

Portrayal of Love and Lust in Kamala Das' Poems

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Abstract—Kamala Das is a poet whom one can compare with no other contemporary Indian woman poets or poets of second sex who lived and wrote before her birth as her poetry is much unique and extraordinary with jet speed in themes, tone and the way she handled her method with polish and refinement. The poetry of Kamala Das attracts and calls for a special attention from all the quarters for what's called "frankness", "openness", a sense of urgency over-powering and overflowing the poems, her anguish and intense voice echoing for more freedom, the covert-tone of asking for due recognition for her individual personality and identity.

Index Terms—contemporary, overpowering, robustness, democratic, emotional, confessing, dreaming, relationship, etc.

By analyzing her poems, Kamala Das can no doubt be called as a love poet or a poet who deals daringly about love and sex in her poems. This open treatment or assertion of love was a new concept in Indian English Literature. In this aspect, Kamala Das can be compared with her European counterpart Sylvia Plath. She is not only celebrating the physical love but love in all aspects as rightly pointed by Dwivedi when he says,

she is dedicated to the celebration, she may not love the robustness and the democratic temper of Whitman, nor the intellectual stamina of the 'Confessional' poets like Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Judith Wright, but she has in her the most essential qualification to do so. (*Kamala Das and Her Poetry* 28)

She regards love as an emotional attachment, and a deep one between a man and a woman. She too regards the sexual relationship between them as something essential but secondary. The difference between the general view of love and Kamala Das's view is that she not only speaks about it openly and

freely in her Poetry, but puts a great emphasis on it. She does not think it indecent or vulgar or even undignified to speak about the need of the sexual relationship in explicit and specific terms. Murali Manohar echoes this by pointing, "Kamala Das distinguishes herself from the pre -Independence Indian English poets such as Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo." (10) Kamala Das unlike her counterparts treats love and sex as important parts of her physical and mental makeup.

Kamala Das's poems reveal those experiences of hers which women would shirk from confessing even to themselves. Kamala Das's sexual experiences with her husband and with many other men have most candidly been described in all her poems. The core of her Poetry is the painful, almost agonizing, though that her love has remained unfulfilled and it is this thought which has ruined all her happiness and endeared her Poetry pessimistic. The reasons for her frustration and disappointments are because of her early marriage at the age of fifteen with an insensitive and unsympathetic man. She tells us repeatedly that her marriage floundered on the rocks of ruin right from the start. Her husband, who devoted all his time to the official files, had no leisure to spare for his sensitive wife who used to long for an emotional attachment. There is no doubt he had earned for her security and money but that alone could not satisfy an extraordinarily gifted woman. She writes of her husband in *My Story* as, "My husband was immersed in his office work and after work there was dinner, followed by sex. Where was there any time left for him to want to see the sea or the dark buffaloes of the slope?"(98)

To live in such dreadful situations which will be definitely difficult for a woman like Kamala Das . Therefore, Dwivedi says, "Kamala feels frequently like a helpless bird put in a cage." (*Kamala Das and*

Her Poetry 29) She obviously wants love and not lust from her husband. Love emerges when both are concerned about each other, whereas lust is something that one gets without the thought of the other. Kamala Das writes in her poem “An Introduction”

I asked for love when 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 sad woman-body felt so beaten. (“An Introduction”)

She was terribly upset because as a girl of fifteen she was dreaming of so many things about marriage and marital life. But unlike an ordinary woman, she could not hide her feelings she records her shock, pain, anger, exploitation and apathy she experiences in her life. G.A Ghanshyam in his article records, “Das refused to bow down before the dictates of society and rebelled against them but underneath her angry outburst was a woman’s heart in pain for the exploitation and apathy she had to face in the men in her life.” (114)

Without any hindrance she talks of her love because she was so shocked as all her dreams about true love were shattered and also forgets that she is a member of reputed orthodox family. She turns into a feminist and started to express her restrictions and exploitations. Through the window of her poetry she expresses her yearning for love in “Calcutta” as

Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to
Warm his bed at night, he folded
Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
Pleasure that has come his way, rich harvest of
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine, the embers
died
Within me then. (“Calcutta”)

What Kamala Das experiences in her marital life is frustration, suffocation, lovelessness are things which are experienced by women right from Adam and Eve’s time.

