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The Beloved and the Betrayed: The Poetry of Kamala Das

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Introduction

Kamala Das Surraiya, known popularly as Kamala Das is a renowned figure in the Indian literary scenario for her remarkable contribution to Indian women poetry. She was born on March 31, 1934 and bred in the Southern Malabar in Kerala. Being a bilingual writer, Das also wrote poems and short stories in her native language Malayalam, most of which were published under her pen name Madhavikutty. She herself is the centre of her own poetry, she portrays her deeply felt desire for love, for emotional involvement, and her desire for fulfillment in a relationship. In giving full accentuation to women's causes Mrs. Das is simply 'every woman who seeks love'; she is 'the beloved and betrayed', expressing her 'endless female hungers', 'the mutual whisper at the core of womanhood' (Naik 209).

Her personal experience is deeply rooted in her poetry. At the age of fifteen, she was married to Mr. K.Madhava Das, who was a government servant, where her life became disastrous in the company of her lustful husband. He indulged in sex with his maid servants, he had behaved brutally with his wife. He had no time for her. He was very busy with his life and as an orthodox traditional wife, she was expected to perform all her responsibilities and to look to the needs and comforts of her husband. Kamala Das's distinct personality is attenuated by this chain of incidents which dwarfed her forever, as she reveals in the poem "The Old Playhouse":

... you called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. 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 and other Poems* 1)

Love is part of everyone's life but it is rare that an Indian woman expressed herself and her experience of different layers of love so 'openly', 'honestly', and so 'boldly'. In all of her writings, Kamala Das searches for love and affection. She longs for love, begs for it even from outsiders, but to no avail. Her thirst for love remains unsatisfied. She was one of the first Indian writers to explore sexual themes in her work.

Kamala Das's poetry reflects her deeply dissatisfied personal experience that is the sole cause of her quest for love. She is choked with grief and wants to overcome that grief through love. She tried to liberate herself from the bondages of patriarchal and tabooed society through her poetry which is the mirror of the modern outlook of an Indian woman. Her poems are revolt and the revolt is the outcome of all her dissatisfaction and psychological traumas. According to her, women are used only for sex. She wrote:

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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
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight on my breasts and womb crushed me. (*An Introduction* 60)

Being a radical feminist she became a spokesperson for womankind as a whole and many of her poems are read from this perspective/context. It is beyond doubt that 'love' emerges as one of its central themes. Kamala Das confesses her loveless life, unfulfilled desires, carnal hunger, quest for love, painful sincerity, sexual frankness, emotional vacuity, frustrated soul. She is criticized for her obsessed love and this made her "a prisoner of loneliness":

I also know that by confessing
by peeling off my layers
I reach
closer to the soul
and
to the bone's
supreme indifference. ("Composition", *The Best of Kamala Das* 81)

The different layers of love in Kamala Das' collection of poetry show her development in her life and love, which are connected to each other. Reading 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' against the backdrop of Kamala Das's painful marital life, the "eunuchs" represent "sterility" to express the poet's sterile loveless life. The dance of the eunuchs is painful as they bleed and also reflect a sense of torment hidden under their bodily movements. This is an expression of her life which has become mechanical and emotionally sterile due to lack of love. Again, the poet says that the eunuchs sang of the "lover's dying" and "children left unborn", where, both the 'lovers' and 'children' cannot be a part of their life which is melancholic and represents Das's unfulfilled desires connected to love. The phrase "vacant ecstasy" expresses the vacuum created in her life because of her loveless life and emotional vacuity. The atmosphere created is gloomy and the barren land cannot be cured with rain (symbol of fertility) as it stinks of dust and urine of lizard and mice. So, the barren love life of Kamala Das is without any ray of hope of getting fertile:

...their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and or children left unborn...
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. (*The Dance of the Eunuchs, Collected Poems* 106)

In "The Freaks" the poet expresses her great despair in love as she says:

The heart
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 9)

Here the speaker who is the poet herself craves for love which is denied by her husband and she had to surrender herself to his lustfulness which she hates. She is conscious of her needs: true love, psychological security, liberty. She is a woman of identity who keeps her rights forward instead of just getting suppressed by the family system.

