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Contradictory Perspectives in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Among some of the poets who started writing in the 1960s, Kamala Das has had the greatest impact on Indian women's poetry in English. She is a modernist poet with a wealth of poetic expressions. Her poetry is all about the woman's hardships and indignities in a male-dominated culture where she has been conditioned to live in conformity. Her poetry explores a variety of subjects, including feminine sensibility, love and sex, the struggle between love and lust, the man-woman relationship, disenchantment and resistance, illness, disability, and mortality. Through exploring a variety of subjects in her writing, she deals with an infinite number of contradictions. This paper aims to illustrate the conflicting viewpoints and assertions which Das employs while digging deeper into her numerous concepts.

Keywords: Love, Lust, Relationship, Suffering, Women.

Introduction

Among the poets who began writing in the 1960s the one, who has made the deepest impression in Indian poetry in English is Kamala Das. She is a modernist poet who possesses comprehensive poetic faces. Her poetry is about the sufferings and miseries of the woman in a male-dominated society where she has been taught to live a life of subjugation. Das's poetry treats several themes like feminine sensibility, love and sex, the conflict between love and lust, man-woman relationship, disillusionment and rebellion, disease, sickness and death. While depicting various themes in her poetry, she has experimented with innumerable paradoxes. In her poems, she mirrors "aching and breaking of heart, anger and frustration, fear and loneliness and grudge and grouse against men" (Padmanabhan 13). Das's love poetry has two phases: In the first phase, she is obsessed with physical love which gives her only loneliness and emotional sterility; while, the second phase shows her experiences of ideal love – a love which does not interrupt her freedom and, contrary to this, the second phase gives her ease and contentment. Das, in her life, remains traumatized in search of love. Eventually, she is left desolated and deserted with her unfulfilled desires.

Feminine sensibility is a prominent theme in Kamala Das's poetry. Das has mirrored the pathos and misery of woman brilliantly. Das's protagonist is a victim. She is passive and inert in her actions. Man always takes the advantage of his manly powers and never leaves any chance to exploit woman, physically, emotionally and morally. He imposes his inappropriate fondness and control on a woman. A sense of humiliation and exploitation of woman runs in many of Das's poems. As M.K. Naik remarks:

Many of Das's poems have a dramatic quality, and like Browning's women, her persona also sees herself in different situations against a clearly visualized scene and setting in each. The

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intensity of her lyrical utterance sometimes results in a lack of verbal discipline, and her constant harping on sex cannot escape the law of diminishing aesthetic returns. There are also moments when she lapses into romantic claptrap, but the final impression that Kamala Das's poetry leaves is one of a bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within. (147)

Das uses the weapon of irony to express man's unrestricted animalism in the name of love and marriage which is executed in the name of woman's protection. The poetess states in the lines:

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 me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. (TOPH 26)

The writer has put two contradictory facts. It was the time when the protagonist enters her husband's home after marriage. She was innocent and full of dreams. She doesn't know the meaning of worldly love and is also unaware of the male view about love. First-line shows a clear paradox. She resonates in her demand that what she should beg from her husband.

Dissociation of sensibility is apparent from her expression. She takes marriage as love and expects affection and care from a man whom she has married. But in reality, this does not happen. These lines evince contrariness. The protagonist is shown too young to understand the meaning of marriage and love. It reveals a woman's innocence and incorruptibility at a young age. But contrary to this, the stanza tells man's endorsement of marriage as a legalized institution to exploit woman in the name of love. For him, love is only desires. The protagonist's husband enjoys bodily love callously without bothering about her tender feelings. This traumatic experience of animal love shatters the protagonist mentally and physically. She expresses her traumatic experiences in a contradictory manner: "He did not beat me / But my sad woman-body felt so beaten" (TOPH 26). The line reflects the protagonist's innocence and helplessness as a woman. He does not beat her, nonetheless, she feels shattered by the manner he treats her. These two lines are steeped in her helplessness giving vent to her unexpected pathetic suffering in this act. For, her "The woman's voice coming from the two kinds of love amply clarifies that mere carnality is never sought after nor it is fulfilling. Men may enjoy it but not women in such situation, and it is plenty, the woman merely feels being used" (Pandeya 34). The theme of love and sex is central to Das's poetry. Her poetry and her life revolve around a "hectic search for love" (Ahmed 79). Das enjoys love relationships with several lovers, besides her husband. Every time she experiences the same pain and anguish at the end of love. For instance, the poem 'Looking Glass' mirrors the poet's dying quest for more love.

