

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

**A WOMAN IN LOVE IN A MAN'S WORLD: EXPLORING THE POETIC CREED OF
KAMALA DAS**

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ABSTRACT

The frankly honest tone of Kamala Das's poetry has encouraged critics like Devindra Kohli, Sivaramkrishna, Eunice de Souza, K. Ayyappa Paniker and E.V. Ramakrishna to describe her as a confession poet. But, it should be noted that there is a romantic but deliberate vagueness in her poems about the men with whom she shares the experience. Her poetry embodies the quest for the archetypal experience of love as does Shelley's in his own way.

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INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das, one of the foremost Indian English poets, was born on March 31, 1934 in South Malabar in Kerala. She was the daughter of V.M. Nair and Nalapat Balamani Amma, the Malayalam poetess. She was educated at the Convent School, Calcutta, but could not receive higher education because of her marriage at the age of fifteen to K. Madhava Das, who was many years older than her. She bore her first child at 16, but her husband was often in a fatherly role to the children as well as Mrs. Das herself. Because of the great age difference between Kamala Das and her husband, he often encouraged her to associate with people of her own age, and also encouraged her writing. He was invariably proud of her accomplishments, even when they were controversial. Mrs. Das says that he was always "very understanding". When Kamala Das wished to begin writing, her husband supported her decision to augment the family's income. Because Das was a woman, however, she could not use the morning-till-night schedule enjoyed by her great uncle. She would wait until nightfall after her family

had gone to sleep and would write until morning: "There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing". The rigorous schedule took its toll upon Das's health, but she views her illness optimistically. It gave her more time at home, and thus, more time to write.

As her career progressed, her greatest supporter was always her husband. Even when controversy swirled around Das's sexually charged poetry and her unabashed autobiography, *My Story*, Das's husband was "very proud" of her. Though he was sick for 3 years before he passed away, his presence brought her tremendous joy and comfort. She started that there "shall not be another person so proud of me and my achievements".

Kamala's achievements extend well beyond her poetry. She says, "I wanted to fill my life with as many experiences as I can manage to garner because I do not believe that one can get born again". True to her word, Kamala Das has dabbled in painting, fiction and even politics. Though she failed to win a place in Parliament in 1984, she has been

much more successful of late as a syndicated columnist. She has moved always from poetry because she claims that "Poetry does not sell in this country (India)", but fortunately her forthright columns do. Kamala's columns sound off on everything from women's issues and child care to politics. In December, 1999 Kamala Das converted to Islam, creating a furore in the press. Less than a year later, Kamala Surayya announced her plans to register her political poetry "Lok Seva".

Kamala Das's literary works

Kamala Das has published novels and short stories in English, as well as in Indian language of Malayalam under the name "Madhavikutty". Some of her works in English includes the novel *Alphabet of Lust*, (1977), a collection of short stories called *Padmavati, the Harlot and Other Stories*, (1992), in addition to five books of poetry, *Summer in Culcatta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996), a collection of Poetry with Pritish Nandy (1990), and her autobiography, *My Story* (1976). Some of her more recent novels in Malayalam include *Palayan* (1990), *Neypayasam* (1991), and *Dayarikkurippukal* (1992). She is currently the author of a syndicated column in India. Her works in Malayalam include more than fourteen books, a majority of them being collections of short stories. She has won the Poetry Award of The Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, and the Kerela Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 for a collection of short stories in Malayalam.

Kamala Das's love poetry

The poetry of Kamala Das calls for special consideration because of its unique place not only among the Modern but even in Indian poetry in English by women as a whole. Kamala Das embodies the most significant stage of the development of Indian feminine poetic sensibility not yet reached by her younger contemporaries. Her poetry voices to the full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian women's journey from tradition to modernity, but even the Indian women poet's sense of commitment to reality.

Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalapat Narayan Menon, a prominent writer. Kamala

remembers watching him "work from morning till night" and thinking that he had "a blissful life". She was also deeply affected by the poetry of her mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma and the sacred writing kept by the matriarchal community at Nayars (India world).

Kamala Das is almost exclusively concerned with the personal experience of love in her poetry. For her, ideal love is fulfilment on the levels of body and mind; it is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfilment from the husband leads to her search for it in extra-marital relationships with other men. Each relationship however succeeds only in intensifying the crisis of disappointment. Faced with the sense of absolute frustration and loneliness, the poet turns to poetry as the exclusive medium for its cathartic release. Poetry responds to the urgent need of the psyche to come to terms with it which otherwise threatens to collapse under the complex tensions generated by the peculiar experience.

