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## Kamala Das: Her Poetic Vision, Her Anti-Traditional Views and A Feminist with a Difference

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### Abstract

*Kamala Das is one of the most well-known feminist poets of the postcolonial period. The sufferings of women in the patriarchal social set up in different phases of the woman's life are superbly expressed in the poetry of Kamala Das. She universalises the female disgrace at the hands of male domination through her own life experiences. The bold themes of the complexities of womanhood, the dissatisfaction of her conjugal relationship, her extra marital affairs expressed through her poetry at a time when the socio-cultural condition did not at all favour such dauntless protests particularly from a woman aptly testify the strength of her character. The subject matter of her poetry highlights the relevance of her writing not only in the present era but also in the coming decades.*

**KEYWORDS:** Kamala Das, women, poetry, love, husband, society.

Born into an aristocratic Hindu Family at Malabar (Kerala) on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1934, and influenced by her great uncle, Nalapat Narayan Menon, a prominent writer and also her mother Balamani, a well-known Malayalam poet, Kamala Das established herself in the Indian English writings as an English poet. The then atmosphere of colonialism and its racism produced a feeling of inadequacy and alienation in her. This feeling haunted her throughout her life afterwards and she never got any kind of charm in her married life nor any kind of affinity towards her husband who was much older than her and rather forced her to find out other sources of love outside marriage. Actually, Kamala Das had to continue a love-less married life. This was reflected in almost all of her poems and sometimes we feel that she promoted herself to defy all traditions which deny a dominated and dignified place to women in a male-dominated society. But she wanted to pursue her freedom at any cost.

Kamala Das is often called a confessional poet because all of her poems are directly or indirectly connected with the thematic approach of confession. Her poem, 'The Freaks' presents her predicament as a married woman who has to feign love to safeguard her image as an active participant in the sexual act:

"It's only  
To save my face my face, I flaunt, at  
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust"

Das was totally fed up with the lusty demands of her husband. She remained an inactive soul in the sexual act. But to preserve her feminine integrity, she had to play some part of showing faithfulness in her 'sexual act' with her husband. To her it was a game of love in a male dominated society. In the same way in her poem 'A Looking Glass', she expressed the physical-cum-mental sufferings which she had to bear at the hands of her lustful egotistical husband. Resultantly, she felt severely isolated and unwanted in her married life. Again in 'The Old Playhouse' the protest of Kamala Das came out as she felt like a caged bird imprisoned by her husband. Similarly, her poem 'The Sunshine Cat' reflected her life of sufferings, her physical and mental stress that reduced her to that of a lifeless sunshine cat. The monstrous ego of her husband forced her to sell off her identity as a woman and lead a life of suffocation. Now the question may arise whether all such feelings were genuine or not. Was there any over-feeling? Or the burden of a patriarchal society made her so? In fact, the poet was neglected and humiliated by her autocratic father who superimposed his choices of life on her and denied her any individual identity or freedom. She never agreed with him as she spoke:

"You chose my clothes for me  
My tutors, my hobbies, my friends  
Humiliations by Teachers, Classmates."

In fact, she was humiliated by her teachers and classmates as a child. She suffered a lot from her sense of hopelessness and felt helpless. So, she was dozed with the feeling of melancholy and a kind of pessimism. Thus, she spoke:

'Friendship  
Cannot endure  
Blood ties don't satisfy'

Thus, for the poet body was no more a source of happiness but only a source of suffering and pain. Consequently, the poet suffered a kind of loneliness throughout her life. A sense of alienation grabbed her in the city life where she settled after migrating from the rural Malabar. This city life never could satisfy her. She felt suffocated coming to this atmosphere. This was quite a hostile environment where she was mentally tortured due to the unbearable heat of the sun, which was perfectly reflected in 'A Hot Noon in Malabar'. She protested with the words:

'To be here far away is torture'.

At the same time, this natural atmosphere reminded her of her parental house in Malabar during hot noon where she was very much happy, satisfied and never

protested against the scorching heat of the sun. A feeling of nostalgia grabbed her emotions to speak out like this. But it could never be denied that Kamala Das was not all pessimistic. Rather, a tinge of optimism could be found when she spoke of her satisfaction in enjoying the hot summer in her parental house, that is, Malabar House.

The poet Kamala Das described her meaningless sexual affairs with her husband because she never felt any satisfaction in it. She blamed her husband for denying her genuine love which is a must for the realisation of her emotion-cum-spiritual needs (Kumar, 2018). She confessed that her lover approached her during the intervals of his long meetings in the office to make love to her. She found no wrong in such extra- marital relationship if they could fulfil the targets of realisation of true love.

