

Self-Imposed Restrictions of Feminine Love in Kamala Das' Poetry

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Abstract: Kamala Das has created a permanent place for herself in contemporary Indo-English poetry. Das as a poet treads on familiar grounds, and she never tries to transgress her self-imposed restrictions. Her poems bring to the fore her boldness and freedom in speaking aloud the secret longings and aspirations of womankind. Her woman pleads for domestic security and the inborn desire to be liberated. She also sings of love and the different roles it plays in human life. It can be varied as merely lust, 'a skin-communicated thing', a longing and hunger, an overpowering force, a bondage, an escape and a phenomenon which reveals the psychological processes behind both femininity and masculinity. The final impression that Das' poetry leaves is bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within. It is not strictly the ideology of feminism rather her individualism as a female writer that comes to the fore when she advocates a concept of love that does not impede her impulse to freedom. Her voice is a rebellion against a man-dominated world. A woman has to face puzzling adolescence, the pain of growing up and the problem of inequality with the male world. Kamala Das considers man as an agent of corruption who plays with the emotions of woman. Her poetry functions as a comic-relief in most of the times as it functions in a way to mock at the cruelty of man towards woman.

Keywords: love, marriage, extra-marital, nymphomaniac, depression, emancipation

1. INTRODUCTION: Kamala Das:

Kamala Das, the singer of feminine sensibility in Indian English poetry, was born in Southern Malabar on March 31, 1934. She is the daughter of the famous Malayali poetess, Balamani Amma. As her parents were poets, she has inborn qualities of poetry in her blood. Her maiden name was Madhavikutty. She was educated mainly at home and was denied the privilege of regular school and college education. At the age of fifteen she was married to K. Madhava Das. She could not find emotional fulfilment in marriage, which, according to her is a male dominated institution. Her frustrations, want of love and sufferings are frankly and sincerely expressed in several of her poems and her autobiography *My Story*. She craves for love which has been conspicuous by its absence in her married life:

... I see you go away from me

And feel the loss of love I never once received. (*The Sea Shore*)

Despite disillusionment and frustration in married life, Kamala Das resigned to her fate and lived with her husband. She has three children.

Kamala Das is a bilingual poet who writes in her native Malayalam and English with equal ease, mastery and command. Her poetic output consists of three volumes of poetry – *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse* (1974). Her poems have appeared in prestigious magazines and journals – *Young Commonwealth*

Poets' 65, *New Writing in India*, *Commonwealth Poems of Today*. She is represented in many anthologies including *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* and *Ten Twentieth Century Poets*. Her autobiography, *My Story*, has been translated into fourteen international languages. She has published various books, especially short story collections in Malayalam, under the pseudonym Madhavikutty.

Kamala Das stormed into popularity with the publication of *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965. She won the Asian P.E.N. Poetry Prize, 1964 for her poem "The Sirens". She was awarded the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for the fiction in 1969. She was also awarded The Chimanlal Award for Fearless Journalism. She was the poetry editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* for one year.

2. Salient features of Kamala Das' Poetry:

Kamala Das' poetry is characterised by frankness, clarity, openness, extreme sincerity and integrity; she speaks out of her love-longings, frustrations and disillusionments with a disarming frankness. It shows that in a male

dominated world; she tried to assert her individuality, to maintain her feminine identity, and from this revolt arose all her troubles, psychological traumas and frustrations. A bird's eye-view of her poetry would serve to clarify the point.

Love and sex form the main theme in Kamala Das' poetry. Her poems mostly deal with unfulfilled love and yearning for love. *The Dance of the Eunuchs* is a good example of a poem dealing with the theme. She parallels her suppressed desire with the eunuchs. The dance of the eunuchs is a dance of the sterile, and, therefore, the unfulfilled and unquenchable love of the woman in the poet. The dance of the eunuchs whose joyless life reflects the poetess' fractured personality is a noticeable piece of autobiographical poetry.

Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled...
There were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some
Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn...
Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.
They were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and rottenness
Were in each of them. (*The Dance of the Eunuchs*)

Their dancing movements reveal their "vacant ecstasy", the sheer meaninglessness of their life. Their appearance reveals their inner anguish; their dry limbs looking like "half-burnt logs like funeral pyres" stand for their helplessness and their sterility. In the dance of the eunuchs Kamala Das finds a close parallel to her own loveless life – a life of emotional vacuity. In this world of emotional vacuity and "vacant ecstasy" love is a far cry.

3. Self-imposed Restrictions of Feminine Love in Kamala Das' Poem:

In poem after poem Kamala Das is preoccupied with love, sex and frustration. Married at the early age of sixteen, Kamala Das could not find the fulfilment of love in married life, a bond that she could not untie. Love proved to be a pretension. She was tied to the tedium and monotony of sexuality:

I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair 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 said woman-body felt so beaten
The weight of breasts and womb crushed me (*An Introduction*)

She reveals the quest of a woman for love in general terms. It is her intense longing to find fulfilment in love:

I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry haste
Of rives, in me... the ocean's tireless
Waiting. (*An Introduction*)

In *The Freaks*, the nymphomaniac persona breaks down, and admits that her lust is a defence mechanism for survival, a cover for her sense of inadequacy. In *Love* shows the hollowness of sexual love, this skin-communicated thing. The memory of the experience lingers in the mind and puts the question – where is Love? This question remains unanswered.

In some of the love poems Kamala Das strikes an entirely new note. She has written many poems about extramarital love, which she justifies by providing a mythical framework. She seeks an objective co-relative for her own love longing in the age-old Hindu myths of Radha-Krishna, and Mirabai-Krishna. Justifying and celebrative love outside marriage, she identifies herself with Radha or Mira Bai who gave up the ties of marriage in search of Lord Krishna:

Vrindaban lives on in every woman's mind,
And the flute, luring her
From home and her husband
Who later asks her of the long scratch on the brown
Aureola of her breast, and she shyly replies,

Hiding flushed cheeks,
It was so dark outside, I tripped and fell over
The brambles in the wood. (*Vrindaban*)

Kamala Das is a poet of love in all its manifestations.

The conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe emerges as a major theme in Das poetry. The poetess is quite alive to her femininity, asserts it and celebrates it in one poem after another. She is a singer of feminine sensibility and rebels against the conventions and restraints of society, which are meant to exploit womankind in a man-made world.

An Introduction is a fine lyric which is confessional and autobiographical. It deals with the poetess' assertion to establish her feminine identity in a male-dominated world and her preference for writing in English. She frankly discloses how loveless sexual assaults are committed on a woman in the name of marriage:

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 said woman-body felt so beaten,
The weight of my breasts and womb-crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. (*An Introduction*)

The Looking Glass externalises the humiliations and frustrations the women have to suffer in a male-dominated social order. The poetess remarks sarcastically that a woman should accept the cruel reality that she is, merely an object for the satisfaction of man's lust. She can easily have physical gratification but her earnest yearning for emotional fulfilment can never be realised. She should accept unquestioningly male superiority and should admire him, "All the fond details that make/Him male and your only male" (*The Looking Glass*).

Man enjoys woman sexually. He soon forgets her and never returns. She suffers all through her life because the emotional integration has been denied to her. Consequently, her radiant beauty which once "gleamed like burnished brass" grows old and decrepit.

In *Composition* the poetess reveals a mature attitude. She resigns to her fate. She ironically pleads to all women to resign before the male ego since it is implicit in the institution of marriage. In *The Invitation* the woman has a feeling of dying in the absence of the lover who has abandoned her. She feels "lying on a funeral pyre/with a burning head". She always remembers the intensity of the moment of love:

All through that summer's afternoon we lay
On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding
Into throbbing suns. The heat had
Blotted our thoughts... (*Composition*)

Jaisurya, one of the finest lyrics in this anthology, shows the intensity of maternal love and feminine sensibility. A mother is eager to see her child even when she suffers from labour pains. A mother forgets even the suffering of her sexual exploitation in the ecstasy of child birth:

Love is not important, that makes the blood
Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his
Lust, but is shed at end of each
Embrace. Only that matters which forms as
Toadstool under lighting and rain, the soft
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. (*Jaisurya*)

In this poem Kamala Das deftly merges the personal with the universal.

