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Depiction of Women's Dilemmas in Select Poems of Kamala Das: A Review

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, M.A. (English), Ph.D. (English)



Kamala Das

www.emory.edu

Kamala Das is one of the most significant voices of Indian English poetry. She is seen as one of the most formative influences of Indian English poetry and, in recognition of her contributions, *The Times* called her “*the mother of modern English Indian poetry*” (www.timesonline.co.uk) in 2009. She won a number of awards like Asian Poetry Prize-1998, Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries-1999, Asian World Prize-2000 Ezhuthachan Award-2009, Sahitya Academy Award 2003, Vayalar Award 2001, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award 2005 for her writing. Her poetry that consists of three

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volumes of celebrated poems – Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendant (1967) and The Old Playhouse and Other poems (1973) – voices in full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian woman's journey from tradition to modernity, but also the Indian woman's sense of commitment to reality. In giving full vent to woman's causes Kamala Das is simply 'every woman who seeks love'; she is 'the beloved and the betrayed', expressing her 'endless female hungers', 'the mutual whisper at the core of womanhood' (Naik 2002 p.209).

This paper aims to explore in select poems of Kamala Das the major universal aspects that lead to women empowerment and genuine pleas for installation of their individual identity as well as dignity.

Introduction

Kamala Das articulates the despair and longing of fellow women through her writings. She protests against the oppression of the female class and wants to emancipate woman from the stereotypes of her colonized status. The poetic work of Kamala Das has engaged considerable critical attention and sustained rigorous explication. The subject of Kamala's work comprises of "woman" and the revelation of female experiences, be it trauma of an unhappy marriage or humiliation of a desireless surrender in sex or disgust at the male domination. Quest for love is certainly the perennial theme of Kamala's poetry. The poet studies love from many angles, and her treatment of the theme is characterized by increasing depth and intensity (Tilak 2009 p.106). According to the poet, love, for a woman is much more than what it is for a man. The difference in experience of love for the two is well put by Kamala:

.....In him.....the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me..... the oceans' tireless

Waiting. (An Introduction)

Women in Select Poems - An overview

1. The male desire to victimize the female troubles Kamala Das lot, and this finds adequate discussion in her most poems. Das believes that women are not just sexual
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objects, but as human as men, with their own emotions and aspirations. Therefore, she portrays her women characters in such a manner that they assume the special power and significant status. She represents them as true lovers, mothers, sisters and saints. The poetry of Kamala Das is the absolute medium of the purgation of her emotions. The frustration which she, contrary to expectations, discovered in her personal life finds out sufficient way in the form of her creations. She experiences that love, in her life, is a mechanical act of bodily union. She seems to be always in search of real identity and dignity of women. Her confessional poems are written as quest for essential woman. This is why she could boldly exclaim:

As the convict studies

His prison's geography

I study the trappings

Of your body, dear love

For I must some day find

An escape from its snare **(The Prisoner)**

2. Kamala Das strongly complains that **nobody is serious for the wishes, aspirations, individuality and even the frustrations of women.** They are all prisoners of the male ego, selfishness and greed. Kamala Das finds herself trapped and suffocated in such pitiable circumstances. In the society women are often targeted and exploited. Their household labour is not considered noteworthy. They are deprived of primary facilities of health and educations. She revolts against male domination and the consequent dwarfing of the female:

You called me wife

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and

To offer at the right movement the vitamins. Cowering

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 **(The Old Playhouse).**

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The same idea is reflected in her autobiography, **My Story**, where she describes her own pitiful lot: “*I settled down to housekeeping and sewed the button on and darned our old garments, all through the hot afternoons. In the evening, I brought for my husband his tea and plate of snags. I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried ‘get out of this trap, escape’*”.

As society is ruled and governed by men, says kamala Das, it has formulated a social code of conduct for women. It tries to trap women in wifehood and motherhood and does not allow her any chance for self realization. This ends in a sort of self-negation of woman and her dependence on men. Kamala Das wants to sweep away the outmoded values of Indian society. In one of her essays, “Why not more than one Husband”, she appears to be acting as the unofficial spokesperson of the Indian counterpart of the women’s liberation movement in the west.

3. Kamala looks very determined to revolt against the conventional society’s definition of womanhood. Even she challenges the traditional sex-roles. In many of her poems, she brings out the emotional emptiness and sterility of married life and the intensity of misery of the wife who surrenders to her husband who is repulsive, and with whom she has no emotional contact at all. According to her, marriage is the prison to women:

..... *Who can*
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? The heart,
An empty cistern,
waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence **(The Freaks)**

4. Kamala Das is against the exploitation of anything, be it body or mind. She hates the imposition of any autonomy on a person. Though she enjoys being a woman, but when her individuality is attached and when she is ordered to follow a fixed pattern of

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life, she revolts against it. Hence, she sometimes considers female body a burden. The urge for release from this bondage gives her poetry great intensity. This discloses her earnest desire to wear shirt and trousers:

I wore a shirt and my

Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

My womanliness (An Introduction).

This wish stems from the frustration and despair that she has suffered, throughout her life, for being a woman. Thus, through her defiant self-assertions, Kamala Das increases our awareness of how the dead weight of outworn values can block the emotional and intellectual growth of an individual. It is in such a rebellious mood against the conservative society that makes her ask if she is happy as a wife and woman:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried,

Beneath a man?

It is time again to come alive,

The world intends a lot beyond his six foot frame (Conflagration).

It seems that she wishes to make women aware of their freedom and individuality. She wants to liberate and emancipates them from the bondage of society. Similarly, in “Sunshine Cat,” she speaks about those crude male partners who consider a woman little better than a playmate: such charlatans embrace her; even her husband has no true love for her and makes her a mere plaything. Thus, when the writer of life comes, the husband, finding her no longer warm, leaves her crying and insane.

