



PORTRAYAL OF FEMINISM IN KAMALA DAS'S *POETRY*

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Abstract

Kamala Das is beyond doubt the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. A confessional poet, she displays feminist ethos in her poems. Kamala Das, born in Kerala in 1934, is a bilingual writer. She writes in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty. She is the recipient of several prizes and awards: the P. E. N. Asian Poetry Prize, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for fiction, Asian World Prize for literature, Kendra Sahitya Academy Award etc. She was short listed for the Nobel Prize along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. Her poetical collection includes: *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems I* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996).

Key Words: Feminism,

Kamala Das's English poetry has been published in Europe in French, German, Swedish, and Serb-Croat translations. She "wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish, and Indian readers . . . responded sympathetically to her guileless, guiltless frankness with regard to sexual matters. Ms. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girlie fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love" ("The histrionics of Kamala Das").

While reviewers of Das's early poetry praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Scholars such as Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar find powerful feminist imagery in Das's poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship to their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are offered in traditional Indian society. Much criticism analyzes Das as a "confessional" poet, writing in the

tradition to Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov. Some scholars, such as Vimala Rao, Iqbar Kaur, and Vrinda Naur, find Das's poetry, autobiography and essays frustratingly inconsistent, self-indulgent, and equivocal, although they, too, praise her compelling images and original voice. They suggest that Das is both overexposed and overrated. Other scholars, such as P. P. Raveendran, connect the emphasis on the self in Das's work to larger historical and cultural contexts and complicated, shifting postcolonial identities ("Das, Kamala").

Kamala Das had an unhappy, dissatisfied life even from her childhood. She was a victim to patriarchal prejudices and discriminations as most women are. She converted to Islam in 1999 taking a new name Kamala Surayya. It was an action, she said, she had been contemplating for many years. To quote Kamala Das:

Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is the Purdah. Second is the security that Islam provides to women. In fact, both these reasons are complementary. Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women a sense of security. Only Islam gives protection to women. I have been lonely all through my life. At nights, I used to sleep by embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is my company. Islam is the only religion in the world that gives love and protection to women. Therefore, I have converted. ("Kamala Das")

The paradox of this conversion is that years later she confessed that it was a folly to convert from Hinduism to Islam. The reason is known only to her. It might be a reaction of the people's—both her friends and foes—in hospitable and wounding response to her conversion. Dr. V. Alexander Raju is of opinion that the conversion was an inevitable metamorphosis. To quote him, "In the poems of Kamala Das, we find a rare body and its feelings and she seems incapable of thinking of eternal life as a bodiless existence. This peculiar stance may be the reason why she is drawn to Islamic religion with its different concept of life after life" (Raju 25). Frustrated by love and loneliness, she longed for an eternal life with her body and soul after her life on the earth. She loved her body as much as she loved her soul. Since her bodily desires could not be satiated by her life here she wants to achieve it by a life after death. As Hinduism could not promise her such a life, she converted to Islam. By conversion she reserved a life after life where she could attain the spiritual fulfilment in man-woman relationship which she missed, fortunately or unfortunately, in her earthly life.

Her conversion caused much ire and furor among Hindu fanatics and they started threatening her through letters and phone calls. Most dejected she bade goodbye to her ancestral house and native place and sought refuge in his son's house in Mumbai. She is living there now fighting against old age problems.

Women's literature is different from Feminist literature. Women's literature which results out of women's identity struggles creates new awareness in men and women whereas feminist literature expresses the shared experiences of women's oppression. "Feminist literature highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women—the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender" (Kumar 9). Its emphasis is on the ideology rather than on the literariness of the text. Feminism evolved as an opposition to patriarchy or the dominant sexist ideology.

It is customary for the much-centered aesthetic to consider artistic creation as act analogous to biological creation. Thus an art work is the product of the interaction between the male artist and the external world which is regarded as feminine. A literary text in this view is the outcome of a generative act involving the phallic pen and the virgin blank page. A woman writer feels artistic creation as a form of violation, resulting in the destruction of the female body. In women's writing sexuality is identified with textuality. As a woman judges her self through her body, the female self is always identified with the female body in women's literature (Kumar 12-13).

