

Feminist Voice in Kamala Das's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is a feminist who expresses her gender concern and feminine sensibility on different levels. First, she reveals woman's age, long sufferings and humiliation in a man-dominated society in which nobody understands a woman's tender feelings and dreams; in which a woman has no joys or aches that are not man's; and in which a woman has to tolerate the loveless sexual assault of her husband for whom sex is an end in itself. Secondly, Das expresses her apathy for the male body as well as the helplessness of the wife who has to submit herself to him even unwillingly as she is bound to him by the ties of marriage, as the poetess shows in "The Freaks". Thirdly, Das propagates feminine sensibility in women arousing them to revolt against man's domination. And fourthly, the poetess gives expression to her frustration in her feminist mission with a touch of satire, ironically appealing women to surrender to man's domination, as in "Composition".

Keywords :- humiliation, man-dominated, continuum, intrinsic, schizophrenic woman, sluts and nymphomaniacs, pseudo-metaphysical.

Kamala Das's poetry, as it grows, becomes a manifestation of a transforming and enlarging social and cultural ambience. It reveals an awareness of a woman's potential and rights and a consciousness of the essential biological and cultural collectivity which consolidate the experience of being female into an intrinsic female imaginative continuum. It certainly demonstrates the recurrences of feminist use for expression, for sharing woman's experiences and sometimes for defying the traditional norms of propriety as well as the prescribed structures of identity.

Then I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored My womanliness.

She is the first woman poet to crack the mould, and establish an attitude and view point the Indian readers were quite unfamiliar with.

Things that came from her pen were something new, as no woman writer had ever before written with such power and honesty. Kamala Das's poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self. Obviously, this is not an easy and uncomplicated process, as this involves discarding a lot, adopting a defiant attitude and probing the bruised self that expresses itself in so many different moods ranging from despair and dejection to anger and bewildered sense of root-less-ness. This is best expressed through felt emotions in an intensely personalized idiom. It is easy enough to see in such a stance a dislocated mind suffering the nightmares of a shut-in life devastated and laid bare by a hyper-sexed, self-willed and a schizophrenic woman. This is precisely what prevailing critical attitude to her

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poems highlights, which is not only lamentably lopsided, but indicative of an alarmingly impoverished angle of critical outlook in Indian English criticism. In a vein which issues from this dominant critical approach, her poems are seen as the expression of the pitiable plight of a defenseless woman who needs love, consideration and sympathy and desires a loving husband, warmth and home.

Such an interpretation comes from a reluctance to give up the traditional mental attitude, for what is more heartwarming than the return of the defiant woman to the conventional age-old mould of the 'categorizers'. It is essentially a poetry of protest, of defiance and of emphatic assertion, all other moods ranging from weak feminine sense of helplessness and submission, to a restless search for happiness and shelter different expressions of this basic promethean spirit which

is eager to break the rusted shackles and have its voice heard.

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare.

At the age of 15, Kamala Das was married to Mr. Das, an official in the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay, where her life became miserable in the company of her nonchalant, lustful husband. As he was experienced in sex with his maidservants, his contact with his wife was usually cruel and brutal. He boasted to have known of 'sluts and nymphomaniacs' and this prompted Kamala to launch into 'a hectic love life with small capital-just a pair of beautiful breasts and a faint musk-

rat smell in my perspiration.....' She grew revengeful towards him, and reacted in a non-traditional fashion in love-making, offering herself to any handsome or resourceful man who came across her, and forgiving even her rapists. Her husband had no soothing words for her, no time to spare for her and was ever busy sorting out his files affixing his signature on them. And as a traditional wife, she was expected to discharge her domestic duties well and to look to the needs and comforts of her husband. This eroded her own distinct personality and dwarfed her forever, as she makes clear 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 covering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic
loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will and
reasons, to all your Questions I mumbled
incoherent replies

This is actually a strong protest against a hollow marital bond which she cannot untie. In India where marriage and love go hand in hand, it is most unfortunate that such a sensitive woman as Kamala Das is tied to a stake whence she cannot fly (to use a Shakespearean expression). Such occurrences are not uncommon in the land of Gandhi and Nehru, turning many a woman tragic and gloomy in their attitude towards life. Kamala Das has made repeated protests against this sort of situation in her poetry.