She utters as follow,

A man to love is easy but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. A living without life when you move
Around, meeting strangers, (TD 31)

The protagonist contradicts her view. She tells that life with a man is both easy and tough. It is very easy for a woman to love a man. Because she is a tender and weak creature who needs affection, security and protection in her life. But life becomes hard when the same man ignores her existence, and, leaves her alone. For her, it is very painful to wait for him. The stanza shows her inability to bear the loss of her lover who supposedly satisfies her in love. In his absence, she feels dead. "A living without life" (TD 31) displays repugnance. Life here means existence. It is impossible to live without existence. Her passionate physical and emotional needs perturb her and make her recall the past love experiences with her lover. Emotionally, she, almost, becomes lifeless. She is unable to bear this separation. The protagonist feels sick and looks for him impatiently.

This longing becomes her obsession and she feels depressed and despaired. This is the state of mind when she feels physically alive, but emotionally dead. The same miserable plight of woman is depicted by Shiv K. Kumar in his poem 'Indian Women'. Kumar's women are also seen waiting for their men's return. "Patiently they sit / Like empty pitchers / on the mouth of village well" (CS 4). They impatiently wait for the return of their men. Women spend precious years of their lives in the false hope of meeting their husbands. They take their marriage/love seriously and remain patient to see their men shortly. This is the irony of love. Love is a lively experience, but in the end, it brings only pain and misery. The last lines bear contrariness: "Body which once under his touch had gleamed / like burnished brass, now drab and destitute" (TD 31). Das's leading figure experiences both love and frustration in love. She feels bliss with her lover's touch, but in his absence, the same body becomes dull devoid of life's lustre. For her, love is life, and life is love. This proves that it is love or the presence of a lover that makes her alive. Opposing to this, she feels inert when the man goes away. Besides physical separation she also talks about mental gaps persisting in a man-woman relationship. In other words, Das associates love with contentment and completion needed for a woman in her life which she never gets in her own life. Das's quest for true love is never-ending. This is apparent from her expectations revealed in 'In Invitation'. She states: "And I need that man for construction and / Destruction. Leave me....." (TD 21). A conspicuous ironic grouping of words "construction" and "Destruction" has been specified in the stanza. The protagonist foresees her anticipation of love in both constructive and destructive ways. If love is true and genuine, it enhances the growth and progress of a human being. But, it causes downfall and disaster when it is fake. The protagonist, in her life, witnesses both the contradictory outcomes of love. She most often gets betrayal and deception in love. Still, she is quite enthusiastic and hopeful of getting a true lover in her life. She feels herself young and wants to take another chance in love irrespective of its unproductive and disparaging consequences. The stanza is in the form of a conversation between the sea and the protagonist. The personified sea asks her to forget all her miseries and pains she has got in love and all memories of her past love-making with different lovers. But the protagonist rejects sea's suggestion in an optimistic vein. The Protagonist lives her life in search of an ideal lover. No doubt, she fails in it. But still, she sounds hopeful and determined to get her true love. Her imaginary ideal lover is her right man who is believed to bring happiness and completeness in her life. The line, "the right one to live in the blue", contradicts her "bright" man. Blue colour indicates dense and dark that is contradictory to "bright". The protagonist has used the word "bright" for her expectations of a jolly lover; contrary to this, the word "blue" expresses the protagonist's depression, sadness. Here, "blue" is also used for the sea's water. Sea asks the protagonist to drown herself in its blue water and merge with it. She rejects his proposal. She is positive enough to meet her good and charming man, though, she doubts that her coming lover would also bring her despair and hopelessness as per her past experiences; she had met in her life. Both, optimistic and gloomy, moods are reflected in her statements. She is trying to end her past sad memories of betrayal in love but she is unable to forget the pain, she has felt in deception. She, somewhere, in her mind, is ready to confront the same deception in her next love-relation with her new lover. Despite this, a hazy wish to meet her ideal love fills her heart. Love becomes her inescapable need. So, regardless of being a failure in love, she is further eager to enjoy with her next lover. The protagonist had "a vague hope that her lover might come back to her even though he might again forsake her" (Lal 31). She knows her inability to leave her imaginary ideal lover. She still waits for him even with her growing age. She tells the sea that she is still young to think about her next love affair. No matter, whether her would-be-man reconstructs her life in a new way or destroys her. She is ready to face all good and bad in her fresh love. Therefore, she asks the sea to leave her to herself for an enchanting life. The protagonist's intense need for a lover makes her do so. The meaning is clear that she is a passionate lover and love means life for her. She can't separate herself from her imaginary lover. But, when she looks back, she finds only betrayal and dejection in her every attempt towards true love. Her frustrated 'love' for 'life' caused her extreme introversion, as a result of which she only wanted to create her individuality.

