

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE LOVE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS AND EMILY DICKINSON: SOME INSIGHTS

G. ARAVIND¹, Dr. S. RAVIKUMAR²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Alagappa University, Karaikudi.TN

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sree Sevugan Annamalai College, Devakottai.TN



G. ARAVIND

ABSTRACT

Acceptably, there is a great divide in culture, race, religion, and in time between the Indo-Anglian poet, Kamala Das, and the American poet, Emily Dickinson. But, most interestingly, they may be deemed twin-sisters drinking at the same fountain of poetic inspiration, as sharers of a common history of a poignant failure in love. The similarity does not stop there but continues in their self-reliant creative process, in their revolt,--Kamala Das openly and Emily Dickinson subtly-against the cultural and social inhibitions of the times and in their adroit intellectual resourcefulness in preserving the sanity of their selves through expressions of estoric experiences in a confessional vein.

Both Kamala Das and Emily Dickinson, as they grew up in age, developed certain passionate private attachments to a number of individuals. Kamala Das's hollow conjugal relationship with her loveless husband might have compelled her to seek extra fulfillments. When Emily wrote love poetry indicating a strong attachment, it has proved impossible to know the object of it or even how much of it was fed by poetic imagination. Both the poets write on the theme of love with candour and sincerity. Almost, all their love poems deal with either of the following modes: the physical aspects of desire or the despair and disappointment that love causes. Though intensely personal, the experiences portrayed by the poets outreach personal significance and acquire a universal appeal.

Key words: Love, Failure, Culture, Confession, Disappointment

Discussion:

Acceptedly, there is a great divide in culture, race, religion, and in time between the Indo-Anglian poet, Kamala Das, and the American poet, Emily Dickinson. But, most interestingly, they may be deemed twin-sisters drinking at the same fountain of poetic inspiration, as sharers of a common history of a poignant failure in love. The similarity does not stop there but continues in their self-reliant creative process, in their revolt,--Kamala Das openly and Emily Dickinson subtly-against the cultural and social inhibitions of the times and in their adroit intellectual resourcefulness in

preserving the sanity of their selves through expressions of estoric experiences in a confessional vein.

A helpless and desolate soul, denied of love and friendship, at home and at school, Kamala Das sought in her husband love, understanding and affection. But she became disillusioned. The desire was strong in her to seek fulfillment outside the ambit of marriage:

I think if love was what I looked for in marriage, I had to look for it outside the orbit of marriage. (Kamala Das, 99)

Kamala Das's temperamentally iconoclastic character was further strengthened by her dashed hopes in married love. Kamala Das was destined to become a love-poet portraying unconsummated love, negated affection and frustrated love is clear from her confession of her need for love with an openness unusual in Indian context. Desolation and helplessness and a fierce longing for love emerge from every page she wrote.

It is said that Emily Dickinson was in love with married men who were by far her elders, and her love poems are cited as the expressions of a thwarted love affair. Her poem "I held a jewel in my fingers" is said to be referring specially to Benjamin Franklin Newton, a law student in her father's office. His early death was a loss she never forgot. "My life closed twice before its close" seems to hide references to both Benjamin Franklin Newton and the Rev. Charles Wadsworth. The poem "I never lost as much but twice" refers to three, Leonard Humphrey, Newton and Wadsworth. Any attempt to identify Emily's love is as wild a guess as attempting to identify the Dark Lady in Shakespeare.

Both Kamala Das and Emily Dickinson, as they grew up in age, developed certain passionate private attachments to a number of individuals. Kamala Das's hollow conjugal relationship with her loveless husband might have compelled her to seek extra fulfillments. When Emily wrote love poetry indicating a strong attachment, it has proved impossible to know the object of it or even how much of it was fed by poetic imagination. Both the poets write on the theme of love with candour and sincerity. Almost, all their love poems deal with either of the following modes: the physical aspects of desire or the despair and disappointment that love causes. Though intensely personal, the experiences portrayed by the poets outreach personal significance and acquire a universal appeal.

Kamala Das is one of the few Indo-Anglian poets to write passionately and unabashedly on love and what it means to her. She "writes incessantly about love or rather the failure of love, her unhappy personal life, her unsuccessful

personal encounters and relationships." (Eunice de Souza, 20) Emily Dickinson was perhaps the only woman poet of the nineteenth century to write on the theme of love with frankness. Her love lyrics may be said to be largely the imaginative dramatizations of an unconsummated love and frustrated hopes. The unfulfilled love portrayed in Kamala Das's poems is not merely hers but many a woman's. In the same manner, the readers recognize in Emily's poetry some of their anxieties.

