love. Then, she, because this poem is in the form of a dialogue with sea, asks sea: “Sea, toss my body back / that he knew how to love” (10). In this poem sea also symbolizes masculinity; and, as a woman, very clear at heart, often with the simplicity and innocence of a child, she requests sea to hurl her body back to shore to give shock to “he” in the poem, the man, the masculine force, from whom she yearns for zealous love. She hopes that he will realise his stupidity; that she has committed suicide for his antipathy towards her; sure, on seeing her dead body, he will feel shocked. She wants to give this blow as a therapeutic treatment to her man, so that he realizes what she desired from him but was denied. In ‘Substitute,’ she has tried to adjust herself with her man, who has been apathetic to her demands of wholesome love. She admits: “Life is quite simple now – / Love, blackmail and sorrow” (12). All these things that are part of life have become simple: once she has adjusted herself to the kind of life she has to live. And, then, she wants to forget everything: “It will be all right if I don't remember / The last of the days together ...” that they have lived, because they were drab and dry like desert sand. She continues to tell about her man's lust devoid of any compassionate love: “Our bodies after love-making / Turned away, rejecting” (13) each other; there was no love at all, it was the gratification of animal hunger; and, after that is over, one turns away. This is what they did in their life. He was more concerned with his sexual satisfaction than the demands of true love – love that is beyond body and even beyond this ephemeral world.

The eponymous poem that gives title to the anthology – *The Descendants* – admits in unequivocal words: “We have spent our youth in gentle sinning / Exchanging some insubstantial love” (14). She considers youth a time of cherishing one's intense wishes and desires in a married life. One's hopes and desires scale the sky for their realisation. Here, it has been futile. They, she and her husband, have this period in “gentle sinning”. Involvement in mere sex for pleasure gives her a feeling of sin: a sin that was committed by ADAM AND EVE; for which, they were thrown out of Heaven. The love they had was “insubstantial” – in significant as against the kind of love she had in her imagination and longed for. She acknowledges: “We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not / To crosses, but to soft beds and against softer forms” to show the waste of precious time and life. Once again, a feeling of guilt emerges in her mind which is reflected in “nailed, no, not / To crosses” – that she has been sleeping with her husband on soft bed which is no less than the crucifixion of Christ – a great suffering for her. Christ suffered for the sins of the world, but she suffers for the “gentle sinning” – the simple acts of carnal gratification. She is sure that “no lost love / Claim us” – and there is nothing to redeem them of the sin that they have committed.

In 'Radha', she enlightens, her reader, about her suffering in virginity: "So that in his first taut embrace, she was girl" not initiated yet into the act that her husband put her to, and a "virgin crying" out of the harrowing experience not only to her body but also to her soul. According to D Murali Manohar: "... the wife seeks an ideal lover like Lord Krishna..." (19) in her husband. When she does not find one, she wails: "Nothing remains" – all her images of love, realised in the myth of Krishna and Radha, of a true and higher love, lie smashed to smithereens. This sense of sin shifts to another poem, 'Ferns': Bodies stacked on beds will mimic the slow / Gestures of the mind and take on the blame / In silent sin" (19). Sleeping together does not give any solace. Instead, it is an enacting of the imagined activity and ultimately to take on her the blame for all this act is "silent sin" – consummation of physical love what her husband has termed "physical thing"; but, for her, it was sin. Her desperation for a model husband/lover, like Krishna, is evident in her sigh: "I've waited so long for you", not only at home, but also around the world – "From one country to another, waiting / Patiently". She has not shown any hurry but restraint in her wait, like Shiv K. Kumar, in 'Indian Women', waiting for their husbands: "Patiently they sit / like empty pitchers / on the mouth of the village well" (*Subterfuges* 36) to reclaim their love.

In 'Invitation', she tells about her husband coming to her "between / Long conferences" embellished with a subtle metaphor of "a fish coming up / For air". He did not come without any purpose but to gratify himself. She does not hide anything, but speaks out candidly: "On the bed with him, the boundaries of / Paradise had shrunk to a mere / Six by two" (20) that in those moments some heavenly bliss was achieved within the confines of the bed, even in reduced dimensions, (for, no bed is six by two), coming closest in consummation of sex. Her long wait for the right person/lover has not materialised: "For long I've waited for the right one / To come" (21) and slake her thirst of *gemeinschaft*. She does not conceal her bodily instinct: "I am still young / And I need that man for construction and / Destruction." Note the deft use of words "construction" and "destruction" for cherishing the pain and pleasure of the act and love is to create paradox, like Kumar in his poem, 'Kali': "If the way to create / is the way to kill" (*Subterfuges* 34). A young person, besides something to regale soul, also seeks fulfilment at physical level, and she is exception to it.

