

Love, Sex and Self in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Kamala Das is one of the most outstanding poets emerging out of the quintessential quartet of pioneers of Indian English poetry post-Independence. Bold, brisk, blazing, and lurid portrayal of love, sex and self by her shook the very foundation of stereotyped male-dominated literary world. She is pre-dominantly a poet of love and sex. She considers love's last form as divine and it coalesces the lovers inseparably united. Sex is the biological urge and a cogent conduit to express love towards the beloved. Love is a bliss: its manifestation mustn't be repressed, but celebrated. She emphasises the physical consummation of love in all its hues inalterably. Her poetry is the sombre spectacle of myriad human emotions like love, sex, intricate human emotions, and universalization of the personal self.

Keywords: Love, Sex, Self, Salvation, Spirituality

Kamala Das is perspicaciously prodigious and peripatetic poetess of India writing in English especially after Independence. Born in 1934 at Punnayurkulam in Kerala, grew up in Calcutta with her parents, married off to a distant cousin Kalipurath Madhav Das at a very tender age. With ground breaking poetry and controversial autobiography, she catapulted herself into a women icon. Her popular poetry collections are- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Play House and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems Vol. I* (1984), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das* (1996), *Encountering Kamala* (1996)- and her autobiography, *My Story* (1976). She is pre-eminently a poet of love, lust, sex, pain, anguish, alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, and melancholy. Bruce King rightly avers:

The poems of Kamala Das when focused on love treat it within a broader ranges of themes, more realized settings and with deeper feeling, bringing to it an intensity of emotion and speech and a rich, full complexity of life. Das's themes go beyond stereotyped longings and complaints. Even her feelings of loneliness and disappointment are part of a larger than life personality, obsessive in its awareness of itself, yet creating a drama of selfhood (147).

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Love is the central theme in her poetry, and other themes are related to it in one way or the other. Love is a supreme bliss and a rare gift of God. Love is not a stationery stasis but a dynamic phenomenon that ever continues. Love is a unifying force that brings and binds the lovers congruously closer. She considers love a kind of relationship that entwines inextricably emotions and spirituality. M. K. Naik is of the view that “Love too appears in roles such as ‘skin-communicated thing’, an overpowering force, an escape, a longing and hunger resulting in satiety (219). The poem “Love” orchestrates her absolute happiness and resolute contentment in love. Mark the following lines of the poem:

Until I found you,
I wrote verse, drew pictures,
And, went out with friends
For walks....
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel
My life lies, content,
In you.... (The Old House and Other Poems, 23)

Kamala Das glorifies love unabashedly and upholds uprightly the unhindered manifestations of it in all forms of human relationship. Love unites all things in oneness of joy and ecstasy. Imminent evolution of ebbs surface on the tide of emotions of love. Love is the intrinsic centripetal force which binds the interest of the lovers until they transcend physical barriers to attain salvation and growth. She considers physical love as a stepping stone for the realisation of true love. However, she contrives to attain mystical realization through the channel of physical love. The poet’s quest for true and ideal love remains a farfetched dream or the desire of the moth for the star. In her one of most florid poems “Introduction”, her feminism is clearly discernible and she universalizes her personal anguish and longings:

Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love... I met a man, loved him, Call
Him not by any name, he is everyman
Who wants woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me...the ocean’s tireless
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and every one,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
I, in this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath (Selected Poems, 6).

“In Love” is a very luminous poem, offers a graphic account of the tumultuous and tormented sexual experience felt by the protagonist. The protagonist feels bereft of contentment, finds herself drowned in the whirlpool of quotidian existence, notwithstanding her lover’s

passionate and feverish lovemaking. The poet enunciates that there must be unequivocal union of minds and hearts during the physical union of two bodies. She delightfully draws an analogy between love and lust. True love in reality is a virtual image like mirage in desert. True love is an ever fixed mark but for her it seems her an illusion. The following lines of the poem “Flotsam” are quite indicative of her unfulfilled love:

We were the homeless, he and I, the floating ones
Who recognise swiftly another of the tribe
By that certain hunger in the eye, a slight
Narrowing, for, although brimming with a desert sun,
It fancies it sees an oasis; the mirage
Greenly reflected in each lonely cornea,
And, so together we stumbled so clumsily
Into lust. But pushing his urgent limbs away
I fought to regain my body’s poise till he cried
I love you, you’ve no need to be afraid of me.
When at last he left, scolded, sent away, alone
On the white desert of my sheets I wondered if
I should have fought at all to save this dubious
Asset, my aloneness, my terrible aloneness (*Selected Poems* 112).

