

STUDIES ON EVOLUTION OF THEMES IN POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT:

Kamala Das is one among the prominent figures in the history of Indo-English literature. Das published six volumes of poetry between 1965 and 1985. Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, Das tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage. Since the publication of 'Summer in Calcutta', Das has been a controversial figure, known for her unusual imagery and candor. She 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 family background not only provides a suitable background but also strengthens the confessional streak of her poetry. Search for love is the sole preoccupation of her poetry. There is a sexual 'brazenness to her persona', which barely hides her inner ferment. Credited as the most outspoken – and even controversial writer, Das earned fame as the 'voice of women's sexuality'.

Kamala Das's poetry originated as a vigorous and poignant feminine confessional poetry, in which the underlying theme was the exploration of the man-woman relationship. As a poet strongly committed to the sexual world, Kamala Suraiyya (Das) always tried to identify love with physical emptiness. To her, this identification was an attempt to redefine her own identity and sustain a meaningful relationship. It was her suffering that led her to seek place in another's arm to knock at another's door- "...yearned for a man from/another town", as she writes in *The Wild Bougainvillea*. Das once herself 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".

Kamala Das lived alone in her world with feelings of loneliness. During her childhood, Kamala, like other children in the Nair family, was almost completely neglected except her grandmother. She tells it in her autobiography:

**“He (Das’s father) was not of an affectionate nature. 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”.¹**

Her first collection of poems, entitled *The Sirens*, appeared in 1964 and won her the Asian Poetry Prize. At the age of fifteen she was married to Mr. M. Das. Mr. Das devoted all his time to the official files, had no leisure time to spare with his sensitive wife who used to hanker for a fulfillment in love, for an emotional attachment. She writes for her husband:

**“My husband was immersed in his office-work,
And after work there was the dinner, followed
By sex. Where was there any time left for him
To want to see or the dark buffaloes of the slopes”?²**

KEYWORDS: Kamala Das's Poetry, Evolution of Themes, Controversial Figure, Feminism.

INTRODUCTION:

In Kamala Das’s volumes of verse, there are a number of poems that breathe an air of love, amorousness, and sexuality. But these should not lead one to believe that she has been pleading all along for promiscuity and adultery. They 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 phrases), and gives a clarion-call to the weaker sex to rise in revolt against all kinds of repression and tyranny being perpetrated on it. Kamala as a poet is never tired of speaking aloud for

womankind as a whole, and several of her poems should be read in this light. Beyond a shadow of doubt, love/sex, occupies a prominent place in her poetry and emerges as one of its dominant themes.

Kamala Das's poetry falls under the headings namely:

- Summer in Calcutta (1965)
- The Descendants (1967)
- The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973)
- Tonight This Savage Rite (1979)
- Only The Soul Knows How To Sing (1996)

Kamala Das has also collaborated with Prithvi Nandy in *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1979), a collection of their love poems. Her poetry deals with the subject of love and emotional discontentment in an empty married life. Her image in public as feminine yet forthright, unconventional yet honest, ebullient yet tragic, impetuous yet insecure;

“ I Studied All Men,” “What Women Expect Out of Marriage and What They Get,” “ Why Not More Than One Husband?” and “I Have Lived Beautifully”.³

India is a unity in diversity and its literature also gives the same fragrance. Modern Indian English poetry emerged at the end of the Second World War after the end of colonialism. It is one of the many 'new literatures' which began at that time. It is also a fact that modern Indian poetry in English has been neglected by the most of the critics, foreign readers and intellectuals as compare to the creative writings of Africa and the Caribbean. The reason is that it has no obvious and direct relationship to the cultural movements which led to national independence. But by 1947, the situation had changed and with it the concern of the new poets became their relationship to and alienation from the realities of their society. They got a hard challenge from older nationalist writers and from regionalists who demanded a renaissance of the culture of pre-colonial languages of India. Now English is no longer the language of colonial rulers. It is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognized national significances and references. English is not the language of ordinary people. It is the language of those who govern, communicate, produce and make decisions at the national level. Words, phrases, expressions of modern Indian English poetry show the local realities, Indian traditions and ways of feelings.

Such Indianization is present in the poetry of Kamala Das, Pritish Nandy and more strongly in the works of Keki Daruwala. It is more commonly present in terms of voice and stress in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and Jayant Mahapatra. Kamala Das is the most distinctive and unique voice in Indian English poetry in particular and the whole Indian literary scene in general. She brings a most noticeable and directly perceptible feminine sensibility and an explicit, undisguised, natural idiom in her poems.