Kamala Das's love experience is a multidimensional phenomenon involving tensions of different kinds. Its complex nature may be properly apprehended by focusing on some of the important dimensions as defined in terms of her relationship with the husband, the lovers, the grandmother's house and the society as in terms of her identities as a woman and as a poet. The absolute honesty to experience gives a quality of uniqueness to her poetic exploration in which the validity of expression is resolved purely by the validity of expression being communicated. Even her autobiography is poetic experience expanded in prose.

The relationship with the husband forms the basis of Kamala Das's love-experience and hence provides the most important dimension for its exploration. The beloved's psyche is strenuously burdened by the bitter realization of the husband's inability to offer spiritual fulfilment in spite of fulfilment on the bodily level, as in: "Can't this man with / Nimble finger - tips unleash/Nothing more alive than the/Skin's lazy hungers?" The poet tries to explain the nature of dissatisfaction with the love from the husband in her statement: "Sex I can get in abundance from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for". As a result, love is reduced to

the mechanical act of bodily union: "Isn't each/Embrace a complete thing, a/Finished jigsaw, when mouth on/Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor/Moodily mind." The urge for freedom from the compulsion of living with the husband then grows into an obsession: "I shall someday leave, I have the cocoon/You built around me with morning tea,/Love-words flung from doorways and of course/Your tired lust." The psyche of the poetess is however aware that it's helpless to leave the husband who symbolizes social security.

The tensions involved in the relationship with other men offer another dimension to Kamala Das's theme of love. The need for fulfilment as the beloved drives the yearning psyche from one man to another. But, in each experience, the brief period of fulfilment is desired to be followed by the final shock of disappointment. The sense of joy for the discovery of the right man who is able to give love as a sexual-spiritual fulfilment is communicated thus: "He is the jewel I prefer to/wear once or twice a week with price/he rubs oil on me he/puts me in his bath tub/ I cover before his incurious stare." But the repeated shocks of frustration from different lovers inevitably generate a tragic sense of defeat and humiliation that seeks expression in the bitterly ironic tone in: "After that love became a swivel-door,/When one went out, another came in,/Then I lost count, for always in any arms/Was a substitute for a substitute."

In "The Old Playhouse", Kamala Das is particularly successful in exploring the nature of true love. The poem takes its birth in the tragic reminiscence of one of the most intense love affairs. The meditative analysis of the experience is offered in two stages of fulfilment as marked by these of past tense, and of the following frustration as marked through the use of present tense for narration. The beloved yearns for the kind of love which will be a spiritual experience involving meaningful sexual relationship without the loss of her own identity. Love should be, according to her, an opportunity for the development of personality, as in: "I came to you but to learn/What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow." Unfortunately, her relationship with the lover awakens the awareness of being enslaved. She tells that 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 crucial images of "swallow" and "room" concretize the tension between the ideal, and the experience of love. The image of "swallow" with us "urge to fly" defines the feminine psyche's desire for freedom, while the image of "room" with its artificial lights and windows always shut, projects the nature of his love which prevented natural growth of her personality.

The recent poems of Kamala Das show a development in her attitude to love. In *Summer in Calcutta* and *The Descendants*, the overwhelming scenes of defeat and frustration leads to the persistent desire for death. The sea seems to invite her towards itself, as in: "Come in,/Come in, what do you lose by dying, and/Besides, your losses are my gains."

But, in the later poems, the maturity of approach is revealed through the psyche's willingness to learn the lessons of experience. The frustrated beloved at last realizes the need for adjustment. She reconciles herself with the role of a house wife, as in: "Into the hospital/She opened wide her delirious eyes and/said : Please let me go/I smell the Tur Dal burning..." There is even a hesitating re-assessment of her relationship with the husband, as in: "Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps/I went astray." How would a blind wife trace her lost Husband, how would a deaf wife hear her husband call- in the light of the experience with different lovers. Kamala Das's search for ideal love and the resultant disappointment seem to involve the psychological phenomenon of the animus" struggling to project the masculine imprint as interpreted by Jung. The attempt to seek in every lover the perfection of masculine being is destined to end I failure because of the impossibility of realizing the ideal of human form. The poet reveals this awareness in: "I met a man, loved him. Call/Him not by any name, he is every man/Who wants a woman, just as I am every/Woman who seeks love." The feminine psyche is awakened to the true significance of the painful love affairs as being progressive steps towards the final realization of its relationship with God, as in: Any stone can make

"An idol. Loving this one, I/Seek but another way to know/Him who has no more a body /To offer, and whose blue face is/A phantom- lotus son the water of my dreams." The poet's search for ideal love often takes the form of Radha's yearning for Krishna in some of the poems.