Kamala Das is pre-dominantly a poet love: she views love from woman’s point of view. She espouses that love’s ultimate goal is divine and unite the lovers inescapably. The consummation of love is the leitmotif of her poetry. The Lila of Radha-Krishna is endemic to entire corpus of Indian love poetry. It is a holy bond that transcends the physical self and unify the two souls in the eternity. She seems influenced with four tenets of Hindu philosophy to get salvation -Dharma (religious whole), Artha (earthly wellbeing), Kama (love and pleasure), and Moksha (spiritual liberation or enlightenment). The philosophy propounds that all the worldly pleasures must be extensively enjoyed. She establishes that salvation can be attained through physical union and consecration of self to divine. She says lamentably:

I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a Man’s heart. Otherwise, why I not get my peace in the arms of my husband (Mohanty 42).

Love is a multifarious phenomenon in her poetry. She contrives to seek emotional and spiritual fulfilment from her lover. She yearns for ideal and pure love which may be spiritual experience emerging out of sexual union. She develops a detached outlook miserably and crawls towards the inner spectacle of the soul. Her husband doesn’t restore her expectations and leaves her craving more for love. Her poetry is beautiful blend of physical and spiritual love. She depicts Radha and Krishna as symbol of ideal love that stands for purity and sublimity. Mark the following lines of the poem where she vies for absolute ecstasy of love:

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And virgin crying
Everything in me
is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You ... (*Selected Poems* 45).

Sex has been another dominant theme in her poetry. Unlike other women poets, she takes up bold, blazing and belligerent approach towards sex. She instinctively exploits the theme in adducing the futility of her conjugal life and relationships outside marriage. Sex looms large in all its biological, psychological, and metaphysical strands. Some poems create goose bumps for its free and frank treatment of sex. The sensation felt by lovers in actual physical relationship is described as an eclectic phenomenon. Hari Mohan Prasad's appraisal of her poetry with respect to the employment of the theme of sex finds finest expression succinctly:

Her poetry has been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over exposer of body or snippets of 'trivia'. But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her poetry the poet is fully obliterating Eliot's distinction between mind suffering and mind creating (35).

She thinks that perfect sexual pleasure is the most genuine and gracious expression of love. Sex is the means by which we can lend or pour love towards the lover. Her poetry is a tangible tapestry of sexual awakening. She considers sex a very important ingredient of successful human life: it is not to be ashamed of but to be talked about and celebrated. Kamala Das very vulnerable to all things related with sex right from her childhood. Her poems remarkable for pristine sexual overtones and unravels kinked image of tortured, tormented woman kind. She aspires to enunciate humanity's desire to connect with the divine through sexual union.

"The Looking Glass" is a very charming piece of verse, illustrates her boldness, dare devilishness and candour to deal with theme of sex. She gives a clarion call to women to support their partners wholeheartedly during amorous act. There must be cajolery, caressing, canoodling and care between the lovers. A woman can stand naked before the mirror along with her lover and observe the reflections which will help to increase the spice and love quotient between them. A woman should surrender to her lover body and soul. She must consent and let her husband touch her body and fragrant zones to ignite the emotions; let him feel the aroma of hair and musk at the cleavage; the warmth of the menstrual blood and all her cravings must be gratified. She feels no qualms in portraying the sexual relationship between man and woman in all colours and variety with élan. She uses erotic words to evoke latent emotions unabashedly. Mark the following lines of the poem which is psychic striptease, an exploration of the dynamics of her mind:

Notice the perfection

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Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all
What you make 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 (*Selected Poems* 54).

“The Freaks” is also a very luminous poem woven around the theme of sex. She says that she is robbed of the desire to be loved as the peacock loves her peahen spreading all his feathers drowned in ecstasy, her husband sexually satiates her but he falls short to kindle the spark she dreams of. Her husband, a recluse, doesn’t pry into her emotional dilemma, and consequently they are unable to attain the conjugal zenith, though living with him for so many years. She calls herself ‘a freak’ because of her feverish and flagrant lust. She rues that her husband failed miserably to arouse more dynamic passion in her. Mark the following lines of the poem:

Desire... Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers? Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence (*Selected Poems* 9).

“The old Play House” is a very popular poem wherein poetess gives an outlet to emotions emanating from monotonous and mechanical conjugal life with her husband. Her husband highly reticent gratifies her biological urge physically but on emotional front he is not that robust. At the emotional and spiritual level he proved a disaster, never seem to create ripples, See the following lines corroborating her squirm:

I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer
Begins to pall, I remember the ruder breezes
Of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves. Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows, always
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps a little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is

No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Old play house with all its lights put out ((*Selected Poems* 69).

