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Delineation of Love in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Kamala Das is a confessional poet. She writes about love and sex in her poetry whatever she has faced and experienced in her life. Her poetry is thus all herself, about her intensely felt desire for love and her failure to maintain a sound married life. She explores the recurrent theme of love and its multi-faceted emotional entanglements with a kind of boldness and frankness that she has earned for herself the reputation of notoriety. The paper thus explores the various facet of love in her poetry.

Keywords: Kamala Das, Confessional poet, Love theme, Female sexuality, Indian English poetry.

Kamala Das is preeminently a poet of love. Love is the leitmotif in all her poems. A serious deliberation of her poetic works reveal that underneath the disguise of mere physicality in many of her poems there lurks a seeker who is in search of ideal love and in the process unravels the essential spirit of love. This idea rings with a distinguished note in the voice of the woman persona who yearns for love in the poem 'Love':

> Until I found you,
> I wrote verse, drew pictures,
> And, went out with friends.
> For walks...
>
> Now that I love you,
> Curled like and old mongrel
> My life lies, content,
> In you.... (SC 30)

Before she met the lover the life of the speaker was altogether different, she was engaged in insignificant trivialities and whiled away her time in meaningless activities. Her life changed after she met her lover. She attained fulfillment in his arms. From the external world she moved inward to find contentment in her man's love.

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Kamala Das's urge to obtain love through an all-encompassing relationship is articulated in yet another poem called 'Winter'. Here the strong emotional attachment of the speaker borders on physicality when she utters:

> ... even my
> Soul, I thought, must send its roots somewhere
> And, I loved his body without shame,
> On winter evenings as cold winds
> Chuckled against the white window-panes. (SC 16)

As roots of a tree clutches soil to attain fixity, so also the soul of the speaker holds her lover's body to obtain security and warmth in love. She longs that her love may surpass the pangs of separation as suggested by the word 'cold' and attains immortality by defying the whiteness of death.

Kamala Das with her characteristic honesty makes no bones about relating her need for love. Her passionate yearning is manifested in the voice of her woman protagonist who says:

> I met a man, loved him. Call
> Him not by any name, he is every man
> Who wants woman, just as I am every
> Woman who seeks love. (SC 63)

It appears obvious that she is least concerned about the man's wants. Even after knowing full well that the man desires only a female form she nevertheless expresses her wish to be loved infinitely and assumes that every woman wants unstinting love from her man.

It is not only at the emotional level that the poet restricts herself in asserting her longing for love. By rejecting the garb of conventionality, unlike her predecessors, she is the first woman poet in Indian English Literature who has unabashedly talked about female sexuality. She has explored the man-woman relationship both in the physical and mental plane. In the strain of the French feminist critics who advocated ecriture feminine Kamala Das, like Helene Cixous who claims that women should write through their bodies, writes in a typical feminine style whose language, tone and feeling work in unison to give a feminine outlook to her poetic works. Probably this is the reason for which we come across the detailing of female physical organs in her poem like 'The Looking Glass':

> Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
> Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
> The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
> Endless female hungers. (OSS 68)

Kamala Das admonishes the woman to gift her man everything that goes into the making of her womanliness. She thinks that by giving away her essential femininity the woman will be able to obtain a fulfilling love relationship. It is only through the complete surrender of selves that the lovers can taste the feeling of oneness.

... 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. (OSS 69)

During this moment of intense love between the lover and his beloved their biological distinction erodes away, the gender binary dissolves in each other's company and all words between them are spent.