The title poem *The Old Playhouse* reveals a note of protest against male domination. The wife's position is belittled in married life. She is exploited and humiliated. The poetess' protest is the protest of the entire womanhood against male domination:

You called me wife,
I was called to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins, cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic load
Became a dwarf, I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (*The Old Playhouse*)

In a bitter, ironical tone the husband is accused of selfishness. She could not realise the growth and development of her personality, as she had expected, in marriage. Her husband was only interested in her body:

You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its
Usual shallow convulsions...you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. (*The Old Playhouse*)

Gino powerfully expresses the terror of sex, its attraction and revulsion:

You will perish from the kiss, he said, as one must
Surely die, when bitten by a Krait who fills
The bloodstream with its accursed essence. I was quiet
For once, my tongue had failed in my mouth. (*Gino*)

The poetess realistically depicts the burdens of domestic life, sickness, her ageing and decaying of body, and the anticipation of death in the final passage:

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long queue
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must
Roll across the road. I shall be the patient
On the hospital bed, lying in drugged slum
And dreaming of home. I shall be the grandmother
Willing away her belongings, those scraps and trinkets
More lasting than her bones. Perhaps some womb in that
Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent. (*Gino*)

The Stone Age, one of the finest poems in this anthology, strongly expresses the note of rebellion against male domination. The wife resents the restraints imposed on her. The husband who is described as an "Old fat spider" weaves "webs of bewilderment" around her and confines her within the four walls of domesticity.

She painfully complains.

You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room,
And stroke my pitted face absent mindedly while you read.
She dislikes him as other men haunt her mind.
Yet, as day dreams, strong men cast their shadows, they sink
Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood. (*The Stone Age*)

In the absence of the husband she knocks at another's door. She asserts her individuality and challenges domesticity. A note of rebellion and defiance is strongly expressed in this poem. The husband, devoid of love, is spoken of as, "Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind./Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment." Breaking away from the dull routine of domesticity and sheer loveless sexual exploitation, she drives to "the other man" when the husband leaves. She does not care for the piercing eyes of neighbours and returns when the deed is done. Mark the intensity of rebellion in the following lines:

... Ask me, everybody ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts.
And sleeps, ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price... (*The Stone Age*)

Jaisurya, one of Das' finest lyrics, deals with motherly love and expresses feminine sensibility very nicely. The woman in her adores the child and in its love forgets her pains of bearing it. The poetess was happy at the birth of her son.

And, then, wailing into light
He came, so fair, a streak of light thrust
Into the faded light. (*Jaisurya*)

Kamala Das rebels against the exploitation of women in a male oriented world. She is aware of her femininity and asserts it in poem after poem. She is a social rebel who opposes all conventions, traditions and accepted norms of society. Her failure to realise fulfilment in love and security and her sexual exploitation, imposed on her by the time-honoured institution of marriage, disillusionment and frustrations turned her into a social rebel. She has been unconventional both in her life and poetry. In her own life she sees the reflection of the entire suffering womanhood. She, thus, generalises the particular. She is every woman:

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. (*An Introduction*)

When the poetess grew up, she was instructed to observe the well-established conventions and to mould her life accordingly. She rebelled against such exploitative womanliness:

Then... I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. On,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows. (*An Introduction*)

4. CONCLUSION:

The poetess vehemently protests against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of woman. The woman is expected to play certain conventional roles and nobody takes care of her own wishes and aspirations. The intensity of protest is expressed in conversational idiom and rhythm. It is symbolic of the protest of the entire womanhood against the male ego. Kamala Das' poetry is a frank and straightforward expression of feminine sensibility. She violated the chiselled, systematic and traditional norms and values and she affirms to a form of life which is characterised by the unconventional and extremely modern point of view.

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