In the poem "Substitute", she indomitably unfolds her frank and candid confession of her dry, dull and disparaging sexual life. The poem illustrates her promiscuity and perversity in explicating her unrequited sexual desire that love has turned 'swivel door', where one lover goes out and his substitute stops by. See the lines:

After that love became a swivel-door,
When one went out, another came in.
Then I lost count, for always in my arms
Was a substitute for a substitute (*Selected Poems* 49).

"The dance of the Eunuchs" is also very fine flush of her feelings of the futility of her sexual encounters with her spouse and lovers. She finds an objective correlative in the dance of the eunuchs to represent the theme of sex. "The Sunshine Cat" is a very beautiful poem weaved wondrously around sex, ensconcing her utter desertion with all her partners she shacks up with. She strenuously tried to ignite the genuine spark among her lovers, by clinging to their arms, caressing them, and giving them every warmth but lovers couldn't reciprocate and respond to her effulgent emotional urge. See the lines from the poem.

Verily, Kamala's poetry is inundated with self: her 'self' as a woman, feminine consciousness, and her 'self' as an Indian English poet. Self is the reservoir where her poetry stems from. All her poetry is highly reflective of her boldness and candour revealing her self to her readers. Her poetry stripteases her psyche and exudes her own personal life. Her poetry is self-reflective, self-explanatory. Manmohan K. Bhatnagar opines: "Kamala's poetry embodies genius of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage and seeking to establish their identity and self (7)". Her feminine self can be observed in her famous poem "Invitation". Her expectations and desires are not fulfilled, and she renders deprived of the paradise she ever dreamed of. Her feminine self penetrates piercingly into her own self revealing her own dilemma. Mark the following lines of the poem "Mortal Love":

Fidelity in love
is only for the immortals,
the wanton Gods who sport in their
secret heavens and feel
no fatigue. For you
and me, life is too short
for absolute bliss and much too long
alas, for constancy (*Selected Poems* 125).

Over and above, Kamala's poetry has been regarded as confessional, for she has no inhibitions to confess frankly and fervidly the things related with her self. She implicitly analyses her own psych and her self is permeated through her poems. Her coital experiences and resultant dissatisfaction surmount to surface in her poems immutably. Her poetry gives a vent to

her pent up feelings. Her attitude and awesomeness towards her male partners including husband finds intense description in her writings. She launches a tirade against the social and traditional restraints that Indian women are subject to. Bruce King rightly observes about her poetry:

The interest of Das's poetry is not the story of sex outside of marriage but the instability of her feelings, the way they rapidly shift and assume new postures, new attitudes of defence, attack, explanation or celebration. Her poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in the feelings of love; they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of ego, self-dramatization and feelings of shame and depression (151).

Kamala's poetry is a carnival of her struggle to establish the beyond the physical. It is her disillusionment and dismay with colourless conjugal life and consequent melancholy and intense craving for a strong and sequestered identity spurs her to pen poems. Her feminine self reaches close to her own self. Mark the following lines of the poem "Annamalai Poem V"

At times I feel that I hide behind my dreams
as the mountain does, behind the winter's mist
I cannot look the day in the face as once
I did, with gumption or confront myself and
Declare, yes, old girl, I have surely let you down
They called me a winner, for, with words I did
weave a wondrous raiment fit for Gods and with
nimble footsteps climbed the stairways of my thoughts
finding even the heaven's portals ajar (*Selected Poems* 135).

Kamal Das adroitly adjusts new Indian English Idiom to showcase her feminine self. In order to give vehement and vivid descriptions of her feelings of love, lust and self, she employs a kind of new vocabulary. She has used the words "pubis", "pubic hairs", "womb", "menstrual blood", "scent of hair", "musk", "orgasm", "breasts", "sexual intercourse", "puddles of desire", "a good flamboyant lust", "dusky breasts", "weight of my breasts" etc. to render her poetry more evocative and erotic.

In conclusion, we may assert that Kamala Das' evolution on the horizon of Indian English poetry proved a revolution. Her daring, dauntless and downright depiction of love, sex and self created ripples in the male-chauvinist literary world. Her poems are a matrix of voyeuristic variegated fantasies. Her transformational journey from a tumultuous childhood to wobbling married woman was irrevocably horrible. Appalled at the shabby treatment meted out to her by her husband, his cryptic coyness and callous indifference towards the emotional needs finds a vent in her writings. She considers poetry a cogent conduit for the expression of her dismay and disillusionment accorded in her conjugal life and life outside the ambit of marriage. We witness the undercurrent of fierce female protest and fine feminine sensibility underlying her poetry.

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