A woman considers her role of mother more important than a wife. Wholly dependant on man in the world of his making, woman craves to have a child for self-expression as self-affirmation. In addition to sexual exploitation and betrayal the lack of love in man-woman relationship is an improvised form of male oppression. Loveless relationships are unbearable for women. In the words of Prasantha Kumar:

Kamala Das conceives of the male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the women loses her identity. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry . . . Several poems of Das convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage . . . Their love is a disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. The life of Das's persona may be considered a tale of her experiments with love and the repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love. (34-35).

Even as a child, Kamala Das experienced the bitterness of sexism. She was a victim of patriarchal prejudice. In her autobiographical book *My Book*, her "father was an autocrat" (91) and her mother "vague and indifferent" (20). Her parents considered her "a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to a relative when she was only a school girl (82). Thus she was compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She complains about it in her poem "Of Calcutta":

I was sent away, to protect a family's
Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some
Abstraction, sent to another city to be
A relative's wife. (*Collected Poems I* 56-60)

In the same poem she presents the image of a doll to portray a woman's miserable condition: "Yet another nodding / Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to / Warm his bed at night" (*Collected Poems I* 56-60).

The indifference of man to woman's miseries is depicted in her poem "The Stone Age." To quote from it:

You turn me into a bird of stone,
a granite dove,
you build round me a shabby drawing room
and strike my face absentmindedly while you read.
(*The Best of Kamala Das* 97-98)

When Kamala Das understood that love and matrimony are poles apart, she searched for a lover. "Though the love affair gives her excitement in the beginning it is accompanied by disillusionment. Her lover is incapable of giving her a blissful experience" (Raveendran 16). Thus her frustration is expressed through her poem "The Freak":

. . . Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers? . . . (*Only the Soul* 59)

The woman's spirit of rebellion against male domination and ego is found in the poem "The Conflagration." As Dr. N. Sharda Iyer writes, "There is a degree to extricate front this "Soul Killing" subjugation:

"Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive.
A world extend a Pot beyond his six foot frame." (qtd. in Iyer 214)

"The Old Play House" also voices her protest against the male domination and the resultant humiliation:

. . . 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 . . . (*The Old Playhouse* 1)

The plight of a married woman, chained to her husband's house is depicted in the opening lines of the poem "The Old Play House":

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. . . (*The Old Playhouse* 1)

In the words of K. Satchidanandan, "The woman can not change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men. But the voices of the tradition would force her back into sarees, the saree becoming here a sign of convention. She is pushed back into her expected gender roles: wife, cook, embroiderer quarreler with servants: the gender role also becomes a class role" (13).

The husband transforms the wife into the contemptible canine status of a housewife. To quote from the poem "Of Calcutta": "Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog / Jumping my routine hoops each day." (*Collected Poems I* 56-60)

Kamala Das is exclusively concerned with the personal experience of love in her poetry. "For her ideal love is the fulfilment of the levels of body and mind. It is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfilment from the husband leads her to search for it elsewhere. Each relationship only intensifies her disappointment faced with the sense of

absolute frustration and loneliness” (Iyer 203). Though she seeks the perfection of masculine being in every lover, it ends in failure because of the impossibility of realizing this ideal in human form. The experience of frustration sets the psyche in the attitude of rebellion.

Kamala Das's aim as a poet is to underline the predicament of contemporary women beset by the crisis of divided selves. She wants to bring harmony out of this existence. Her poems are remarkable because they reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, acute sense of isolation, fragmentation and loss of identity. Modern Indian woman's ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. She seems to have the combination in herself—wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. While her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love, she is also proud of her being the seducer, the collector especially of those men who pose as lady killers (Iyer 193-194).

There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry—a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu. Kamala Das's is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world . . . Of course, the endless reiteration of such hurt, such disillusion, such cynicism, must sooner or later degenerate into a mannerism, but one hopes—and her exceptional talent offers the ground for such hopes—she will outgrow this obsession in due course and find her way to a season less trying than summer and a world other than the 'unreal' city of dreadful ghosts. (680).

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