Farhnaz Yousefi in his article “Man - Woman Relationship” speaks of this problems as,

The cosmic cause of procreation is fulfilled by the tug-of-war and the attraction between opposites. This relationship has always been held up as one ordained by gods and therefore not to be questioned. However, Kamala Das questions this blind acceptance of matrimony and its inherent quality of subjugation of woman. (globalwebspot.com)

In poem after poem, she questions about the unfairness of this relationship and whips the society with her bold and powerful words. She is even ready to embrace death than of living a loveless life. The poem “Suicide” expresses this deep agony:

I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead. (“Suicide”)

The love she expects is not carnal and it is something more than that. She wants to be loved truly and genuinely and in turn wants this love for a man to the love for humanity. She craves for the love of the world. Instead of tolerating the pompous physical love she is even ready to face the death. Her search for true love makes her to oscillate between life and death. She changes her mind and writes in the same poem.

In him I swim
All broken with longing
In his robust blood I float
Drying of my tears. (“Suicide”)

In order to make her love genuine she even willingly stoops down to serve drinks to the man. For her, love is important but to him it is the drink. She further writes

But, when he did love
Believe me
All I could do was sob like a fool. (“Suicide”)

At one point she comes to the conclusion that all men are the same. They are least bothered about the hearts of women, their yearnings and desires.

Kamala Das's experience of disgust is also revealed in the "Freaks" The word "freak" means abnormal person who is deviated from accepted social norms. The lover and the beloved are freaks in this poem because they behave abnormally. With great intensity and poignancy Das expresses her emotions in this poem.

The lover and the beloved are the husband and wife and are alone together. She beautifully portrays the betrayer of love and lust as

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam. ("Freaks")

Dwivedi writes of this relationship "He in the poem is the man persona and 'Me' is the woman persona. They are together in a room. The lover talks and turns his reddened face towards her. But he is not like the lover in the family tale; he is not rather repulsive to her." (*Kamala Das and Her poetry* 93) This relationship is a forced one. As a woman, she has to submit herself to the lustfulness of her lover. This is the actual situation of Kamala Das, a situation that Devendra Kohli characterises as "a rather helpless situation." (*Virgin Whiteness* 22) It is an abnormal situation which the poetess dramatically presents. They do not seek union of minds and hearts. So they are incapable of making love. She strives to find emotional fulfillment and security but all her strivings prove to be futile. Kamala Das considers her heart as

An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence...
I'm a freak. ("Freaks")

In the absence of love, they simply satisfy their "skin's hunger". Farhnaz views this as,

There is no emotional contact at all. This poem paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive

and the woman is burning with desire, but she is helpless. Her empty heart is therefore filled only with a stinging silence comparable to coiled snakes which could sting a person at the least provocation. (globalwebspot.com)

This emotional situation - the lovelessness compels her to call herself a 'freak'.

There are a number of poems which present her cravings for love and to be loved. "The Music Party" presents this land of desire of the woman to feel the warmth of love.

I wish my
Eyes were similarly
Brave and looked at you
At least once before the music
Stopped and you left
Quickly, without good bye. ("The Music Party")

In another poem "Beauty was a Short Season" her love awareness makes her identify both happiness and beauty.

Happiness yes
That was a moment or two
And beauty
A short season
Like gnarled fruit trees
The fecund season? ("Beauty was a Short Season")

She feels the loss of love which she has been expecting from her lovers. Her expectations thus shattered, she feels troubled as in the poem "In Love"

While I walk
The verandah, sleepless
A million questions awake in me
And all about him and this
Skin communicated thing
That I dare not yet in his
Presence calls our love. ("In Love")

It deals with the tension between love and lust. Sterile love will only lead to frustration. Das speaks of these frustrations and disillusionments in this poem. She craves for love but her explorations of love end in sex and lust, "the skins lazy hungers."

