

Writing-A Quest for Love and Liberation: A Reading of Kamala Das's Select Poems

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Abstract: Kamala Das with utmost frankness writes about a number of themes in her poetry. One of them is the man-woman relationship. In her poetry, her personal experiences turn into universal through her fervent expression. In fact, Das in her poems seeks for love, especially mutual love with emotional bond, and tries to achieve consummation in love. The male dominated family relation with her husband gives her no space to articulate her passionate longing for love. So, she chooses to bare her longings in her writing through which she is in quest for liberating her 'caged self'.

Keywords: Writing, Love, Liberation, Disillusionment, Quest.

Kamala Das (1934-2009) began writing poems when she became intensely unhappy in her personal life devoid of love. She began to search for love which could have given her a space for liberation from the patriarchal domination. Her poems become the medium to inscribe her loveless life and through the inscription of her loveless life her writing becomes a safety-valve for the liberation of her own self. Through her writing Das is overwhelmingly devoted to celebrating love. My aim through this paper is to show how Das has used her writing (poetry) as the vehicle to inscribe her search for mutual love leading to the liberation of her self. My discussion will mainly concentrate on "An Introduction", "My Grand Mother's House", 'The Freaks', and "Radha" from the first collection of her poems entitled *Summer in Calcutta*. We come to know from her autobiography *My Story* that when she was a child, she was more or less neglected:

My father was always busy with his work at the automobile firm where he was employed, selling Rolls and Royces,... My mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam.... So we grew up more or less neglected, and because we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young,, there developed between us a strong relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for his mate who pushed him on a hand-cart when they went on their begging rounds (2).

But she found herself happy when she was accompanied by her grandmother. When she reached fifteen, she was married to a man who remained always busy with his official routine. He never cared for Das's need for love. Resultantly, she became emotionally isolated from her husband. She writes in *My Story*:

I felt miserable. I had lost whatever emotional contact I once had with my husband who was at that time busy preparing for his superiors, a Rural Credit Survey Committee Report and had no time at all for his family. I let him take my body every night, hoping that the act would

relax his nerves and make him tranquil. At night after all had slept, I sat in our tiny sitting room, sobbing and trying hard to believe in a destiny that might change for the better (102).

The relationship with her husband offered her no emotional food of love. On the other hand, she had not the courage to admit before all that her marriage was but a total failure. Without love, her life became 'like a house with all its lights put out' (*My Story*, 103). She was unable to find a medium, a way out to express her loveless life as well her yearning for love. Then she chose to spare ink to write a 'new life, an unstained future' (*My Story*, 104):

I sent the poem to the journal of the Indian P.E.N. the next morning. My grief fell like drops of honey on the white sheets on my desk. My sorrows floated over the pages of magazines darkly as heavy monsoon clouds do in the sky (105).

So, writing became only medium to express her quest for love. In all the three volumes of poems, we find a number of poems which are firmly founded on her concept of love. She chooses to write of love for love and liberation. Her writings also have become an unflinching document of her. The absence of true love in her life, then her relentless search for it has found expression in "An Introduction". By true love, she never refers to platonic concept of love which is but the union of two souls. Rather, in the growth of relationship between man and woman, true love comes out when both are concerned about each other in an emotional affair. On the other hand, lust comes out of the relationship when one of the two is not thoughtful and careful of the feelings of other. This exactly happens in the life of the poet who is married at the age of sixteen and is asked to be a wife:

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.

It is quite natural in Indian society that a married man considers his wife to be a sexual object. This is suggested by the word "drew". But, here the husband is not considerate of the tender age of the poet who is not matured physically and mentally. She is so innocent that she does not know even 'what else to ask for'. Contrary to her expectation of love, she is drawn into bedroom and experiences lust: He did not beat me | But my sad woman body felt so beaten. So, a woman's expectation for love is shattered, and she begins to seek love and comfort outside her marital relationship:

I met a man, loved him. Call | Him not by any name, he is every man
| Who wants woman, just as I am every | Woman who seeks love.

When the poet becomes mentally exhausted in her quest for mutual love, she seems to put a full stop in her journey; and she takes refuge in the real love of her grandmother. In "My Grandmother's House", through the reminiscence of her grandmother house she becomes elated. But the death of her grandmother created emptiness in feelings of love. The death of her grandmother and loveless life with her husband converted her into a beggar of love:

I who have lost | My way and beg now at strangers' doors to | Receive

love, at least in small change? (14-16)

So, it is evident here that the poet is deprived of love after the death of her grandmother, and she becomes pensive and thinks of begging for love at stranger's doors to receive love, as her marriage life was devoid of love.

Dr. K. M. Pandey opines,

...in the personal poem "My Grandmother's House", the memory of the Grandmother makes her pensive when she recalls the house, where she once received love from the old woman. Thus more than the pathetic memory of her grandmother, it is the poet's preoccupation with death and decay, implied in the image of the crumbling house which displays her poetic command in the moment of personal reckoning. (100)

In her quest for the search of her identity, she revolts against the present and takes refuge in the past. For her, past emerges as symbol of security, love and freedom, whereas the present with the patriarchal norms stands for insecurity, bondage and humiliation. Her nostalgia for the past proves cathartic to liberate her self from the male hegemony. Das broods over the theme of disillusionment in love. This theme is seen to have been developed in "The Freaks". In this poem, the poet gives expression about her feelings while lying in bed with a lover. She becomes disillusioned in love as her emotional need for love remains unfulfilled. Then what she receives from her husband is only to cater to his 'skin's lazy hungers'. She fulfills his sexual hunger but in turn she herself remains an 'empty cistern'. In a disillusioned and empty heart, love is poisoned. In fact, she points out the gap between the emotional need and physical fulfillment:

The heart, | An empty cistern, waiting | Through long hours, fills itself |
With coiling snakes of silence (14-17).