The poems of both treat many facets of love ranging from exultation to depression. Both the poets express their keen desire for physical love. In "Winter" Kamala Das, by means of Nature imagery, treats of an uninhibited hunger for physical union. The short lyric "Wild Nights" by Emily Dickinson depicts the poet's pining for physical union with her lover. Nature's engendering life is symbolically and physically capitalized by Kamala Das in describing a possible experience of the woman-persona's reaching out for a sexual awareness without shame:

It smelt of new rains and of tender
Shoots of plants—and its warmth was the
warmth
Of earth groping for roots...even my
Soul, I thought, must send its roots
somewhere,
(*"Winter," Summer in Calcutta 16*)

For Emily Dickinson, wild night becomes sensually and sensuously pleasurable in the company of her lover:

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

(*"Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 114*)

Emily feels that if only she had the opportunity of being with her lover just for the night— "Might I but moor— To Night," she would be enjoying the blissful delight of physical love— "Rowing in Eden."

The poems of both Kamala Das and Emily Dickinson portray the anguish and the agony occasioned by unfulfilled love. In "The Sea Shore" Kamala Das deals with the theme of negated affection while the poem "If You were Coming in the Fall" by Emily expresses the keen agony of finding happiness. Kamala Das is full of vibrant and eager expectancy for an intense fulfillment of love through her darling with whom she is passionately in love but whose love belies her:

Not knowing what
Else to do, I kiss your eyes, dear one, your
lips, like
Petals drying at the edges, the burnt
cheeks and
The dry grass of your hair, and in stillness, I
sense
The tug of time, I see you go away from
me
And feel the loss of love I never once
received.

("The Seashore," *Summer in Calcutta 40*)

Emily's poem expresses the beloved's longing in futile expectation for the arrival of the lover. She is willing to wait for years, centuries and even till the time of her death:

If certain, when this life was out—
That Your's and Mine, should be
I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,
and take Eternity— ("If you were coming
in the fall," *The Complete Poems of Emily
Dickinson 249*)

Kamala Das is full of eager expectancy for a rich consummation of love through her man. She gives him her love but he never gives her his. Emily too waits expectantly for the meeting with her lover.

In recording her moments of disappointment, Emily observes a clinical detachment between her personal emotions and her poetry. In the company of loneliness she is proud of her broken heart, and even resigns herself to her lot by taking to the life of a recluse. But Kamala Das, getting herself frustrated with her man seeks extra-marital fulfillment. The beauty of Emily is such that she does not succumb as a defeatist to her agonies. She has a rare capacity to sublimate her intense experiences in this regard and to

psychologically extend them to the realm of poetry and create miniature marvels of love poems, sometimes romantically and sometimes metaphysically. Kamala Das too, by her rare alchemic capacity, sublimates her plurality of love experiences and transmutes them into realms of gold.

Emily rejoices in the imagined situation of conjugal love, and Kamala Das rejoices in the reality of filial love. To Kamala Das marriage is a bad dream the bitter memories of which she wants to forget by finding her joy in the creation of a child. She rejoices at the painful but pleasurable act of creation. Denied of marital status, Emily Dickinson transports herself to an imagined situation where she could enjoy the luxury of love, unlike Kamala Das, more securely and more intensely with her imagined lover whom she adores with physical intensity in her imagination.

"Kamala Das, frustrated in conjugal love, finds a relief and an anchor in the warmth and worth of the creation of a child, a new life." (Subhas Chandra Saha, 31) Not luckier enough to be led to the altar, Emily expresses her yearning for a sympathetic correlation of experience with an imagined husband.

"Jaisurya" is a celebration of Kamala Das's beatific joy of pregnancy and of filial love to make up for her loneliness and failure in connubial felicity. She glorifies pregnancy as the happiest period in her life: "Only during my pregnancies could I shed my, deep-seated loneliness I used to feel as if my husband's hand rested on my belly all the time." (Kamala Das, 59) Hence her urge: "When once my heart was vacant, fill the/Emptiness, stranger, fill it with a child."

Emily Dickinson, denied of the joy of married life, expresses in her marriage poems her youthfully nostalgic and wistful longing for a conventional married life:

Title divine—is mine!

The wife—without the Sign!

The poet feels that the marriage confers a divine title—the Wife—but in her case the divine title is

"without the sign"—that is without the husband. She feels regal that she is an empress without crown, again suggesting the marriage is yet to take place and that she is a wife without a religiously sanctioned husband. She is betrothed but without the "swoon," the rapture of one who is betrothed:

Royal—all but the Crown!

Betrothed—without the Swoon!