Kamala Das is a poet of many facets and moods. She is a poet of free love. Love is the lynch-pin round which the poetry of Kamala Das revolves. Her unfilled need for love is the main treatment in her poems. Love is a complex and multi-dimensional human experience in her poetry. It has physical, emotional and spiritual moods in the poetry of kamala Das. Love and hate are often neighbours in her poetry. The theme of alienation is also present in the poems written by her. Because of her disillusionment and alienation from this physical world, she gives the note of protest with feminism in her poetry. Apart from these themes, the theme of glorifying the womanhood is also grabbing our attention. Her poems are mainly concerned with her uncaring husband, her childhood, her marriage, love, life and her intimacy with others. Kamala Das delights in celebrating herself in her essential feminine self. Her writing style is economical and the use of language is very precise. Such is her creative genius that even after succumbing to several unwanted controversies, she remains a widely popular literary figure. Kamala Das is not only a poet of Indian English language, but she is an age herself. There are several types of relationships between a man and a woman known in this mortal world. These relationships are made by human beings to meet their different types of social, personal and emotional needs. The first and foremost relationship between man and a woman is of mother- son relationship. Man- woman relationships of father-daughter, husband-wife, brother-sister and lover- beloved are other types of man-woman relationships and each and every man-woman relationship has its own social, personal and emotional values and significances. The treatment of man-woman relationship is the main and most important theme of the poems of Kamala Das. Although the treatment of man- woman relationship in her poetry is something subjective, but it is also true for general life of common man, common woman. In her poetry, she generally talks about her relationships with her husband and with other men also to whom she treats as her friends or lovers. But the conclusion of all the relations made by her to men including her husband is that love is the necessary element to make a healthy relationship which she fails to get. In her famous poem 'The Freaks', Kamala Das talks about the disgust relationship of a husband and wife. In this poem she concludes about the base of the husband- wife relationships as:

"But, they only wander, tripping idly over puddles of Desire...can't this man with nimble finger-tips unleash nothing more alive than the Skin's lazy hungers?"⁴

Here she has the view that only physical relation cannot give a perfect touch to a man-woman i.e. a husband-wife relationship. She asks: "Who can Help us who have lived so long And have failed in love?"⁵ Meaning is that love is necessary to build a healthy and long lasting relationship between anyone. Only physical relationship is not able to bind the two persons together in any relation. In her another poem 'The Sunshine Cat', she also talks about the same kind of loveless relationship of the man and woman. She complains:

**"... the man she loved who loved her not enough...
the husband who neither loved nor used her"**⁶

and concludes the fate of this loveless bond of man - woman relationship in the following way: "a bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping..."⁷

Hence, in the poetry of Kamala Das, she strongly recommends that the presence of love is necessary to make any kind of healthy and long lasting relationship between man and woman. Whether it is a bond of husband and wife or lover and beloved or it is bond of mother and son, all types of man-woman relationship can be made only by a bond of love.

The poetry of Kamala Das must be viewed in the light of her feminine consciousness. She acquired these circumstances dependent upon the society of her childhood days. As a poet, she is conscious of her creative faculties and tries to break chains and restraints. She indulges in self-awareness, self-exploration and Self-introspection in order to define herself poetically. She finds herself condemned to play the part, apart from her feminine self. It is the male society, which compels her to choose her roles according to their convenience. She is forced to act either as a slave or an idol. Her personality reflects her worse condition of woman. She writes in My Story:

"Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself; o get rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but: is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements".⁸

Thus her feminine self is, traditionally, associated with the enclosed world of household under the disguise as a mother; a wife and a helpmate. She wants to escape from her frustrated memory in 'Substitute' where the reaction of her body shocks her feminine self, she says: "Our bodies after love making turning away rejecting our works began to sound like clatter of sounds in fight".⁹ Such psychic-painful experience during her quest for emotional involvement with her husband compelled her to take freedom in suicide. Love for her has become a mechanical affair and lovers a series of substitutes: She says again:

"After that love become a swivel-door, Where one went out, another came in."¹⁰

The 'ache' and sadness arising from her inner self is the symbol of general pain. The symbolic use of the 'sea' indicates her emotional restlessness and sad mood, reciting the self's confessional sense of the melting and disintegrating into nothingness. The 'sea' becomes a safe-guard for her time ridden existence and tormented psyche. The sea', throughout her second volume, functions as an objective correlative to her quest for peace. Here, Kamala Das faces two psychic traumas. One, her feminine self wants to be attached with 'body's wisdom' and the second, her poetic self wants to gain the total vision of life by being detached from the earlier. She is unable to make reconciliation between the two because there remains always a gap between the two. The ironic fact is that these experiences give her the power neither to subdue her nor to forgive her. Both the conflicting selves do not reach the single conclusion. As Devendra Kohli opines: "Despite the positivity of 'body's wisdom' the body itself is subject to decay".¹¹ A number of poems in 'The Descendants' deal with the theme of love-affairs resulting in uselessness. Most of her poems in the present volume are of tragic vision. But 'The Looking Glass' functions as a comic-relief in the same intensity as it functions in a typical Shakespearian tragedy. In a male dominated world, it depends on her to satisfy the male ego by admiring his male powers and her own feminine weakness. Her soft, lovely feminine self serves two duties, first to excite his passion and - second to gratify his vanity as a superior male. Her feminine self also learns how to get a man to satisfy her lust. She says: "Getting a man to love you is easy only be honest about your wants as woman stand nude before the glass with him So that he sees that himself the stronger one, And believes it so, and you so much more softer, younger, lovelierAdmit your admiration. Notice the perfection of his limbs, his eyes reddening under the shower, the sky walk across the bathroom floor".¹² The poem is a psychic striptease the woman poet who is denied the emotional involvement which she hungers after. Kamala Das the 'queen of erotica' admits herself softer and lovelier and see him as the 'stronger'. She let him feel that he is her 'only man' for sexual satisfaction. To satisfy her "endless female hungers", she offers her female anatomy including- ; musk of breasts' 'scent of long hair' and 'the warm shock of menstrual blood'. But, her thrust for emotional fulfillment remains starved. Her sexual self, who was once receiving warm erotic touch, now becomes 'drab' and 'destitute'. It is her inner self which is reflected in her poems. A keen feminine sensibility is at work here. As a hot blooded woman, Kamala Das makes an honest confession of her wants for her sexual-starvation. For a woman, love is the slice and essence of life. Frustration and turbulence at the early young age, lust and sexual needs at the mature young age, tender affection towards children and flirting towards male are the psychological expressions of woman-love.

A woman always longs for love and this love cannot be one sided. It should be reciprocal. But instead of the juice of love Kamala Das finds an 'empty cistern' in her life. As Saleem Peeradina has opined: "She writes about love with the obsessiveness of a woman who can realize her being fully only through love. Not surprisingly, given the subject, the writing is some-times weak and self-indulgent".¹³

It is, therefore, obvious that she feels always hungry and unhappy in the absence of true love in her life. She remained all through her life searching for love of which she could not get a single stance. Her heart remains unfulfilled: “When I die Do not throw the meat and bones away But pile them up Let them tell By their smell What life was worth on this earth What love was worth In the end”.¹⁴

Kamala Das is a poet of moods and freaks, and hence she writes about so many other things ‘that momentarily arrest her attention; e.g., about pigeons, seasons, children, bangles, the sea-shore and the morning tree, bats, phone calls, artificial alarms, airports, the ferns and the maggots, the juice-sticks and the looking-glasses, convicts, problems of composition, the high tides and the loud posters, the swamp and the blue bird. These various things have been catalogued here in order to show that Kamala Das does emerge from her well-chosen themes now and then, and thereby create an impression of diversity and variety. She is as felicitous in their handling as in that of her familiar themes. And together, they create the impression on the reader’s mind that her poetry is “as honest, as human, as she is”.

Kamala Das’s first book was published in 1965 (Everest Press Delhi) but it was like a “Parcel of dynamite”, as O.J.Thomas calls it, exploding in your face, shredding masks and bringing out the hidden discontents of the worked- especially the woman’s point of view.