According to the opinion of Kamala Das, love is an emotional and spiritual feeling and again, it is based on the principle of equality and proper respect for each other's identity and integrity. There should be no attempt to dominate over the other to show any kind of superiority in such love. In short, there is no room for any conflict of interests in true or ideal love. On the other hand, lust is the devaluation of true love. It is a kind of exploitation of the female body. The poet opined that the male persona bears no faith in the purifying power of love. It is the male who dominates, but the female feels caged and suffocated in such relationships (Dodiya, 2010). He deliberately overlooks the emotional satisfaction of his partner in love. Thus, the poet Kamala Das expressed her anger and sufferings, her agony, despair and disappointments in her marital relationship and also in the so-called mutual relationship between two lovers or in other love- affairs.

The poet Kamala Das dealt with body from various perspectives like celebration of the body, condemnation of the body and decay of the body. All these aspects of love were discussed by the poet in her poems from different angles. Over all, the love-poems revealed a fierce yearning and anguished quest for realisation of personal identity through erotic love.

The poet said that physical love is desirable. She was not against such love. But she felt that it is not the end of life. It is just a part of love. Love involves emotion attachment, a spiritual union which transcends the carnal level of love. Only sexual attachment ignores the demands of the soul. It can never satisfy the soul of a female. She felt cheated in the fake drama of love-making. The poem 'The Freaks' highlighted this aspect. A lady's resentment against the exploiter of her body was finely revealed in these lines:

"Can this man with  
Nimble finger-tips unleash

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Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers?"

The poem 'Substitute' portrayed the woman's disenchantment in the 'soul-torturing' exclusive life of lust. The lovers at last realised the futility of such meaningless relationship and decided to snap this kind of love. She admitted:

"It is physical thing, he said suddenly,  
End it, I cried, and let us be free.  
This freedom was our last strange toy."

In her other poem 'Gino' Kamala Das exposed the nature of her partner's impersonal lust and its tragic consequences on her body. The poet showed her obsession over decay and death. The lady carried her body without any joy and the lust-stricken body will wither and will enter another body as one who is filled with severe discontent and dissatisfaction:

"The body I wear without joy  
Shall wither with  
My darling's impersonal lust."

This is also a fact that the poet intermingled the different themes related to love such as body-love, humiliations in love, man-woman relation in love, feminism and even the nostalgia relating to love in her poems. All these help us in understanding the variegated dimensions of love in her poems. The poet had revolutionary approaches in expressing her thoughts. Her thinking was quite liberal and thought provoking. She had enough courage to discuss bold topics directly and fervently. Perhaps no single woman-poet was there during her time who could be compared to Kamala Das. Even she faced severe criticisms for such writings. But she neither cared for nor did she quarrel with them. She wrote not for any praise not for any prize. She wrote what she found right. She was dead against the primitive concept of dehumanisation of females in the society (Pope, 2014). She knew the then society very well. So, the poet never did try to get any consent or help from anyone for communicating her revolutionary love thoughts to the public. She never bothered what comments would come up from other contemporary writers or poets. She believed that love is to be a liberating and life-giving experience which helps in self-discovery and self-growth. It is to be based on the principle of equality, mutual trust and mutual self-respect. A sense of helplessness regarding love had been expressed in her poem, "The Old Playhouse" such as:

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“Cowering  
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your  
 Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.”

Now can we come to conclude that all of Das’s poems are biographical sketches of her life? The answer is simply no, it will be a very abrupt conclusion. It is true that she was neglected by her parents, neglected by her husband, but at the same time we observe her expression of failure in her realisation of true love or her failure in extra-marital relationships. In the poem “The Bangles” she said,

“The man switches on the light and  
 Looks into her face with his  
 Grey, pitiless eyes...  
 The woman sufferer in this way  
 Realises the fallacy of married relations.”

She spoke of her failures, but she never said that it was very unusual. So, she again said,

“Who can  
 Help us who have lived so long  
 And have failed in love?”

To prove that even such failure is so common the poet Kamala Das in her poem, “Next to Indira Gandhi” revealed that her marriage at the age of fifteen was an utter failure. To the poet it was a classic example of soul torturing separation in this so-called holy bond. According to her:

“It was never a husband and wife bond,  
 We were such a mismatched pair.”

So, we get a definite touch of universality in her poetry. She stood for every woman and what she felt or thought is universal as expressed in her poem “Composition”:

“We are all alike.  
 We women,  
 In our wrappings of hairless skin”

The poem, “An Introduction” confirmed that Kamala Das is the leading voice of the victimised women of the world. She painted their joys and sorrows that are in no

way different from her own. She used 'I' not only in a personal, but also in an impersonal sense in the poems. The poet wanted to reach out to other female counterparts through her own sufferings. She offered a clarification in the following lines:

"I have no joys which are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I."