Other women in blissful fulfillment have such exultation in feeling so possessive about their husbands. For them "My husband" becomes a song. In her case the possessiveness in the title of being a wife without a husband belongs to her. Other women announce their husbands,—"stroking the Melody"—which she cannot do, and hence the question: "Is this the way?" Thus "Emily dreams of a happiness that has failed to be realized." (Henry W.Wells, 48)

In both the poets, the sun is a physical representation of a lover. It is a symbol of destruction to both. To Kamala Das, sexual love is destructive. "The Old Playhouse" portrays her frustrating experience in trying to learn her true self. Impelled by a desire to realize her true self, she comes to her man but she loses her individuality in the process:

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," *Only the Soul Knows
How to Sing* 38)

To Emily, human passion is destructive. In her letter to Sue, her brother's wife, she reveals a fear that a man may become so absorbed in himself that a woman's self is no longer important. Love-making becomes a matter of the man's satisfaction alone, while the woman's identity becomes obliterated.

Both the poets attempt to liberate love from the narrow clutches of physicality and elevate it to a higher level. God's love is constructive. There are poems in both which reveal the gradual sublimation of their love into love for God—Krishna

in the case of Kamala Das, and Christ in the case of Emily Dickinson. "Radha Krishna" by Kamala Das depicts the poet's longing for the union with the Divine Mate:

This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old Kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality. . . . ("Radha-Krishna," *Summer
in Calcutta*, 37)

The union of Radha and Krishna is that of *Jeevatma* and *Parematma*. In that the individuality of the soul is lost and the soul becomes one with God. The poet is consumed by *Krishna Prema* as is Radha. In her imagination, if not in real life, the poet-persona's alterego seeks a similar Radha-Krishna experience for the realization of sublime spirituality.

Emily retires into the closet of her private life only to prepare herself to allow the love of God to take complete possession of her being. She has to virtually move away from society since it is not conducive to Emily in her preparation to reach God. The poem "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," expresses the soul's yearning for communion with her lover, God. Kamala Das's wish in "The Invitation" and "Composition" to go down the sea expresses her soul's longing for a merger with Krishna, as symbolized by the sea through the extension of its colour. She seeks that "bodyless form" to realise her true being. Elsewhere she states: I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha." (Kamala Das, 180) Truly speaking, Emily Dickinson's marriage and love poetry is not a body of verse lamenting a frustrated love affair but is the seeking after something that fills the whole circle of her existence and establishes her true individuality.

While frustration in love is as killing as death itself to Kamala Das, love itself as intense an experience as the consciousness of death to Emily. Emily describes Death as her suitor. In what may be termed her finest poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death," Emily, following the chivalric customs and traditions of romance, likens death to a suitor who stops "kindly" for her in order to take her on a

coach ride towards Eternity. In "The Bangles" Kamala Das sees her frustrated love affair as death in life because her own loveless life has perhaps extinguished her soul. To think of death as an amorous lover is foreign to Kamala Das. To Emily, Death is her lover, her wedding is to Death, the wedding bower is the grave and the relations are the departed souls as in the poem "Death is the Supple Suitor." The richly symbolic passage in "In Love"—sleek crows flying/ With poison on wings" and the corpse bearers crying "Bol Hari Bol" and "strange lacing/For moonless nights" suggests that Kamala Das is dead to the titillation of sex. The terms "crows," "moonless nights" and "corpse-bearers" having a semantic feature black" typefying mourning cumulatively suggest that the loss of love is as destroying as death itself.

Both Kamala Das and Emily Dickinson were iconoclasts. They possessed the spirit of rebellion the only difference being that Emily lacked the unabashed flamboyance and tongue-in-the cheek mode of Kamala Das who challenged with clenched fist the established tradition and convention. The Amherst society of the days of Emily, conditioned by an austere puritan attitude, was chiefly conservative. Women were not allowed to enjoy full open air and had to remain indoor fully covered attending to domestic chores. We find in the following passage Emily the radical defying social conventions and coming in the open to delight in Nature:

Inebriate of Air—am I—
And Debauchee of Dew—
Reeling—thro' endless summer days—
From Inns of Molten Blue— ("I taste a
liquor never brewed—," *The Complete
Poems of Emily Dickinson* 99)

In "An Introduction," Kamala Das is against the conservative Hindu society which imposes on her the acceptance of a name, a role and a function. Many are the injunctions imposed on her: "Be embroider, be cook/Be quarreller with servants. Fit in: oh,/ Belong, cried the categorizers." But Kamala Das's independent spirit cannot remain confined within the demarcated stereotyped role of a conventional woman.