The love experience gains a fresh dimension in Kamala Das's anxiety to explore it with reference to the grandmother's house. The life spent in the grandmother's house as a child symbolized the state of innocence as contrasted with the life as a married woman symbolizing the state of experience. Her preoccupation with it echoes the subconscious anguish of the frustrated psyche to return to the state of innocence now irrevocably lost, rather than a sense of "nostalgia". The childhood stands for the period- "Before the skin,/Intent on survival,/Learnt lessons of self-betrayal/Before the red house that had/stood for innocence/Crumbled." Her poem "Blood" (The old playhouse and other Poems) defines the clash between her sense of pride for inheritance of purity and her sense of disgust for the conversational sex-role.

Another dimension that completes the man-woman relationship in the case of Kamala Das refers to her identity as a woman involving the social compulsions to conform to the traditional feminine role. The urge for freedom from the conventional role of a woman asserts itself early in life, as in: "I wore a shirt and my/ Brother's trousers cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness./ Dress in sarees, be girl, be wife, they said." The experience of frustration sets the psyche in the attitude of rebellion against the pretentious role of a happy wife in: "I must pretend,/I must act the role /Of happy woman,/Happy wife." Her revolt as a woman against the traditional concept of womanhood is matched with her revolt as a poet against the conventional medium of mother tongue for poetry. She has instinctively chosen English as the poetic medium although she is at home with Malayalam in prose.

The dreams which form a part of the feminine psyche's obsession with love in terms of sex seem to add the psychoanalytical dimension to the theme of love in the poetry of Kamala Das. The poet tends to turn with significant frequency to the

subject of dreams, either for their thematic or their imagistic potential. For instance, from thematic point of view, here is the poet conferring how "I dream of obscene hands/Striding up my limbs and of morgues where the night lights /Glow on faces shuttered by the soul's exit."

In "The Corridors", she probes into the recurrent dream "Of a house where each silent/ corridor leads me to warm/ yellow rooms". Apart from the imagistic reference to dreams in a number of poems, the instance sexual awareness of has neurotic is evidenced in the recurrent imagery of limbs, rooms, mirrors, and in her attempt to identify the search for true love with the search for a "Misplaced father". But it is different to agree with Eunice de Souza's psychoanalytical interpretation of Kamala Das as a nymphomaniac. For, in her poetry, the feminine psyche's obsession with sex is prevented from being prevented into nymphomania because of the inherent urge for spiritual fulfillment in love through the medium of sex.

The peculiar nature of Kamala Das's love-experience might be understood with reference to the sociological dimension offered by her Nair Lineage. The Nair society has "The matrilineal, matrilocal organization" and "did not hinder the plurality of husband to a Nayar woman." Of course, "It treated marital relations with increasing rigidity from the end of the 19th century." The Nayar Lineage of Kamala Das with its tradition of sexual freedom in spite of later rigidity explains the frankness of her attitude to love in terms of sex. M. Elias attempts, in particular, to prove how "her sinfulness or innocence is not the product of modern conditions in India or elsewhere, but that they originate from inherited complexes from his study of the Nair society.

The communication of experience for its own sake gives a special dimension of honesty and concentration in the poetry of Kamala Das. It is notable that the poetic psyche does not attempt, at any stage, to derive consolation from the assumption that her particular experience of frustration is a part of the typical love of a woman in the man-oriented society. There is no evidence to justify Keki Daruwalla's comment that she continues "with her obsession regarding woman being play

things in the unfeeling hands of the male." On the other hand, her poems reveal the psyche's anxiety to come in terms with the specific ordeal or frustration purely individual level. It is particularly notable in the context of her writings on various occasions as a feminist rebel against the conventional marriage. For instance, she writes in the article on "The Sham of a Marriage": "I am thoroughly disappointed with my marriage and everybody else's marriage... . The ideal marriage, continued according to the desire of our society, is a bond in which both become mental cripples and cling on to each other until death."