And again, the poet asserted that her experiences were no different from the other neglected women. She informed:

"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"

Almost fifty years have passed from the time when Kamala Das wrote:

"Life is quite simple now  
Love, blackmail and sorrow."

Do we not feel that it is written by any poet of the present day? Her view is still relevant and will remain so forever.

There is a pessimistic vision of life in the poetry of Kamala Das and sometimes it is tragic in her presentation. She had been a sufferer throughout her life. Many images of disease, destruction, death, decay, loneliness, helplessness, frustration and rejection have been delineated in her poems. Her pessimistic attitude was best expressed in the poem 'A Request' where she became disillusioned with love and life:

"what life was worth  
On this earth  
What love was worth  
In the end."

Kamala Das had frankly admitted and depicted the plights of women in their married life or love life. A true love is not possible in this male-dominated society. In the young age a girl child had to obey the words of her grandmother:

"My grandmother cried,  
Darling, you must stop this bathing now.  
You are much too big to play

---

Naked in the pond.”

In the Middle Age a woman is neglected and reduced to the level of a maid servant:

“They no longer  
Need you except for serving tea and for  
pressing clothes.”

In the same way the poem ‘The Suicide’ was a veiled attack on the elderly female ancestors who superimpose their personal choices on the young girl children and deny them freedom to choose anything in life. The poet found that women’s desire is mostly controlled by men, their so-called well-wishers or elders. They were not allowed to choose their life-partners or dresses or hobbies.

Kamala Das was a vehement critic of social inequalities in Indian society. She could feel that the poor was becoming poorer day by day. Riches were leading their lives very lavishly. The poet’s rage was also directed towards the society of male prerogatives. In “Flag” the poet presented a picture of the downtrodden in the capitalist’s scenario which reflected her protest against the disparity between the rich and poor, that is, the social disorder:

“Rich men dance with another’s wife and  
Eke out a shabby  
Secret ecstasy, and poor old men lie  
In wet pavements and  
Cough, cough their lungs out”

The poet was also aware of the gradual loss of moral values in life. She delineated the lack of compassion in a progressive society like India in the poem “Cochin’s Jewish Quarter”. She was shocked to see a small-pox victim dying by inches with none to attend:

“With a twitch of his loosened mouth  
And a rolling of  
His eyes, there was none else in the room  
But the dog  
He was dying of some fearsome pox alone”

The poet had cited such a heart-rendering example of an attitude of indifference among the people of the Indian society. Apart from her concerns with the women issues the poet was also equally concerned with the man’s alienation from Nature. The lust for grabbing money has made man oblivious about the beauty of Nature and

its effect on the body. In the poem "Sepia" the poet showed man's total estrangement from Nature:

"They do not go up the trees  
To read with fingertips  
A fringe of summer clouds.  
They do not go down the sea  
To count the mermaid's eggs  
That lie beneath the Anemones."

Kamala Das highlighted the various forms of violence that damages the peace and harmony in the society. She preached the religion of love which can bring forth communal harmony, fellow feeling and stability in the society. In the poem "The Inheritance" she spoke about the fanaticism of religion which breeds hatred and intolerance in the society. Sometimes fanatics kill the innocent persons who go against them:

"Slay them who don't  
Believe, disembowel their young ones  
And scatter on the streets  
The meager innards"

The poet also dealt with Tamil ethnic issue in "Smoke in Colombo." "The Sea at Galle Face Green" and "Affects July."

The poet described her harrowing experiences about the mass killings of men, women and children of Tamil origin. She raised the question behind such ruthless killings. In the "Sea at Galle Face Green" she asked:

"Did the Tamils smell so  
Different, what secret  
Chemistry let them down?  
Was there a faint scent of  
Jasmine in their women's  
Hair?"

Lastly, the poet Kamala das has always been considered a confessional poet who has composed almost all her poems with the personal experiences of her life and it is a truth that the elements are true to the facts. Still, we have to note that an artist like her is bound to mingle a series of imaginative aspects in her recollection of thoughts. However, her main motto was to focus on the wretched position of women in the

male dominated society. Her main fight was against the traditional social norms which repressed women of all classes. She declared her war against all such social barriers and norms. Over all she was a non-traditionalist and she refused to glorify the historical past. She rejected the patriarchal value system that is based on egoism and greed for power. She rejected expansionism, violence, exploitation of man, woman and nature. She proved herself a perfect artist in Indian English poetry, calling the future generation of writers to break the traditional norms that will help the women at large to be free from all barriers of life.

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