5. Next, Kamala Das believes love to be a fulfilment of soul realised through body – an experience of sex, beyond sex. Unfortunately, in each love relationship she finds her body accepted at the cost of her soul. As she herself opines, “*My affairs have not been sexual. I am frigid by nature. Sex, I can get enough from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for*” (My Story). She looks for a soul mate in her lover, the one who loves her body as well as her soul. She enters her conjugal life with some legitimate expectations and innocent dreams: “*I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to* Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life” (My Story).

6. Her poetry reveals the dilemmas and poignant situations faced by Kamala Das under the strain of her longing for love, sex and resultant loneliness. She faces the pains of loneliness even in her childhood. Neither her parents nor the society in which she grew helped her to free herself from this loneliness. Even marriage does not give her any solace from this kind of loneliness. In her married life she is subject to lust and sex. Instead of getting happiness in marriage she gets in it a heap of tension and despair and even danger to her existence (as revealed in “My Story”). Her longing for true love gives her neither the peace of mind nor the emotional fulfillment. In this way, her injured ‘self’ attempts to explore and identify freedom. All these pervade Kamala Das’s poetry and prompt to serve as the emotional or psychological equivalents of her own mental states. As Feroza Jussawala (1982) says: "*Her self as woman and ... her self as poet and artist .. are tied together. The 'feminine sensibility' can be described as her personal self: her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution from teenage bride to adulteress and mother figure*".

Das' uncanny honesty extends to her exploration of womanhood and love. In her poem "An Introduction", for example, the narrator says, "I am every/ Woman who seeks love". Though Amar Dwivedi (2006 P.303) criticizes Das for this "self imposed and not natural" universality, this feeling of oneness permeates her poetry. In Das' eyes, womanhood involves certain collective experiences. Indian women, however, do not discuss these experiences in deference to social mores. Das consistently refuses to accept their silence. Feelings of longing and loss are not confined to a private misery. They are invited into the public sphere and acknowledged. Das, however, seems to insist that they are normal and have been felt by women across time. She once said, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little"(Warrior Interview).

Though some might label Kamala Das as "a feminist" for her candor in dealing with women's needs and desires, Das "*has never tried to identify herself with any* Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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particular version of feminist activism" (Raveendran 1994 P.52). Her views can be characterized as "a gut response," a reaction that, like her poetry, is unfettered by other's notions of right and wrong. Nonetheless, Eunice de Souza (1994) claims that Das has "mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms" (P. 8). She has ventured into areas unclaimed by society and provided a point of reference for her colleagues. She has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very honest woman. Her poetry revolves around a hectic search for love. What distresses her most is that too often lust is passed off as love. Unlike other poets of India, she is frank and open to her readers. She openly expresses her longings for love. She is always charged with overpowering emotions and a sense of urgency.

.....*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)**

7. The poignant and provocative poetry of Kamala Das contains an **open statement about the poet's efforts to define and expose the prison** in which she finds herself trapped. Many of her poems reflect her own marriage as unsatisfying and unfulfilling, and present an image of a marriage which grew lifeless, empty and dull. The predominant theme in her poetry is the difficulty of being a woman in Indian society and finding love. She says that women find male lust and indifference, and, therefore, rejects the very institution of arranged marriage.

"Husbands and wives,

here is my advice to you.

Obey each other's crazy commands,

ignore the sane.

Turn your home into a merry

dog-house,

marriage is meant to be all this

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anyway,

being arranged in

most humorous heaven.” (Composition)

Let us see what Margalit Fox (2009) writes: “*She’s always consistently being inconsistent,*” Rosemary Marangoly George, an associate professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego, said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. “*She had many poems and many interviews where she talked about the oppression of the marriage, and then others where she talked about her husband and how much she loved him and how much he loved her and how much she missed him when he died.*” (www.nytimes.com)

Conclusion

Critics feel that with her exclusive dealing with these problems, she at times seems to be too preoccupied with love and sex. However, if viewed with a different viewpoint, she does not advocate sexual affairs; she just portrays the feminine longings of the women of the society. Her protest against the prevalent systems of the society turns her into a ‘rebel’. Her offended feminine self goes on emotional wanderings attempting to explore an identity and freedom. Nevertheless, her traditional make-up of a conventional woman is a factor which persistently forbids her from breaking away completely from the role of a traditional wife.

A conflict naturally arises between the passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe. And the conflict persists all through her life. Her poetry is concerned mostly with herself as a fiction of circumstances and sexual humiliations. Her voice is distinctly feminine intoning the organic mission of her female self’s longing for love. As she once said in an interview to the Warrior, “*I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little*”. Though some might label Das as “a feminist” for her candour in dealing with women's needs and desires, Das, according to many others has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism. It is not the attitude to look for love outside marriage but it is a plain woman's longing for love from a man.

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Kamala Das' achievements extend well beyond her verses of poetry. This gets reflected in her assertion, "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" (Warrior Interview). True to her word, Das has dabbled in painting, fiction (Warrior interview). Kamala Das highlights the grim and pathetic condition of women in Indian society. Bereft of power and honour, the woman gradually moves towards penury and death. She raises the seminal issues of women in a very befitting manner. She knows well that restoring the dignity of women must be society's prime concern. Hence, she boldly advocates empowerment of women for the overall development of society. To quote Devendra Kohli, "Her poetry is in final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman. Kamala das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman's ambivalence, giving expression to it more nakedly than any other Indian woman poet..... (cited by Raghukul Tilak P. 109).

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