As Das remains unhappy so far as her yearning for true love is concerned, she identifies love with sexual or physical desire. R. Raphael opines, "For Kamala Das the word 'love' is an euphemism for sex (Raphael, 134). In fact, sex runs like an undercurrent in her love poems. This undercurrent of sex is because of the frustration and repugnance with sexual union having no love. K. R. Ramchandran Nair aptly says:

A strain of sexuality runs like forest fire in Kamala Das's poetry. However, it is the disappointment and disgust with sexual union without love and concern that mark most of her poems. Thus love and hate, excitement and depression appear side by side. In her life long search for true love and true lover, the poet has stumbled on the painful discovery that man succumbs only to the snare of lust. Thus the woman is nothing more than a passive partake in the ritual of sensuality planned by man (100-101).

But it must be remembered that she never likes sexual love which the male-counterpart showers on the female. Rather what she always desires for is the emotional bond that may end with physical union. This kind of emotional bond can lead her to the destination of liberating her self. The poet is not against sexual intercourse which is but an essential need both of the man and woman. She advocates that the sexual love must be the outcome of the mutual love. The husband and wife must be reciprocal in it. So, she is in quest for mutual love in her writing, and proposes that all

husbands and wives should 'obey' each other's 'crazy command'. When she repeatedly fails in her search for an ideal lover and mutual love, she through her writing turns to Lord Krishna to accept him as her ideal lover. To quote Anisur Rahman,

Her disgust in failures led her to frantic search for the mythic Krishna, the ideal lover, in whom she has established her eternal bond (11).

Interestingly enough, Das seems to mythologize her love in her writing. In her writing, she identifies herself with Radha. In "Radha", she is seen to beg for love from the eternal lover Krishna; she writes in the poem:

Everything in me| Is melting, even the hardness at the core|
O Krishna, I am melting, melting| Nothing remains but You.....

The most significant image is "melting". It is suggestive of the poet's earnest desire to surrender her self to Krishna, the eternal lover who always forwards love for those who hanker after it. Here Krishna seems to be the man she is in quest for. The word also refers to the poet's deep devotion to a lover who is loveable. In *My story*, she writes:

You are my Krishna, I whispered kissing his eyes shut. He laughed. I felt that I was a virgin in his arms....I am at last in love. I have found my Krishna.... (180-181).

Here she appears to be in her liberated self while she is in Krishna's arms. Most importantly, this is possible for her only in writing. So, writing gives her the space to attain some measure of equipoise in a relationship that is loveable. Dr. K. M. Pandey writes,

Kamala Das's poetic culmination can be seen when she wants to establish eternal relationship with God Krishna by writing about love, sex and family deprivation, fulfilment and separation in her poems as revealed in day to day life. She is such a typical Indian poet of erotic luxury whose voice of courage, conviction, and sincerity is transparent in her poems in vigorous form. Therefore, what she seeks to obtain is an identity that was loveable (102).

Dr. Pandey is right when he says that Das is in search of a loveable identity. But writing about love and sex does not ensure that she is a poet of 'erotic luxury' because Das's quest for mythologizing her love is the way that takes her to the destination of the liberation of self. Her eager devotion to Krishna through "melting" is but her aspiration to achieve a relationship, at least by her writing that can provide her what she wants. So, writing became the only medium to express her quest for love. She chooses to write of love for love and liberation. Her writings also have become a testament of her amorousness and sexuality. But when she is writing of love and sex, it is not that she is hankering after establishing an illicit affair with other men or pleading for practice of adultery. Rather, through the articulation of yearning for love and sex in her poems, she is desperately in search of liberation from the bondage of patriarchal society. To quote A. N. Dwivedi:

They (*the love poems of Das*) rather articulate her strong desire to get liberated from the clutches of a male-dominated society and pass a happy, healthy life of peace and rest. The woman persona in her asserts an 'indomitable will' and 'the spirit of revenge' (to use Milton's popular phrase), and gives a clarion call to the weaker sex to rise in revolt against

all kinds of repression and tyranny being perpetrated on it (29). [Italics mine].

Hence, it is evident that Das uses her poems as the vehicle to express her love- longing, and it is through the depiction of her love-yearning that she is in quest for liberating her 'caged' self. Sunanda P. Chavan aptly opines:

The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfillment from the husband leads to her search for it in extra-marital relationships with other men. Each relationship however succeeds only in intensifying the crisis of disappointment. Faced with the sense of absolute frustration and loneliness, the poet turns to poetry as the exclusive medium for its cathartic release (61).

Her poetry is indeed an 'exclusive medium', the powerful weapon which she uses so as to become triumphant in her search for love. Writing poems on love is a fruitful activity which not only does cater to her own psychological and emotional need but also does help her to create a space of love and emotional bond. She does not seek for physical love though her poems are also an expression of her amorous feelings. Rather, what she craves for is liberation with an emotional bond which she achieves through her writing.

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