Kamala Das's persona expresses her desire to obtain love with such undying passion that it verges on obsession on her part. To her:

The only truth that matters is
That all this love is mine to give
It does not matter that i seek
For it a container, as alms
Seek a begging bowl ... (TSR 12)

The poem deviates from the usual notion of a beggar asking for alms. Here the poet is ready to shower all her love and looks out for suitable container that can hold her unbridled emotions. She wants nothing in her life but unconditional love. Life without love is meaningless for her and she would prefer death to life if it is devoid of love:

I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead. (OSS 108)

Kamala Das's pleading for love is exhibited with compelling drive in the poem, 'Morning at Apollo pier' also. Her anguish in prominent in the following lines:

But, hold me, hold me once again,
Kiss the words to death in my mouth, plunder
Memories. I hide my defeat in your
Wearying blood, and all my fears and shame.
… … …
Your flawed beauty is my only refuge.
O love me, love, love me till I die ... (TSR 16)

With desperate yearning she clings to her lover whom she thinks is her ultimate abode where she wishes to take "refuge". In him, she desires to submerge all her "defeat", "fear" and "shame" and be loved till death. This inexorable dependence upon her man makes the woman persona sound somewhat pathetic.

In another poem named 'The Gulmohur' the poet celebrates the crowning emotion of love and its powerful impact upon her. She compares her present condition with that of the past and describes how her life has changed after she received love:

...my hands before I met him were cold as though they had reached out and touched a corpse I was so uneasy with them but in his room against his body summered my hands grew warm... (TSR 43)

Earlier the poetic persona was akin to a corpse; cold and dead but love rejuvenated her life with the warmth of pleasant summer. She basked in the sunshine of her lover's love and all her uneasiness of feeling like a "corpse" withered away with the loving touch of her lover.

It is a known fact that Kamala Das's autobiography "My Story" when published for the first time in 1976 caused a huge furore in the literary world. The poet was immediately labelled as controversial. A lot of stories have been fabricated regarding her relationship with Madhav Das, her husband. Many critics of known credentials have regarded the autobiography as touchstone of her feminist principles and read her poems in relation to that book. As a result her husband has often been criticized for failing in his duties to the poet. However Kamala Das turns the tables to acknowledge a close affinity with her husband quite precisely in her interviews and in covert manner in some poems.

The poem 'The Last Act' is one such poem that bear explicit testimony of the deep-seated love she had for her husband:

> ... Back home,
> He stumbled into the woman's arms, that
> Little one who used to talk of love and
> Tire him. I was waiting for you, she said,
> I thought you would need me today. (OSS 106)

The dependency of both husband and wife on each other leads to marital bliss. The wife comforts her husband and provides him with emotional and mental nourishment. She continues in the same strain at another place when she says:

> …My beloved is armed with winning and violet hate and mistrust but he comes to my arms unarmed and when the last of strengths in drops is shed I call him my baby I hold him to my breast.... (OSS 36)

Here Kamala Das does not restrict herself to the limited role of wifely duties but following the tradition of Indian culture she makes an extension of her feminine self and manifest motherly qualities only to solace her husband against the pitfalls of life. But reality jolts her when to her dismay she finds him a completely changed man: "... I open his door and see him at his desk signing/letters with the glasses on with the stern look with the do you want/something the change is so complete that I am silent...". (OSS 36)

In Kamala Das's poems love often brings frustration along with it as resultant outcome. In most poems her persona has felt the pangs of love with severe sufferings. This may be due to the fact that her expectation of a fruitful relationship has never attained fulfillment. She recollects the relationship with her husband with a sigh:

> There are no memories that enthrall,
> no fond phrase capsuled in thought,
> It was never a husband and wife bond.
> We were such a mismated pair, ... (OSS 141)

The mismatch between the spouses is probably due to the unreciprocated love between them which drives the wife to seek the much needed love desperately outside her marital bonds. She takes her own liberty when the husband is not around, "When you leave, I drive my blue battered car / Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty / Noisy steps to knock at another's door" (PP 57). Her pathetic urge to obtain love is so potent that the woman persona does not deter to pay heavy price to receive love in meagre amount: "Ask me why life is short and love is / Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price ..." (PP 51).