'Doubt' is a poem, wherein she compares the sex act to murder: "How well I can see him / After a murder, conscientiously / Tidy up the scene, wash / The blood stains under / Faucet, bury the knife. . . ." Everything is clear in her own words; nothing remains clandestine about the act and thereafter. However the use of the word "murder" exhibits the persona's utter distress associated with such kind of loveless act. Her spiritual suffering comes to the fore in the poem, 'The Proud One' that tells about a youth's "desire to subjugate a girl"; and, she fails to understand him in his subjugation – snubs and slights – "being silly, spurned him". He leaves her and remains away for a pretty long time. When he returns after a long

interval, he finds his "old wife turned whorish" (24), and uncompromising to him – "Withdrew from under him". His realisation of guilt and sin of deserting her in her prime becomes apparent in these words: "Lying nailed to his bed, in imitation / Of the great crucifixion".

In 'The Conflagration', she discloses about the young persons coming close, uniting in wedlock, are no less than sun, full of heat, heat of passion, that is capable of burning each other: "We came together like two suns meeting, and each / Raging to burn the other out" (26). Each one wanted to over power the other, but only one, the wife, succeeded in this clash of heat of passion: "He said you are / A forest-conflagration and I, poor forest, / Must burn." The woman of the poem is so joyous that she asks the man: "But lay on me, light and white as embers / Over inert fires. Burn on, elemental / Fire, warm the coal streams of his eternal flesh till / At last, they boiling flow, so turbulent with life" (26). In this process, the woman calls herself "inert fires"; perhaps, to tell about her state of bliss, reached after her discharge, in the process. These words divulge the bliss that the woman has experienced in this act. Here, her protest and grievance of lack of *gemeinschaft* seem to have sunk to bottom in the heat of passion. In the very next poem, 'Three P. M.', she feels befuddled "by his lust" (27).

The wife's apathy for husband and liking for friend is revealed in 'The Joss-sticks at Cadell Road'. She tells about him and also about herself:

My husband said, I think I shall | Have a beer, it's hot,
Very hot today. | And I thought, I must | Drive fast to town and
Lie near my friend for an hour. (29)

Both husband and wife want to escape from the torture of scorching heat. Both of them have different plans to seek solace from the sun: one wants to take beer to abate the heat of the day, while the other wants to drive "fast to town" to her friend and "Lie near" him for one hour. Their different attitudes to stave the heat off of the day, also, hint at discordance in their mutual marital life; their married life is not harmonious, but at variance.

In 'Convicts', the persona gives the kind of married life they have lived:

There was a time when our lusts were
Like multicoloured flags of no
Particular country. We lay
On bed, glassy-eyed, fatigued, just
The toys dead children leave behind,
And we asked each other, What is
The use, what is the bloody use? (32)

Here the persona tells about some past time when their passions were high – "each raging to burn the other out" (26), but, now, they lie on bed tired like the toys of dead children suggesting their carelessness and indifference towards each other. Also tells about the kind of life they lead now: "That was the only kind of love, / This hacking at each other's parts / Like convicts hacking" Now it has been reduced to a mere frigid routine; nothing more than that. Nonetheless, at another point in the same poem, she tells about man and woman becoming one entity in the

process of sex: "When he / And I were one, we were neither / Male nor female." Man and woman are complementary to each other: none is complete individually; they are called halves. This union of male and female as represented in the poem derives its origin from *ardhanarishwar* (half man and half woman) image of Lord Shiva and Parvati.

In '*Jaisurya*', the poet sings of goodness resulting from evil. She has considered marriage an evil. A marriage against her will. The birth of her child is celebrated, and gives her satisfaction and bliss of marital life. She gives vent to her feelings in these words: "Out of the mire of a moonless night was / He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of / The wrong is born the right and out of night / The sun-drenched golden-day" (34).

Her dejection about married life is evident in her use of the words "mire", "moonless night", "wrong", and 'night'. But, the joy, she gets after the birth of her son, is immense, and is revealed in the use of these words: "Jaisurya", "right", and "golden-day". When end is good, one forgets and forgives the means. So does she. All her complaints, agony, and protests about her unsatisfactory married life come to an end. She, instead of it, finds *gemeinschaft* in her son – a reward of her married life.