The unusually complex experience of love leaves little stamina for confronting social experience in the case of Kamala Das. She has hence written very few poems on social themes although they may be notable for her capacity to respond to the area of social experience. For instance, she portrays the tragedy of the eunuchs with rare sympathy in "The Dance of the Eunuchs" in which "Some beat their drums; other beat their sorry breasts/ And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They/were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from /Funeral pyres."

In "The Descendants", the poet probes into the state of helpless submission to the process of spiritual decay in the present world: "None will step off his cross/Or show his wounds to us, no God lost in/Silence shall begin to speak, no, lost love/Claim us." Kamala Das's poetic sensibility shows great interest in the social themes in the earlier stage of her poetic career as is seen by a number of poems from "Summer in Calcutta." Probably with the resolution of tensions in the experience of love, she may turn to social theme again.

Kamala Das's world of imagery seems to be derived in particulars from the fields of nature, corporeal life, city life and domestic life. The image of „Sun“ is an integral part of her love experience while the birds like bats, herons, swallows and crows project different shades of her subjective response. The image of sea is limited to the scene background in the first volume, but is transformed into a meaningful symbol of the experience of frustration in the second volume. The particular recurrent image of the roots in the first volume probably

marks the poet's sense of rootlessness because of the disappointment with the husband. The corporeal imagery enables her to explore the theme of love as a physical experience. The street is a major image associate with her residence in the cities. It provides her with a means of contact between the inner and the outer world. The imagery involving the insignificant details from domestic life stresses in contrast, the psyche's need for significance as a beloved.

The early poetry of Kamala Das suffers from certain weakness of technique, some of which continue even in her mature poetry. The device of repetition of words, for instance, in the first volume suggest the young poet's lack of confidence in the verbal medium. Notwithstanding the mature control of the device in the subsequent volumes, it continues in the form of the repetitions of sentence patterns. The excessive use of dots weakness Kamala Das's poetic expression in the early stage. The dots are generally used to suggest either a meditative pause, or the beginning of the next stage of thematic development, or the incompleteness of the experience communicated, or the end of the stanzaic unit. One of the distinct signs of the poet's mastery of the verbal medium is her control over the use of dots in the later poetry. The overflows and pauses emerge as one of the peculiarities of her technique. The lines pause and overflow at times even without grammatical or stylistic propriety. For instance, there is the most awkward overflow from the article to its noun. The pause also comes practically anywhere in the line and for as many times as the emotion demands. In spite of her few experiments in prose-poem; she prefers the traditional lyrical pattern to experimental structures.

Some of Kamala Das's poems seem to echo certain American and English poets although she is not directly influenced by any of them. For instance, the crucial word "striptease" in her important confession, " I must let my mind striptease" minds of its use by Sylvia Plath in the similar context in : "They unwrap me hand and foot/The big strip tease/Nevertheless, I am the same,/Identical woman."

Conclusion

Her statement about how “I watched and I watched the cart in “Visitors to the city” echoes Wordsworth’s reference to how “I gazed and gazed” from his poem, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” The verb “incarnadine” from the crucial speech of Shakespeare’s Macbeth finds its way in „The Fear of the Year” where Kamala Das speaks of the fear that “Thrusts its paws to incarnadine /the virgin whiteness.” And also in “The Inheritance” when she refers ironically to the „incarnadined glory” of the city. The frankly honest tone of Kamala Das’s poetry has encouraged critics like Devindra Kohli, Sivaramkrishna, Eunice de Souza, K. Ayyappa Paniker and E.V. Ramakrishna to describe her as a confession poet. But, it should be noted that there is a romantic but deliberate vagueness in her poems about the men with whom she shares the experience. Her poetry embodies the quest for the archetypal experience of love as does Shelley’s in his own way. In a sense, it symbolizes in miniature the elemental quest of a woman – a deeply sexual being – for a man. However, in her vital effect to come to terms with the man – woman relationship in its full complexity, Kamala Das has modernized the Indian poetic psyche. The poetry written by her so far is meaningful enough to make her one of the leading Indian poets in English along with Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan.

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