The poet's desire to find love outside her marriage however brought disillusionment that caused further pain in her life. Love proved to be a mere ideal of which she could only dream of. Even in the presence of her lover she feels hesitant to think of love:

> Million questions awake in
> Me, and all about him, and
> This skin – communicated
> Thing that I dare not yet in
> His presence call our love. (SC 12)

It is a pity that instead of emotional involvement, the lover could only awake "skin's lazy hunger" in his beloved. The woman persona in the poem 'The Freaks' considers herself and her lover unfortunate enough because: "... who can / Help us who have lived so long / And have failed in love?" Silence fills their relationship and even after sharing much time together the couple fails to feel the necessary attachment towards each other. Their hearts are vacant, for they are empty of emotions and share no feelings in between them. The disillusionment caused from mere physical attraction brings along with it some painful experiences:

> Yes, I was thinking, lying beside him
> That I loved, and was much loved.
> It is a physical thing, he said suddenly,
> End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free. (OSS 66)

This is the sad story of the end of a love relationship; evidently when carnal pleasures take precedence an everlasting bonding between the lovers becomes impossible. Although, once they were enough responsive towards each other, it proved to be momentary spring time which withered away and only "a physical thing" left behind that led them to end up their relationship.

The poetic persona be mourns the loss of her love in the poem 'A Losing Battle' also. She compares this loss with the losing in a battle. She feels defeated by a more worthy competitor who seems to have taken over her lover. On being rejected she speaks out:

> Men are worthless, to trap them
> Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
> Love, which in a woman must mean tears
> And a silence in the blood. (OSS 59)

The poet here expresses her indignation for men who do not value the true feelings attached with love. She states difference in attitude of man and woman regarding love for each of whom it means different. To men, love is nothing short of lust; while that same feeling brings pain and agonies in women. Hence, the poet is of the opinion that the ennobling emotions which love brings along with it should not be meant for men.

The frailties in love and the poet's repeated failings to establish an immortal relationship with the lover creates vacuity and sufferings in her life. As a result, she has remained preoccupied with the theme of insecurity in love. The poem 'My Predecessor' is built around this theme and consists of a series of questions in which the female counterpart asks:

> How shall I believe this man?
> If what he said was true who was it who blanched his
> Rude short hair, rumpled the satin of his skin and
> Left him feeling like a rind? (OSS 154)

The woman persona continues with a sting of jealousy in her voice and asks her opponent's "inauspicious name". She wishes to know by which power the other woman could draw away her lover from her.

The woman protagonist in Kamala Das's poems brings out male betrayal besides pointing to the callousness and indifference of an insensitive husband towards his wife. The female persona in the poem 'The Sunshine Cat' speaks out her resentment:

> They did this to her, the man who knew her, the man
> She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
> And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
> Used her, but was a ruthless watcher … (SC 51)

The man whom she loved proved to be "coward" and "selfish" who could not understand her emotional involvement. The husband too was no less at fault because he turned out to be a silent but ruthless watcher who gave cold shoulder to his wife's sufferings. He was careless enough to provide any stability to her when she needed his support the most.

The emotional aridity and unresponsiveness that Kamala Das felt in the company of her husband and other male lovers was compensated to a great extent by her grandmother who showered all her warmth and affection on the poet right from her childhood. Her autobiography My Story is strewed with nostalgic memories of her dear grandmother. She fondly reminisces about her in the poem 'My Grandmother's House':

> There is a house not far away where once
> I received love. That woman died
> The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
> Among books. (OSS 150)

In the above context Kamala Das refers to her grandmother as "that woman" who by her loving nature made the ancestral house of Nalapat the abode of peace where the poet received abundant unconditional love. But with the passing away of grandmother

that house lost all its identity for her and so she sadly grieves the fact that "… I who have lost/My way and beg now at stranger's door to/Receive love, at least in small change?"