K.R.S Iyengar rightly points out: "Under the Indian sun, although sensuality lures irresistibly, yet it fails to satisfy; feeling and introspection but sound the depths of the oceanic sense of frustration; and the calm of fulfillment eludes forever. Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself again and again." (65)

She voices out her problems in describing to a man who made love to her in a rough manner. There is subtle irony in the poem because the poetess is not in love with the man who uses her body. She compares her lover, whose mouth is like "the burning mouth of sun" and whose limbs are like "carnivorous plants." The hollowness of sexual love binds the lover together.

Oh, yes his
mouth, and his limbs are like pale and
carnivorous plants reaching
out for me and the sad lie
of my unending. ("Summer in Calcutta")

The memory of the experience lingers in the mind when she walks sleeplessly in verandah and puts the question 'where is love?' The question remains unanswered.

It is not this 'skin communicated thing' that he should be interested in, but also in understanding and fulfilling her. But as there is no alternative she has to put up with him. Therefore she says in the "Convicts":

We lay
On bed, glassy eyed, fatigued, just
The toys dead children leave behind,
And we asked each other, what is
The use, what is the bloody we? ("Convicts")

Furthermore she admits:

When he and I were one we were neither male
Nor female. There were no more words left,
All words lay imprisoned in the ageing
Arms of night. ("Convicts")

Her oneness in love does not exist longer and she says that the oneness they felt is a thing of past. Shiv. K. Kumar is of the opinion that, "Kamala Das

portrays her lover as someone who only arouses "the skin's lazy hungers." (6)

Furthermore, she asks her husband a direct question in the poem "The End of Spring."

what is the use
Of love, all this love, if all it gives is
Fear, you the fear of storms asleep in you
And the fear of hurting you. ("The End of Spring.")

Kamala Das questions the 'use' of 'love', rather lust and says she gets fear instead of love. The husband as Kurup puts it, is obviously "Uncomprehending and indifferent to his wife's emotional needs." (19) At one stage, Kamala Das decides to commit suicide and at other stage she feels she does not have the courage to do it.

Moving away from the thought of dying, she expresses how it is easier for her to hold the sea than her husband.

Holding you is easy,
Clutching at moving water

To make him love
But when he did love. ("Sea")

The comparison between the husband and the sea reveals how crude and harsh her husband is. Though her husband is interested in lust, she tries to offer love to him, but it is of no use. She declares her state in her poem "Captive."

Added to this, are her nostalgic memories of her childhood and her grandmother, who has been a source of affection and inspiration to her. Her grandmother's house 'Nalapat House' is the symbol of impenetrable source of security and protection which she missed in her married life. The atmosphere of terror and violence of her married life is contrasted by that of peace, softness and security of the old house which she remembers only with a sense of pride and love. Her "sweet frail great grandmother" gave her freedom and fed her with the juices of life, are now only memories, which she recollects in "My Grandmother's House."

There is a house now far away where once

I received love.... You cannot believe darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved.....

Such nostalgia makes her aware of her "sense of loss" at the hands of her husband. He with a finger sticking into her dreaming eye can only turn herself into "a bird of stone." So it is very difficult for him to believe her words. She writes, "..... I who have lost / My way and now beg at stranger's doors to / Receive love, at least in small change?" ("The Stone Age")

Since her husband is not capable of offering love and as her grandmother died for ever, she has to 'beg' degrading herself at Strangers doors to receive love. Therefore she seeks a happy relationship by accepting herself both a sinner and a saint. "I am the sinner. I am the saint."

