

Kamala Das's Poetic Work: A Tantalizing Portrayal of Feminine Longings

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Abstract

The poetic work of Kamala Das has engaged considerable critical attention and sustained rigorous explication. The subject of Kamala's work comprises of "woman" and the revelation of female experiences, be it trauma of an unhappy marriage or humiliation of a desireless surrender in sex or disgust at the male domination. Quest for love is certainly the perennial theme of Kamala's poetry. Love, for a woman is much more than what it is for a man. The difference in experience of love for the two is well put by Kamala:

*".....In him.....the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me... the oceans' tireless
Waiting." ----- (An Introduction)*

The author, in this article, does not attempt a general appreciation of her poetic achievement, but restricts herself to examine the emotions of longing in her poetry. This article critically evaluates the charisma of passion, despair and hunger for love in Kamala Das's poetry. An attempt has also been made to expound the poet's soft feminine feelings beyond her intrepid expressions.

Das's poetry revolves around a hectic search for love. What distresses her most is that too often lust is passed off as love. Unlike other poets of India, she is frank and open to her readers. She openly expresses her longings for love. She is always charged with overpowering emotions and a sense of urgency.

*".....Gift him all
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers."*

----- (The Looking Glass)

The strength of Das is so much attributed to her love poetry that she is often called the queen of erotica. However, to consider Das as a poet of love alone is to hold an erroneous view. She has metaphysical quest of unrest soul and she writes invariably about the power of love along with the appeal of the body. The experiences in Das's love poems cannot be assessed at their face values solely with her dealing of physical aspects. She writes with equal pride of pains, failure and wounds of love. Kamala

Das in one of her creations portrays the character of Radha who says of her lover: *"I do not remember his colour or his height or even his face, all I remember is the bliss I felt when he was inside me, Like a seed inside the earth."*

As an honest poet of love she is frank and naive without the "intellectual pride". She writes of her longings against a conservative and tabooed society and brings out the pathos of women emerging from passive role to the point of discovering and arresting her individual liberty and identity.

*"Of late I have begun to feel hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest-fire that
Consumes, and, with each killing gains a
wilder
Brighter charm all that comes my way."*

----(Summer in Calcutta P.51)

It will suffice to say that her poetry is based largely on the physical aspects of a female whereas feminine sensibility, in the real term implies stress on emotional bond. However, it can be said that her verses depicting physical love are not devoid of emotions. Underneath the bold words, lie soft feminine feelings. As she asserts with characteristically bitter candour, *"a woman can get into a man's heart only through his loins."* She admits that it is an ugly remark and then adds that *"it tells an ugly truth that cannot be put in gentler words"* (Asia Week, 12 Nov. 1976, 46, 31). Coupled with her exploration of women's needs she also exhibits the pining to lose one's self in passionate love, as discussed in 'The Looking Glass' from 'The Descendants'. She, here urges women to give their man *"what makes you women"*. The things which society suggests are dirty or taboo, are the very things which the women are supposed to give to their beloveds. The *"musk of sweat between breasts/ The warm shock of menstrual blood"* should not be hidden from one's beloved. For the poet, love should be defined with unconditional honesty. A woman should *"Stand nude before the glass with him,"* and allow her lover to see her exactly as she is. Likewise, the woman should appreciate even the *"fond details"* of her lover.

The poetry of Kamala Das is the absolute medium of the purgation of her emotions. The frustration which she faced in her personal life found out way in the form of her creations. She experience that love, in her life, is a mechanical act of bodily union and says:

*"As the convict studies his prisons geography
of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its share."*

----- (The Prisoner)

This kind of man-woman relationship where the union is only a physical act and not an emotional desire, leads only to frustration and not

to satisfaction. Trapped in a loveless relationship with an insensate husband, she yearns for the true lover. She is sentimental and idealistic when she speaks in mythological metaphors:

"I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for ---"

This urge for love becomes intense and can be traced to her poetic growth. Many persons entered her life as lovers and she does not make any efforts to hide it.

*"After that love became a swivel door
When one went out, another came in
Then I lost count, for always in my arm
Was a substitute for a substitute"*

----- (Substitute)

She believes love to be a fulfilment of soul realised through body – an experience of sex, beyond sex. Unfortunately, in each love relationship she finds her body accepted at the cost of her soul. As she herself says, *"My affairs have not been sexual. I am frigid by nature. Sex, I can get enough from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for."* She looks for a soul mate in her lover, the one who loves her body as well as her soul. She enters her conjugal life with some legitimate expectations and innocent dreams:

"I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. 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.87)

However her actual experience totally belies her fond expectations. Marriage did not offer her any solace, instead she found – and faced – a male-oriented world of sex and lust. Das herself wrote: *"...every morning I told myself that I must raise myself from the desolation of my life and escape, escape into another life and into another country"*. The harsh realities of life demolished her expectations and shattered her dreams:

*".....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 weight of my breast and womb crushed me. I
Shrank pitifully."*

----- (An Introduction)

Moreover she is shocked beyond measure by her husband's open display of homosexual advances in her presence.

"At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they showed me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but

after some time, my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt then a revolution for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through mouth."

----- (My Story P. 110)

Thus the frustrating physical experience shared with her husband reflects in "The Maggots":

"-----What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?"
----- (The Descendants P.22)

The poignant and provocative poetry of Kamala Das contains an open statement about the poet's efforts to define and expose the prison in which she finds herself trapped. Many of her poems reflect her own marriage as unsatisfying and unfulfilling, and present an image of a marriage which grew lifeless, empty and dull. The predominant theme in her poetry is the difficulty of being a woman in Indian society and finding love. She says that women finds male lust and indifference, and, therefore, rejected the very institution of arranged marriage.

"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,
Marriage is meant to be all this
anyway,
being arranged in
most humorous heaven."

(Composition - The Descendants P.22)

Not only does she describe the dissatisfaction she gets from her husband but also she reveals the humiliation she faces with one of his lovers who takes her body but leaves her soul unfulfilled in the act of sex:

"He undressing my soul effortlessly . . . but still – I leave
unsatisfied for what does he bare for me on the bed, in his
study except his well tanned body."

(The Old Playhouse and other Poems: p.52)

Critics feel that with her exclusive dealing with these problems, she at times seemed to be too preoccupied with love and sex. However, if viewed with a different view-point, she does not advocate sexual affairs; she just portrays the feminine longings of the women of the society.

Das's protest against the prevalent systems of the society turned her into a 'rebel'. Her offended feminine self went on emotional wanderings attempting to explore an identity and freedom. Nevertheless, her traditional make-up of a conventional woman was a factor which persistently forbade her from breaking away completely from the role of a traditional wife. A conflict naturally arose between the passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe. And the conflict persisted all through her life. Her poetry was concerned mostly with herself as a fiction of circumstances and sexual humiliations. Her voice was distinctly

feminine intoning the organic mission of her female self's longing for love. As she once said in an interview to the Warrior, "*I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little*". Though some might label Das as "a feminist" for her candour in dealing with women's needs and desires, Das, according to many others has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism. It is not the attitude to look for love outside marriage but it is a plain woman's longing for love from a man.

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Treasure Hunt

All over the places that you inhabited,
 in all the nooks and crannies
 where you could be contained
 I looked for you, haunted,
 exploring all your own haunts,
 till I had grown fuzzy-brained
 Ready to give up,
 readier than I had been for being given up,
 I glanced up and realised that I had looked right through
 That searching beneath, beside, between, beyond,
 I had failed to look at you.

Unconditional Love

As pleased to hear
 "I love you for what you are",
 As incredulous of your knowledge
 Of what I am.