Das portrays failure in a man-woman relationship brilliantly, as her own married life was not a success. Das's woman is ultrasensitive and demands loyalty and equality in the relationship. But she fails in it. Das takes her disillusionment as a honed-up weapon to rebel against patriarchy. Her rebellion against the patriarchal system, or concern for feminism, is the next important theme, we notice in her poetry. She is a social rebel. It is her rebellion against a patriarchal society that makes her so bold and frank in the

delineation of the sexual predicament and exploitation of woman in the name of physical love. In a country, like India, where even man evades free and frank discussions on sex; Das has mirrored a woman's life in "all its nakedness" (Tilak 20) including the physical persecution/bullying, these women get by their monstrous husbands in a sacred, alleged and secured institution like marriage. Besides, she has touched the most obscene and, of course, the most sensitive issue of sexual need and physical satisfaction of a woman which this conventional and orthodox man-oriented society has been tyrannizing for ages past under the veil of domesticity and so-called ethnicity forced on her. Das, in her poetry, has, "mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in the social and linguistic term" (De Souza 8). Das, herself, refuses to perform her conventional role and sheds her womanliness. She openly confirms her adulterous affairs as a repercussion of the maltreatment she receives from her man. In the poem 'The Stone Age', the poetess exposes her indulgence in extra-marital affairs: "Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood" (TOPH 51). White colour is contradictory to Dravidian. The latter is used for dark-complexioned races. The protagonist physically involves with strangers who are fair in complexion. As the protagonist herself belongs to south Indian inheritance, she is dark in complexion. The word "sun" symbolizes passion. The protagonist burns in the fire of passion, and, ultimately, she indulges in illicit love affairs with strangers. This practice is against Indian ethos. The protagonist, despite, being a conventional Indian wife, openly discusses her affairs with other men rather than her husband. The protagonist expresses her passion in a contradictory way in 'Summer in Calcutta':

The April Sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass? I sip the
Fire, I drink and drink. (SC 48)

The poet describes passions in a striking antagonistic manner in the opening lines of the poem. She abruptly says that the passions are like the hot sun of April. She is burning with the fire of physical love. The poet uses a beautiful simile by calling the sun orange. She contemplates her passion for love and sex also pleasant and energizing. So, she opts to "sip the / Fire, / drink and drink." She loses herself in it out and out. There is no comparison and relationship between the two. But the poet tries to yoke both together to express her unavoidable urge for physical satiety. Both fire and water are contradictory. The protagonist's absurd and vague comparison reflects her disillusioned state of mind. Persona describes her enjoyment of physical charm in a highly painful way. In the next lines, she expresses her distress:

Again, I am drunk
Yes, but on the gold
Of suns, What noble
Venom now flows through (SC 48)

The protagonist calls the fire of sun gold. She drinks this fire and gets enjoyment. But when the act is over, she feels that the same golden rays of (passions) now run in her blood like venom. On the departure of her lover, she realizes that this physical union gives only momentary bliss and separation makes her bitter which forces her to call it venom. Emotional needs remain unfulfilled. At last, she turns towards her archetypal love. Fair enough, frustration in love and lack of fulfilment of emotions make Das search for an archetypal lover in "Krishna". Another framework of love depicted in Das's present poem is the arrival of the mythical lover, Krishna. Das's protagonist routes to her exemplary love-relation with Lord Krishna akin to Radha-Krishna relationship. Das rises from her coma of worldly love and goes out consciously to meet her Krishna in the vast of her heart. The idea is philosophical and contradicts the protagonist's extra-modern and ultra-practical approach towards love/sex, which we witness in her other poems. This abrupt transition in her character seems paradoxical. A woman who changes her lovers, just to dissent the pater-facred patriarchy, seems to be so pious and spiritual. But things are still differing. She, still, is an ordinary, weak woman not spiritual or saintly. She conforms to "Frailty, thy name is woman," (Hamlet). This is the kind of weakness of a woman that the protagonist nurtures in her character. All her efforts to find true love and even her indulgence in sex to search for a true lover are in vain. The image of real love, she keeps in her heart, is hypothetical and does not prove true makes the protagonist console herself in the

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vicinity of Krishna. The stanza is full of paradoxical expressions: “The long waiting / Had made their bond so chaste and all the doubting / And the reasoning” (TD 15). These lines appear to be used concerning her archetypal love but, in reality, they symbolize the protagonist’s heart-rending anguish met within former love associations. The long waiting purifies their ideal relationship, and, with this, it also purifies the protagonist’s all doubts and illusions. Both concepts differ. The line refers to Krishna but in reality, the protagonist has passed a long period of her life in search of true love. From time to time, she gropes for her true love in the shadows of other men. She, as such, never waits for Krishna. Her failures in matrimony and other love-kinships resulting from her over-demanding nature compel her to seek satiety in Krishna’s love. Tired of materialistic love and excessive exposure to the sexual world, drives her towards her exemplary lover, Lord Krishna, for peace and contentment. Likewise, she calls herself a virgin – a contradictory statement.