“The dominant theme in this collection of poems is Kamala Das’s personal experience of love in its diverse roles. It is a painful account of her personal frustrations and psychological traumas. The love theme in Kamala Das’s poetry is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. On one hand she realizes love as the mechanical act of bodily union; And, I loved his body without shame, on winter evenings..... This kind of relationship becomes a kind of compulsion for them and leads to only frustration. On the other hand, she prefers relations with other men. This is another facet of her theme of love. She seeks fulfillment from other men but in each experience the beloved is destined to be shocked by unfulfillment. This collection of poems shows her overwhelming frustration leading to the final desire of death. In some of her poems she transcends beyond and relates herself to the larger perspective. She becomes the voice of the victimized women of the world”.¹⁵

The Descendants by Kamala Das is devoted to physical decay, nothingness, frustration. Marriage has hurt her ego, leaving her unfulfilled; her poems also record a woman enjoying the newness of the world as she wanders the streets and pursues her own interests. She has faced frustration, disillusionment and drabness that she has expressed through every verse-line of her poetry in a bold

and confessional manner. A note of pessimism is all pervasive in this volume of poems. Her personal frustration and sense of loneliness figure prominently in it. The poetess has finally discovered that her search for true love is not going to be materialized in this life.

This *Old Playhouse and Other Poems* show her utter disgust with the life of lust which denies her any emotional or spiritual satisfaction. It marks a definite shift from the physical to the emotional or the spiritual. It further shows that the life of lust kills a sensitive woman emotionally and spiritually.

Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (1996)

This is a selection from the entire poetic corpus of Kamala Das published in 1996. The new poems included in this collection deal with the themes of death and decay, society and human-relationships.

Social poems:

In "Toys" Kamala Das is critical of those who sow the seeds of disharmony and tension in the society. "Delhi 1984" deals the terrorist violence unleashed on the innocent Sikhs in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination. "Smoke in Colombo" is the denunciation of the genocide of Tamils commuted by the dominant non-Tamils in Sri Lanka.

"The Dalit Panther" highlights the atrocities committed by the police on a Dalit youth. "If Death is your Wish" is the bold condemnation of those who settle their accounts by indulging in acts of violence to destabilize society. In "Daughter of the Century" is the condemnation of the forces of hatred.

Poems of Death and Decay:

"Women's Shuttles" reveals the agony of the poetess who had to undertake a number of trips behind a dare one's bier. "Life's Obscure Parallel is Death". In "Death is So Mediocre" the poetess visualizes her prelude to death.

"I Shall Not Forget" shows the poetess's direct confrontation with death at the time of her father's death. It was this encounter with death that always haunted her mind. In "Smudged Mirrors", the poetess bemoans her deteriorating health and approaching old age. "The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit" presents death-like atmosphere, patient waiting for execution and half-grown nightmares

couch under beds. In "A Requiem for my Father" is the realistic account of her father's death after a prolonged illness and expresses her yearning for fatherly affection which was denied to her in life.

Personal Poems:

In "Larger than Life was He" is the frank admission of Kamala Das's failure of marital life. She has no hesitation in confessing that her marriage as a sham. In "The Widow's Lament" the poetess mourns her husband's death that was her sunshade and her home. In "Cat in the Gutter" the poet describes how lust makes her feel like only "a high-bred kitten rolling for fun in the gutter". In "The Seashore" deals with the non-fulfillment of the cherished love. In "Mortal Love" shows that fidelity in love is only for immortals and not for mortals.

Conclusion:

Kamala Das is preoccupied with death, decay, failure and frustration in love. Her canvas becomes wider and imagery more original and modern. Indian English Poetry has come of age with enduring charisma, enchanting range and amazing authenticity. Kamala Das occupies a pre-eminent position among contemporary poets with her astounding imagery, new idiom and honest portrayal of Indian women and their concerns.

Thus, one can say that frustration in love is responsible for her present condition. She is a woman who wishes to escape the trappings of lust in order to find her love. Often she is frightened to think about the loss of a man whom she loved. She accepts the fact that to love is easy but to live without lover with his memory is very hard for a woman. She says: "Oh, yes, getting a man to love is easy, but living without him afterwards may have to be faced. A living without life when you move Around, meeting strangers with your eyes that Gave up their search, with ears that hear only His last voice calling out your name and your Body which once under his touch had gleaned Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute".¹⁶ These lines show that Kamala Das wants full satisfaction in love with its associations such as security, mutual understanding, shelter and a happy home. Love always meant something more than a physical-inter-course to her. What she actually wanted from her husband was sympathy, gentle dealing and companionship. She has lived her all life in search of true love and a true companion, with whom, she can live happily.

Kamala Das is remembered chiefly for creating awareness among women about the need to think of them first and foremost. One cannot help others without helping oneself. She immortalizes the

splendor of nature and human relationships in her poetry, where personal experiences turn into universal on account of passionate expression.

Kamala Das's voice, earthy and direct, sheds a harsh light on everything around us, revealing small stuff that we never knew existed in us.

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