She is a sinner because she has had extra-marital relationships with men other than her husband. She is a saint because she is in search of love. Kamala Das is supported by Devendra Kohli when he says, "When Kamala Das speaks of love outside marriage she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security." (2) However, in each extra-marital relationship she finds the blurred image of her husband's lust. As Murali Manohar points out, "There is nothing new, rather nothing of love, but only lust." (44)

She starts to seek her relationship in the mythical love of Radha Krishna and tries to identify the image of Krishna in her lover. According to Sadhana Agarwal, "Without any hesitation she accepts the fact that Krishna is the ultimate lover" (www.newman publication.com) Kamala Das in one of her interviews to *The Savy* magazine talks of her bonding with Krishna as, "I grew up reading Geetha - Govindha, about Radha-krishna Which Hindu girl has not been interested in Krishna, the great lover? So to us Krishna has not been vulgar at all. True it has just been normal."(17)

Naturally it has become a habit of Kamala Das to visualize herself with Radha who is waiting on the banks of river Yamuna for her Krishna, the mythical lover. This celestial love compels Kamala Das to seek her true love in this mundane world. In the poem "Radha" she writes,

The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, an all doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me. ("Radha")

Sadhana Agarwal records this situation as "At last in a situation of tension she discards the earthly love and optimizes her love in the form of divine love of Mira for Lord Krishna."(www.newman publication.com)

Having failed in her search for an ideal lover, she turns to Lord Krishna and accepts him as her ideal lover. Anisur Rahman has rightly said, "Her disgust in failures led her to frantic search for the mythic Krishna, the ideal lover, in whom she has established her eternal bond."(11) Therefore she says in the poem "Krishna"

Your body is my prison, Krishna
I can't see beyond it.
Your darkness binds me,
Your love words shut out the
Wise world's din. ("Krishna")

This is also reflected in the poem "Radha - Krishna"
This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return some day
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality.

Poems like "Sunset", "Blue Bird" can also be interpreted in terms of the Radha krishna myth. Radha's loneliness as a result of Krishna's abandonment to her humble pride, parallels the poet's acute sense of desolation caused by her husband's indifference.

Love is like a pivot to Kamala Das and is revolving around it. Sadhana Agarwal remarks,

Her poetry encompasses a woman's longing, hopes and fears. Her repulsion for physical love and lack of sincere love occupy a very significant place. She craves for union with man for the fulfillment of love. But she is disillusioned into sheer lustfulness and bodily pleasures. (42)

What Kamala Das advocates in her poetry, is the concept of true love, says Rangacharya,

Shringara Rasa, the Rasa of Love which she finds missing in her life. The quality of losing oneself in the enjoyment is the distinctive feature of the Rasa of Love. It is not pleasure or joy or even ecstasy as such but the state where one loses one's identity. This is exactly a feeling that distinguishes sexual experience. This particular feeling in literary appreciation is called 'Rasa' a word which has no equivalent in English. It is no surprise in view of the origin of the conception to find that Rasa of Love (Shringara) is called the king of all Rasa. Sex experience is at the root of conception. (144)

No doubt, such situation forces a woman like Kamala Das to surrender her body to a hungry hawk. Kamala Das accepts that she is merely an object for the satisfaction of a man's lust. She vehemently asserts that even by challenging the traditional social norms should derive satisfaction out of her sexuality. Sadhana states, "But it is pathetic that her physical love brings only frustrations and humiliations without considering her frustrations and humiliations She tries to unite her physical love with the eternal one. Not even having an iota of shame she continues her journey in search of true love." (46)

Rarely there are poems in which she talks of her joy of love, the love she experiences as a mother and not as a lover.

Love is not important, that makes the blood
Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his
Lust, but is shed as end of each
Embrace. Only that matters which forms as
Toad stool under lightning and rain the soft.
Stir in the womb the foetus growing. ("Jaisurya")

This love is something beyond the physical and she merges the personal with the universal. Shadana rightly states: "Search for love is part of a larger quest for motherhood and home which cannot be understood by the commercialized urban sensibility. City knows no real love to a beggar." (47)

Kamala Das in her poetry also deals with the dual relationship of love and lust. Right from her marriage, she has been craving for a true and honest fulfillment of love but what she gets in return is lust and not true love. Just to experience true love, Kamala Das even though married goes from one man to another.

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