In the poem “In Love”, the poet first interrogates herself whether the sexual desire in her is love or lust and then finally she expresses her disgust towards physical love which cannot give her fulfillment. She says:

This skin-communicated
Thing that I dare not yet in
His presence call our love. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 11)

She confesses that the sexual desire is not the love she always longed for. The use of the image of dead body is to express that bodily desires end with life but not love which is an emotional bond. Here the “burning” sun is the symbol of ‘burning’ mouth of the husband in love. “In Winter” also carries the warmth of sexual act as she frankly admits:

And, I loved his body without shame,
On winter evenings as cold winds
Chuckled against the white window-panes. (*Summer in Calcutta* 17)

The opening line “There is a house now far away where once I received love” shows the poet’s longing for love in “My Grandmother’s House”. Kamala Das expresses the love and security she felt when she was with her grandmother but then her marriage brought an insecurity and lovelessness in her life. This sense of despair has been well expressed through the lines:

I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger’s doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?” (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* 32)

“Blood” is another poem in which she recalls her love for the old house and her grandmother who is dead. Often in her love we find her preoccupation with thoughts of death. She says:

I know the rats are running now
Across the darkened halls
They do not fear the dead
I know the white ants have reached my house
.....
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 70)

Love as it is manifested in her life causes a sense of death, one feels that it is very difficult to draw the demarcation line between love and lust and life and death. “The Seashore” opens with an image of death and show a dependence of love on death and vice versa. This love-death theme is revealed in the lines:

On same evenings I drive past a cremation ground
And seem to hear the crunch of bones in those vulgar
Mouth of fire, or at times I see the smoke in strands
Slowly stretch and rise, like serpent’s satiated
Slow content, and the only face I remember
Then is yours... (*The Best of Kamala Das* 33)

“A Relationship” is a confession of her sexual desire. The “sterile sting” of abdication is combined with “my body’s wisdom” which expresses that the poet finds peace and love in her betrayed lover’s arms:

Why care I for their quick sterile sting, while
My body’s wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayers arms... (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 14)

Here she juxtaposes love and sex. This layer of love is corporeal love. It was her suffering that forced her to search a place in another's arm, to knock at another's door: "Yearned for a man from/Another town" ("The wild Bougainvillea", *Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 35). "Bougainvillea" are symbol of nature's protection, care and concern for those neglected by human beings on the one hand, and of Phoenician revival and rejuvenation on the death of memories on the other.

In "The Testing of the Sirens", the poet feels lonely as she wakes up after a night full of love. Her craving for love always remained unfulfilled. The poet seeks a refuge in physical love outside marriage; each of such bouts strikes a disturbing note of emptiness within. Kamala Das found a desert in her life, and Saleem Peeradina has vividly stated this in the following lines, ably divided into categories, "she writes about love with the obsessiveness of a women who can realize her being fully only through love." She says:

...I
Shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was
No more night, no more love, or peace, only
The white, white sun burning, burning, burning...
Ah, why does love come to me like pain
Again and again and again? (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 32)

"The Sunshine Cat" is a brilliant poem by Das, where she wants to wash away the bitter experiences and memories she gathered from her married life and seeks love from some other but every man is same as she starts with the word "they"; who felt her "cold" and "half dead" and not fit to be loved:

...they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.
They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 23)

Kamala Das craved for emotional bonding. She seeks relief in the streak of sunlight beneath the door which is the ray of hope, her sunshine cat with rays on it. Her husband's cruel treatment made her realize that "tears" are her only companion and not love. In "The Looking Glass", Kamala Das mirrors the crude reality of a male dominated society where a woman "gifts him all" to satisfy male ego but still do not get security in love. A man's lust dominates over the female body but that love is centered just to the body but a woman loves the man accepting his ego and gives up all her modesty and shyness. But then the man leaves her but what remains is the looking glass which reminds her of all the moments of spent in front of it. It's a material connected to her nostalgia and expressive of every humiliation and frustration suffered by her then and now as she is living without the man of her life i.e. "living without life" according to her. It is a picture of humiliation and a sense of despair in love which has been expressed through the lines:

.....gift him all,
Gift him what makes you women, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. A living without life... (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 54)

"An Introduction" is an autobiographical poem where she shows her growth and how she became the figure of love and sex in a male dominated society. She expresses her pain in growth. Her first experience of love, both physical and emotional is projected clearly. As the other poems reflect her different modes of frustrated love, this reflects her positive attitude towards love:

... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is everyman
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 5*)

Another poem of her childhood is “Punishment in Kindergarten”. It expresses her quest for love as a child. She wrote:

Today the world is a little more my own.
No need to remember the pain
A blue-frosted woman caused, throwing
Words at me like pots and pan, to drain
That honey coloured day of peace.
‘Why don’t you join the others, what
A peculiar child you’ are! (*Summer in Calcutta 43*)

“In Ferns” expresses the irony of physical love which has got nothing rather than sad end. The images of candles, fern, shores and mountains used as a metaphor in order to express her powerful emotions. The central image, ‘fern’ is a feather-shaped leaf and not flowers. Thus, she has described her love budding like ferns but in vain. She sees her femininity as a kind of sterile bondage. “The Old Playhouse” is a poem of her personal life where she acknowledges that love is no more than a way of learning about one’s self or the completion of one’s own personality. It is a strong protest against the expected traditions and restrictions of the married life: domesticity, routine lust, artificial comfort and security, and finally male domination. She says:

...love is narcissus at the water’s edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind to erase the water. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 69*)

“The Stone Age” portrays the picture of the poetess who is being offered love by another man rather than by her husband. Here an image has been created of an ‘old fat spider’ who weaves ‘webs of bewilderment’ where the husband is the ‘spider’ and the web is around the poetess, which turns her into ‘a bird of stone, a granite dove’. The husband irritates her privacy and urges her to seek freedom in another man’s arms. This freedom is gained by her here. This layer is of her freedom in love. Another shade of love takes the shape of myth - old Hindu myths of Radha-Krishna or Krishna-Mirabai. The myths justify the celebration of love outside her marriage. She finds her identity in the figure of Radha or Mira, who had relationship outside marriage and prays Lord Krishna, the true epitome of love:

Vrindavan lives on in every women’s mind,
and the flute, luring her
From her 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... (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 131*)

Here we find a shift from sexual love to spiritual love. “Ghanshyam” is also expressive of her love for Lord Krishna, a savior from a life of dejection:

Ghanshyam
You have like a koel built your
Nest in the arbour of my heart,
My life, until now a sleeping jungle,

Is at last astir with music. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 87)

“The Descendants” is a collection of twenty three poems. This volume deals with both the themes of love and sex. Her defeat in finding love is accepted and her desire for the relationship of male and female not based on physical fulfillment but as a union of two souls with all care and affection is described here. She portrays this union in the poem “Conflagration”:

...but lay on me, light and whitembers
Over inert firs, burn on, elemental
Fire, warm the coal streams of his eternal flesh like
A last, they boiling flow, so turbulent with life. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 44)

She finds sex both destructive and constructive. In “The Suicide” again she talks about feminine need for love and the sea is given a masculine image where she wants to swim. The desire for death is again well drawn as she says:

Between me and the light.
Ogea, 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, just dead. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems* 39)

Conclusion

All the layers make it clear that Kamala Das made a bold attempt to unveil the theme of love through her poetry. The first layer of her love is her want of emotional attachment but then her disillusionment and frustration came as she realized the overpowering of lust and it took a different turn and she brought out the layer of death and spirituality. Thus she added a new dimension to this genre of love poetry.

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