In the poem, ‘Radha’, she summarizes: “And virgin crying / Everything in me” (TD 15). The word “me” refers to a poetic persona – a married woman. The word “virgin” contradicts her character. She is not a virgin in the true sense of the word; she is married and has experienced sex with a large number of men. The expression has been used for her emotional sterility and the unsatiated quest for love. She has never felt that accomplishment as she feels with her archetypal lover, because she was not exposed to an ideal lover earlier. Krishna is the first true lover. Although, He is imaginary, yet she feels oneness with Him. Therefore, she cries like a virgin to get Krishna as her lover. The lines “melting, even the hardness at the core / O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting / Nothing remains but You” (TD 15) again reveal incongruity. Both “hardness” and “melting” are contradictory words. Being frustrated in unreciprocated love, Das ultimately finds peace and a sense of completion in Krishna’s love. The fire of patience has melted the deep-seated hard illusions of the protagonist’s mind regarding love and true lover. Ultimately, these whims get resolved to help her mind to be steady and free. Besides, her soul also liquefies in His cuddle. She has been looking for love in this materialistic world and its so-called selfish relationships which is impossible. At last, feelings of love and adoration merge ultimately in her long-awaited lover Krishna. She feels one with her lover. Soon, she feels missing and finally finds herself in the Self of Krishna.

The title of the poem ‘Radha’ represents the “spirit of surrender” (Sharma 8). Das’s persona completely surrenders herself to her ideal lover. She sheds all fears in the arms of her true love and experiences refuge and warmth that she sought in all her worldly lovers including her husband. This was the protagonist’s first step towards “spiritual evolution” (Sharma 8) that interferes with her ultra-modern stance of love. “Melting” symbolizes “its obvious sexual overtone suggests that the way fluid is absorbed in the earth the soul is absorbed in the divine Being, the only indestructible entity” (Ahmed 97). Das’s intense love for Krishna compels her to personify His mythical beloved, Radha, in her poem ‘Krishna’. She completely surrenders herself to Him as a “literary incarnation of Radha” (Ahmed 97). The poet speaks like Radha and admires her archetypal lover. She uses contradiction in the line of the poem

‘Krishna: “your love word shut out the wise world’s din” (SC 11). The poetic persona uses contradictions to heighten the feel of her submission and surrender before Krishna. She admires her imaginary ideal lover while delineating a paradoxical tone in the line. “Your love word shut out the wise world’s din” (SC 39). The expression shows the worthlessness of all knowledge before love. Wise men always speak worthy things but, here, their words are called disturbance before Lord’s words of love. The protagonist says, “Lord! Your lingo of love dares to silent the wise men even”. Any spoken word leads to noise but Krishna’s words seem to calm even the sensible conversation of wise men that appears worthless before His love words. The protagonist completely surrenders herself to her imaginary lover. She always feels Him better than others in this world.

Conclusion

Contradictions find a conspicuous place in her poetry. Especially, the love poetry of Das is the poetry of paradox. However, the clear paradox is not seen but the poet has used contrary words and expressions brilliantly in her poems. Paradoxical observations made by the poet take the readers to her unstable and

unsteady mind filled with a dilemma and enigmatic queries that trouble her throughout her life. Her heartfelt and legitimate poetry peels off the illegitimate ironic layers of her perception regarding love and marriage. Conflicts and intricacies in love never depart the poet in her life as well as in her poetry. Her own married life undergoes deformity and distortion. In addition, through contrariness in her poetry, she seeks release from her fear and angst, which she received from insensuous and selfish relationships of this world. Love and lust – two integral parts of a woman's life are justified keeping in view the "feminist paradigm" (Raveendran 155). In her poetry, Das seems to represent the contradictory roles of a woman. In the vicinity of her imaginary true lover, she is shown completely submissive, while, with her uncaring and autocratic husband, she exhibits her excessive rebellion self without bothering about the social and cultural ethos. Her contradictions are mild, not grave, yet they challenge the entire social construct explicitly and submerge the age-old historical dimensions of patriarchy in its deep and vast ideology showing sympathetic concern for the whole populace of women.

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