The protagonist asks her husband about her response to sex, in 'Composition': "I asked my husband, / am I hetero / am I lesbian / or am I just frigid" (36-37)? She wants to know what he thinks about her: "He only laughed." The kind of love, as manifest in her use of the symbol of Krishna and Radha, is gone now; she does not bother about it: "Love / I no longer need". She feels "most content" with only warm feelings about it. Whenever she meets some "interesting man" – "a curious editor, / or a poet" – who tickles her feelings, she admits: "I must / most deliberately / whip up a froth of desire, a passion to suit the occasion" (37). The use of phrases, such as "most deliberately", and "whip up" evince her indifference: but, she very warily pretends to be passionate for that meeting, lest they should also find her "frigid". She reminds the reader, who may think her as "a girl with vast / sexual hungers," for her open expression of her sex life with the husband. Her commotions of personal married life are laid bare. In this respect, Ganga Laxmi Patnaik believes: "Her poetry deals with the psychic turmoil of woman with the limiting and restricting confines of domesticity" (43). And, then, she tenders advice to all "Husbands and wives" to "Obey each other's crazy commands, / ignore the sane." Her advice is for maintaining harmony in married life, even if the mind does not agree. A refusal for such "crazy commands" would generate disharmony and ill-will. Her counsel is, unquestionably, worldly-wise. About herself, she admits that she has "failed" in her life; now, her "age" has become a deterrent to "fall in love with" any person, suitable or unsuitable to fling herself "on him / like a moth on a flame" (41). So, now, she construes herself useless. She, finally, owns up, by the end of the poem: "Ultimately / I will feed only the hunger / to feed other hungers, that basic one." Here use, of "hunger", "other hungers", and "basic one", is of great implication: the first "hunger" is related to "basic one" that is, primal animal instinct of desire

– sexual desire, and “other hungers” suggests other requirements of life to maintain harmony for leading a happy married life.

This study, as a final point, suggests that all through her life, the persona in Kamala Das's poetry, strived for a wholesome love, what I have called *gemeinschaft* – a human and humane feeling – in her intimate moments of life; but, she failed to get it and that led to disharmony in her marital life. Her attempts to find it in extra-marital life earned her the epithet of a nymphomaniac. However, she says: “I was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant to my husband to make him happy” (“The Freaks” 24). Her advice to couples comes as handy to harmony in life. Das's “centres round the theme of feminine sensibility” (Prasad 111), “feminine longings” (Rai 94), and “impresses by being very much herself in her poems” (Parthasarthy qtd. in Mehta 24). Rita ShanthaKumar also indirectly subscribes to my objectives of this paper, in her observation: “Her search for love and kindness ends up in a barren wasteland where there is neither life nor hope” (91). “Kamala Das's is thus a fiercely feminine sensibility which articulates without inhibitions the plight and predicament of women doomed to live in an intensely man-made world” (Pathak 20); her quest for emotional satiation continues and ultimately finds it in the fruition of married life for which man and woman have been created. Then, and there, all plight and predicament disappear.*

Works Cited :

- Das, Kamala. *The Descendants*. 2nd ed. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1991. Print.
- ---. *Summer in Calcutta*. New Delhi: Everest Press, 1965. Print.
- Kumar, Shiv K. *Subterfuges*. New Delhi: OUP, 1976. Print.
- Manohar, D. Murali. “Individuality in Kamala Das and Her Poetry.” *POETCRIT* 19.2 (July 2006): 13-20. Print.
- ---. *Kamala Das :Treatment of Love in her Poetry*. Gulbarga: JIWE Publications, 1999. Print.
- Mehta, Amrita. “Trajectories of Exclusion: Indian English Women's Poetry and the Politics of Anthology-making.” *Pegasus* 6 (Jan-Dec 2008): 21-32.
- Pathak, R.S. “Indian Women Poets: Mapping out New Terrains.” *JIWE* 29.2 (July 2001): 14-26. Print.
- Patnaik, Ganga Laxmi. “Movement from Innocence to Awareness.” *POETCRIT* 22.2 (July 2009): 41-45 & 55. Print.
- Prasad, Amar Nath. “Kamala Das's 'An Introduction': A Poem of Patriarchy and Feminism.” *POETCRIT* 24.1 (Jan. 2011): 110-13. Print.
- Rai, Yashu. “Kamala Das's Poetry: An Existential Psychoanalysis.” *The Vedic Path* 83.3&4 (July-Dec. 2009): 94-101. Print.
- Sharma, Kiran. “Creative Use of Language in Kamala Das's Poetry.” *The Vedic Path* 80.4 (Oct-Dec. 2007): 74-87. Print.
- ShanthaKumar, Rita. “Quest for Love and Identity in the Poems of Kamala Das.” *POETCRIT* 23.2 (July 2010): 89-92. Print.