For Kamala Das, her granny had always been a genuine source of love and sustenance. She shared close affinity of warmth and affection with her which gradually faded away with the passage of time. The childhood happiness got restricted only to memories of the poet but never for once had grandmother's love waned for her: "My grandmother, she was/the first I loved, trunks, when opened, after/She died, contained only dolls" (OSS 113). It is a loving memory for a grand daughter to recollect that her dear old granny's trunks contained gifts of dolls that she had kept as treasure to offer her affectionate grand daughter.

Besides grandmother, Kamala Das has extended her love towards her father also. Interestingly, the few poems that she has written on her father are after his death and project to the deep attachment between father and daughter through a loving relationship which apparently seemed to be otherwise. Mourning on the loss of her father, she laments the fact that the father died without any parting words, "You left me without good bye". She might have brought pain and dishonour to him as she over-heard someone whispering: "The one who caused him the greatest pain/And look at her now, acting solemn" (OSS 49). However she resolves this apparent anomaly in the father-daughter relationship towards the end of the poem when she confesses:

> Should I have loved you, father
> More than I did
> That wasn't so easy to do
> If I have loved others, father,
> I swear I have loved you the most. (OSS 49)

In another poem 'Next to Indira Gandhi' Kamala Das talks about the relationship with her father at length. She begins with a note of strong antipathy for him as she gradually unfolds the ways by which the father tried to dictate her life and subjugate her within the boundary of his whims: "You chose my clothes for me/My tutors, my hobbies, my friends/And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me a husband" (OSS 148); She had no courage to go against her father's wishes because she dreaded him most. It was only after his death that the poetic persona could ask "Did you ever want a daughter/Did I disappoint you much …" (OSS 148). But the last line of the poem is a volte-face that conveys an absolutely different attitude of the poet: "And I, freed from fear at last, feel no relief at all, I feel dead. More dead than you…" (OSS 149). The entire poem creates the impression that the father is a man of strict convictions who has put the daughter under his thumb and therefore no love has been shared between them. The end part of the poem however reveals that the loss of father has created a void in her life. Freed from his constricted rules she ought to have felt happier but on the contrary she feels benumbed and lifeless.

The somber tone that goes with numbness arising out of the father's death persists in the poem 'My Father's Death' also. Here the poet gives an elaborate description of the funeral scene of her father and goes on to relate that people came to get photographed

with the dead man "For he was the most important/Man to die in Calicut" (OSS 146). He had suffered for twelve days before he passed away and during that time the daughter tried to nurse him back to health. It was only during his illness that she could feel a close bonding with him:

> Only in a coma
> Did he seem close to me, and
> I Whispered into his ears that
> I Loved him although I was bad,
> a bad Daughter … (OSS 147)

All through his life there was a cold indifference between them that distanced even the close relationship of father and daughter. It is only after his death that she calls out in pain "You should have hugged me, father, just/Once, held me to your breast, you should/Have asked me who I was, in truth" (OSS 147). Her agonies to obtain her father's affection are prominent here; she has pined for his love and care.

The father's death caused a great grief to the poet. She might have failed to become her father's daughter in true terms, she might have brought dishonour to his name but undoubtedly such is her deep attachment for him that she would have gladly changed her place with him at his death bed as he loved life more than she did.

Throughout a long poetic career of nearly a century Kamala Das has kept herself preoccupied with the theme of love and its intricate emotional entanglements. Sometimes she celebrates the euphoric ecstasy attained through earnest feelings of engagement, while at other times she appears pitiable with her gripping pleadings to cling to her lover. In some poems she is turbulent and articulates her thoughts with impulsive drive that has urgency of passion within it while in some other poems she is sedated like the deep blue sea which often forms the background of her poems with all her emotions spent up and adopts a reconciliatory attitude towards life. While she is mesmerized by the unblemished beauty of love she also feels disillusioned by the repulsive selfishness in man woman relationship. Kamala Das's artistry arrest all the nuances attached to the delicacy of male-female liaison to render them into poetry of rare artistic merit.

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