Both of them in tune with their iconoclastic temperament use a language that would shock the staid conventions. With impish satisfaction Emily describes herself in "I taste a liquor never brewed" as an "inebriate and a "debauchee" and then finally crowns herself as a 'tippler' against the sun. These words would raise the puritan eyebrows and suggest an abandon and a surrender to the pleasures of Nature. Kamala Das too is a poet of revolt in the choice of theme and in the use of language. She "comes to terms with man-women relationship in blunt, bitter and concrete terms, whereas the men still pussyfoot in metaphor, metaphysics and roundaboutation." (Gauri Deshpande, 8) Love, a theme avoided by many poets, is no taboo to both. The Indian ethos gets a shock when Kamala Das gives essentially erotic tips to get a man's love:

Gift him all,
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. ("The looking
glass," *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*
68)

It was through poetry that both of them achieved a stay from all confusions and stultifications of life. For Emily, poetry as an outlet for the agonies and ecstasies of her enigmatic mind. Kamala Das also found poetic composition as a cathartic experience giving her a stay from all her frustrating love experiences. She found solace in writing, in the freedom to write. To quote Kamala Das: "I loved my writing more than I loved them (my parents) or my sons. If the need arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my doting husband, and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was, a writer." (Kamala Das, 21) For Emily, poetry was a way of spiritual and emotional satisfaction and was not a mere confession of biographical facts thinly concealed by fancy. She found her true religion in the writing of poetry: "It was the aesthetic rather than the moralistic aspects of religion that concerned her, the discipline of art

replacing the rituals and doctrines of a church." (Charles R. Anderson, 247) She found her poetry her only way to spiritual life.

Emily did not belong to the literary traditions of her predecessors nor did she emulate any models. She imitated none of her contemporaries and caught nothing of their philosophies from others. "She would . . . never consciously touch a paint mixed by another" (Richard Chase, 267). But it is possible to listen to subtle echoes in Kamala Das from the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. The influence of Walt Whitman upon her is admitted by Kamala Das herself: "Afterwards there was no poet to influence me / as Walt Whitman/" (Kamala Das, 31). "Composition" and "An Introduction" are like Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." In repetitive devices, symbolization and rhetorical structure it may be said that Kamala Das is Whitmanesque. Though nowhere Kamala Das has made an acknowledgement of her indebtedness to Emily. She seems to take after Emily -Dickinson. Learned Opinion has never considered the possibility that Kamala Das may have been inspired by Emily Dickinson's model to compose the one poem in particular "Summer in Calcutta".

Kamala Das's "Summer in Calcutta" has striking shades of Emily Dickinson's imagery and symbolism in the latter's celebration of a similar ecstasy in Nature in "I taste a liquor never brewed." The poet wants to be an inebriate of sensuous experience. "I drink, drink, drink/And drink again this/Juice of April sun," is symbolic of the sumptuous delight afforded by the warmth and heat of the April sun. With an overdose, sex-appetite sickens and she wins (emphasis mine) over the defeat of love "The April sun /squeezed/ like an orange in/My glass is as Keatsian an image as "Tankards scooped in pearl. . . ." in Emily. "I taste a liquor neverbrewed," is a nature poem bringing out the drunken delight derived from Nature. "Summer in Calcutta" is a love poem celebrating the drunken pleasure that Kamala Das enjoys from being in love with love itself.

Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das, though rooted in different cultures and divided by time and space, resemble each other in their choice of

themes-Love and Death. Emily Dickinson, despite the social emancipation that western society had given her, retired into a shell as a solitary recluse at peace with inner self. Kamala Das, though conditioned by Hindu society, sought liberated fulfilment of love. She used poetry to communicate with the world, even sensationally. Emily through a veritable telegraph of her own communed with herself. Kamala Das is an introvert turned extrovert. Emily remained an introvert throughout.

Within the space available a few peaks of similarity in the voice and vision of Kamala Das and Emily Dickinson have been pointed out. But these poets, by virtue of their unique positions as women poets of a very special kind, indeed call for an exploration and analysis of their inner experiences in an extended and indepth study.

References

- Das, Kamala. *My Story*, New Delhi: Sterling paper backs, 1977.
- Souza, de Eunice. "Kamala Das." *Osmania Journal of English Studies*. September 1977.
- Subhas, Chandra Saha. *Modern Indo-Anglian Love Poetry*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971.
- Das, Kamala. "The Guilt of Abortion." *Mirror*, Vol.XIX, No.8 June 1980.
- Johnson, Thomas H. (ed). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Little Brown, 1969.
- Wells,W Henry. "Romantic Sensibility." *Emily Dickinson: Twentieth Century Views*, ed. Richard B. Sewall, Egglewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1963.
- Gauri Deshpande, ed., Foreword, *An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1974.
- Anderson, R Charles. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*, New Yark: Holt, Rinehart at Winston, 1960.
- Chase, Richard. *Emily Dickinson*. New Yark: William Solane Ass., Inc., 1951.
- Das, Kamala. *Leaves of Grass on the Kerala Coast*,10, XIV (October 1975).