But the woman poet continues to live with her husband and look after her children (all sons). When she speaks of love outside marriage, she does not really advocate for infidelity and adultery, but merely searches for a kind of man-woman relationship which should guarantee both love and security to a woman. And it is important to note

that she gives a mythical framework to her search for genuine love and identifies it with the Radha-Krishna myth or with the Mira-Krishna relationship. There are several poems on lord Krishna in her volumes, supported by references to this lord in her prose writings (especially in *My Story* and *Alphabet of Lust*)

Her Summer in Calcutta (1965) opens with the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs," which sets the tone (of irony) and temper of the entire volume. There are many poems on the theme of love, but few which speak of the glory belonging to a really exalting love-experience. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" objectifies, through an external, familiar situation, the poet's strangled desire within. It was written against the background of the poet's sudden contact with 'a man who had hurt me when I was fourteen years old;' she wanted 'to get him at any cost.' The poem is powerful and bold indeed, and displays an admirable sense of proportion in the use of imagery and metaphor.

The Descendants (1967) has twenty-three poems in all. Most of these poems are further variations of her favourite theme of sexual love. This collection is, by and large, bitterly death-conscious, perhaps death-obsessed. And some of these poem like "The Descendants," "The Invitation," and "Composition" look to be sobered by compassion or humility under a false impression. The truth is that there lurks beneath the pseudo-metaphysical poise the inability to reckon with emotional defeat and frustration, with a sense of nothingness:

The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973):- contains 33 poems in all. Of these, fourteen are old poems taken from *Summer in Calcutta* and six from *The Descendants*. The poems reprinted from *Summer in Calcutta* are: "The Freaks," "In Love," "Love" "Summer in

Calcutta," "An Introduction," "The Wild Bougainvillea," "My Grandmother's House," "Forest Fire," "A Relationship," "The Snobs," "Corridors," "Loud Posters," "I Shall Some Day," and "Drama," and those from *The Descendants* are: "Convicts," "Palam," and "The Descendants." Thus, the collection has only thirteen new poems to be considered here.

The title-piece, "The Old Playhouse," tells us that love is perhaps no more than a way learning about one's self or the completion of one's own personality. It is addressed presumably to the husband, and is largely personal. It lodges a protest against the constraint of the married life: the fever or domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort, and male domination. 'You' in the poem is possibly the husband, who wants to tame the swallow who is the woman and thus deprive her of her natural freedom. As a result of his egotism, she feels emptied of all her natural mirth and clarity of thinking:

A different kind of protest- against the fanaticism of - religion is obvious in "The Inheritance." This poem is better, ironical, but not cynical. It deals with the hatred and intolerance that goes in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism. What man has inherited is not love but hatred, not wisdom but babble: 'this ancient virus that we nurtured in the soul.

Conclusion :

A fascinating area of sociobiology concerns with the fissure between the sexes. How deep the roots of gender go? The logic of religious myth and colonization seems to have placed women outside culture.

Women are an integral part of human civilization, no society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its general development. Although the place of

women in society had differed from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all societies is that women had never been considered the equal of man. Her status largely depends on the simple biological fact that she is the bearer of children whose care is her responsibility. Thus her sphere is usually restricted to the familial roles.

Since time immemorial woman had been the victim of male domination and oppression, and treated like a beast of burden and an object for pleasure. Man has always looked down upon woman as the weaker sex. The religions of the world have given sanction to the female's subjugation to the male.

Hence Kamala Das's poems raise the voice of a radical feminist against traditional role of women as faithful housewives and child bearing

machines.

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