

Kamala Das: Her Concerns

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Abstract

One cannot think of a better way of introducing the concerns of Kamala Das- than by, quoting from her autobiography - My Story. "Poets, even the most significant of them are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shop men and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them; they feel the pressure and the torment." (MS, 165). Reading Kamala Das's works have been like journeying through a land that has its share of flood and famine, of lush green gardens and cold graves and scorching sun and rain bow skies, such is the harvest of thought in her work. Her works take leap from love to life, to death with the adeptness of an ace sprinter and the peculiar charm lies in how she manages love and life with the same intensity that she employs to celebrate them.

Keywords- Autobiography, Sensibility, Adulthood, Repression

It would be no exaggeration to say that love themes are responsible for metamorphosis in her poetry that takes her from the purely mundane to the sublime levels. After traversing the long and painful road of love, she reaches the soul's door and knocks at it 'To reach the mute arenas of the soul.' Her works are a product of a personality, which are a healthy combination of fine sensibility, a rebellious nature and highly sensitive responses to personal experiences. Kamala Das through her works represents life in myriad forms, reflections of her childhood i.e. - lost paradise, her adolescence, her entry into adulthood and the status of the girl child in a conventional Hindu orthodox family. Born in Malabar in 1934, when India was still under the British Empire and her father V. M Nair worked for a British Automobile Firm, her mother Balamani Ama was a poet of great distinction and maternal grand uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon, too was a famous poet. Despite the highly intellectual family set up, Das received only a negligible amount of formal education. Marriage was forced on her by her "autocratic father", simply because she "slipped in arithmetic". It was the first crushing blow of patriarchy to an extraordinarily sensitive girl, just on the threshold of womanhood. She hardly had the maturity to comprehend the consequences as reflected in this observation, "Obedience was not one of my strong points. It was a great relief when my relatives suggested marriage as a chastener, and before my sixteenth birthday I slipped out of my parents' home and its uneasy calm." ("Of mother, childhood and all. Kamala Das Reminiscences", from Indian-English, Indian Literature, Vo.139, 1990, pg113).

All these happenings left a lasting impression on her but her finer sensibilities did not allow her to get crushed under their burden. Rather the artist in her converted this personal suffering into a source of creative inspiration. A close reading of her work reflect memories of two distinct forms i.e.- Private and hidden self and collective or cumulative memory. Suffering serves as a new material in her works and by blend of imagination, fantasy and thought she transforms this very anguish into aesthetics.

Love – the craving for it, the lack of it, the pains of it, the ecstasies of it- is the touch stone for Kamala Das’ intensities and provides the very source of her poetic inspiration. Love in its various fulfilling and frustrating reflections is what most of the first two volumes of her poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* and *the Descendants* speak about.

How else can one explain the following?

“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, “Love”

And then on to another extreme in “A Request”

“When I die
Do not throw
The meat and the bones away But pile them up,
And let them tell By their smell
What life was worth= What love was worth=
In the end.”

“The Dance of the Eunuchs” , the opening poem in the first volume “ Summer in Calcutta” is a powerful metaphor for the unfulfilled desires that seek the spiritual dimensions of love expressed in poem after poem but stop short at the ‘vacant ecstasy’ like the “Dance of the Eunuchs”. The eunuchs ‘beating their drums’ and their ‘sorry breasts’, are a symbol of the poet’s frustration in love. She has focused beautifully on their pain and thereby her own, “they were thin limbs and dry: a drought and a rottenness were in each one of them.” It is this drought within that turns their outer state of dance into “convulsions” and, it is this drought that is so exhaustive in the poet’s own mind that even 73 poems later (the number of poems in first two volumes together) she is still reflecting on it in the third volume: “The Old Play House and other poems”.

It is not for nothing that critics have taken exception to what they variously call “obsessive”, “repetitive” and “neurotic” references to love and lust in Kamala Das’s poetry. But what is notable is that these references never jar. In fact we find a reflection of growth of the poet’s personality in each one of them, the poet is on to the road of self discovery and she says it in as many words in the poem “The Old Play House”. “It was not to gather of yet another man that I came to you but to learn /what I was, and by learning to grow; but every lesson you gave about yourself.”

The road is marked with despair, melancholy, ecstasy, frustration, flamboyant,

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frivolity, pain and spirituality. While the road to true love is marked with fluctuations, the poet is quite definite in her disgust of the purely physical relations.

“..... Can't this man
Nimble fingertips 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 Freaks”

And then “In Love” “This skin communicated Thing that I dare not yet in His presences call our love.” Kamala Das never quite ceases to note the utter hopelessness of mere sexual relations:

“I went to him for half an hour
As pure woman, pure misery-----
I enter others'
Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home.”

“Glass”

The doubts expressed about the man woman love, the disillusionment with it, are as often as in the conviction that love is the most natural and ennobling experience. “The Looking Glass”. The Glass is the most telling instance of this duality of emotion above love. When she finds true love she goes into ecstasy about it but not without the realization that after all it is built on the perishable human bodies:

‘Oh yes, getting a man to love is easy,
But living without him afterward May have to be faced.
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 gleamed Like burnished grass, now drab and destitute.
Not with standing, the dark vision, that destitution which has to be faced ‘afterwards’ the poet's search for love is unending. She is speaking the language of love unhaltingly. It is her one great craving even from strangers.
Why do I so often dream
Of a house where each silent Corridor leads me to warm
Yellow rooms----- and loud voices welcome.

“Corridor”

Actually all this hunting for love is marked by a constant nostalgia for the love and affection that she has known from her grand-mother-a love received in childhood before the skin intent on survival learnt its lessons of self- betrayal. The adult love, therefore is quite naturally always marked with disenchantment as she admits in the poem:

There was a house now far away where once I received love-you cannot believe
darling, can you, that I lived in such house and was proud, and loved- I who have lost
my way beg now at strangers' doors to receive love, at least in small change?

“My Grandmother’s House”

However, love sometimes is a matter of life and death for her; a means of survival: O
sea, I am fed up

I want to be simple

I want to be loved and

If love is not to be had, I want to be dead

“Suicide”

And yet we find her tragic vision overlapping her pining for true love:

“My grandmother’s-- she was the first I loved- trunks When opened, after she died,
contained only dolls, and you,

My last, what do you treasure, hold dear?

“Captive”

Her sense of futility in love finds yet another expression in “The End of Spring” “The spring
dehydrating like a grape,

Meek cow- smells on the breath of winds,

And your

voice, now on

the telephone--

what is the use of love, all this love, If all it gives in fear the fear of storms as leap in
you

And me the fear of hurting you?

The title of the poem itself is reflective of the hope offered by love and hopelessness
promised by its inherent perishable nature. Love, though she is always seeking it, brings her
more pain than pleasure.

It is not merely the personal experiences but the social concerns, which are
predominant in her works. Her sensibility is fundamentally Meliorist. A sustained
undercurrent to reform runs through the entire gamut of poetry and prose. The influence of
Mahatama Gandhi is visible as she is a staunch believer of non-violence and universal
brotherhood. She is critical of the violence that is legitimized in the name of nationalism,
patriotism, religion and race. A desire for moral and spiritual edification and universal
brotherhood runs through the poem like “Afterwards”, “The White Flowers”, “The Fear of the
Year”, “The Flag”, “Inheritance” and Terror”.

As a champion of venerable poetic tradition of non-violence, Das presents a critique of
hegemonic culture with its retrograde value system. Her instinct militates against every form
of oppression and inequality, irrespective of gender or class. In this Meliorist vision one may
detect the “Private Voice” of Das, as a resonant voice of sanity and love. Her sympathy is not

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only confined to the Darvadians. She castigates in her poem “Delhi1984”. In bitterest terms the state sponsored terrorism unleashed on the innocent Sikhs in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s assassination in1984:

“The turbans were unwound, the long limbs Broken and bunched to seem like faggots
So that when such bundles were gifted

To their respective home the women Swooned as their eyes lighted on a scared Knee
or a tattooed arm-----

If such an act enjoys the sanction of the scriptures then the scriptural chant is nothing
but a lunatic’s guffaw:

The Scriptural Chant sounded like a lunatic’s guffaw, Any God worth his name would
hasten To disown these dry-eyed adherents Of the newest cult-----

The adherence of the new cult of terrorism is “dry-eyed” and insensate. The poet
mocks them because

their vigour lies not in their loins but in their guns:

----- and this brand new cult spawned by an uneasy era turns

Out its own dry-eyed adherents, men whose Vigour must repose not in their loins

But in the guns they tote. They shall

not Populate this earth but shall

cleave it

Into two-----

“If Death is yours wish”

It is pertinent to mention here that according to Das social change is possible without violence. While penetrating deep into the layers of her work one can unfold the layers of erotica and understand the private voice of the poet. As she says in “Loud Posters” :

I have put

My private voice away, adopted the

Typewriter’s click as my only speech: I

Click-Click, click-click tiresomely into yourself Ears, Stranger, though you may have
no need of Me. I go on, not knowing why-----

Here the typewriter’s click strategically conceals her ‘private voice’, embodying thereby her multi-vocalism. She has often chosen to speak for the other, the muted sections of the society and her ‘song’, therefore is “Someone else’s Song”. Thus, the poem expresses a cosmic human concern. As can be seen, her writings have a very clearly stated agenda to save mankind. Supporting the ban on Rusdie’s *Satanic Verses*, she said: “On my list of priorities peace would come first and literature only second, I would not mind if all the writings that have been produced in this world one day get burnt if it can ensure peace. The ultimate aim of literature and art must be to establish peace on this earth.” (IL 155157)

She is anxious about the lives of the people after violence, which leads to devastation, hunger, poverty and life bereft of love and companionship, cloistered existence. In the poem Afterwards: son is the representative of human race and ill-conceived notions of progress. She

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strongly feels that the world can be made beautiful only by love and human fellowship by uncorrupted values, by simplicity and innocence of its inhabitants and above all by keeping the magnificent creation on.

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