

A CRITIQUE OF ALIENATION AND QUEST OF LOVE IN

THE WORKS OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das's literary works revolved around the endless and hectic search of love. The deep frustration in the Kamala Das's Poetry stemmed out from her early childhood due to the domineering patriarchy and then due to the fruitless sexual relationship with her husband as well as with other men. What distressed and made her feel isolated was that too often lust was substituted with love. She felt estranged from her husband due to his harsh treatment & domination. Besides she also felt distanced from the society because society always make it possible for the men to suppress the feminine feelings and consequently poetic persona had to escape from the lustful world and flow towards the spiritual world. The aim of the paper is to examine the varied moods in which the poet felt alienated herself in the endless quest of Love and ultimately found solace in the sanctuary of the bodiless.

KEYWORDS: Domineering, Feminine, Patriarchy, Poetic Persona, Suppress

INTRODUCTION

Alienation and quest of love are central to the poetry of Kamala Das. In fact the two have an intimate relationship with each other. It is the incomplete and endless search of love that results from the anguish of the endless compromise of a woman at each and every stage of life and consequently the sense of alienation sprouts up. The agony of the alienation and separation gives birth to the sad poems written by Kamala Das at each stage of her life. Normally her alienation had been in three phases- first her child hood when she became the victim of patriarchy and faced mistreatment and indifference. Besides her marriage marks the second phase of alienation as it alienated her from her grandmother and the Nalapat house and consequently from her husband as the union was meant to be only physical union and she felt betrayed at every step. Later on the third phase marks her escape from the corporeal, consequently transcending the barrier of sex and treating the infinite as her redeeming finale.

Her Complete Alienation from Her Child Hood

The profound pain is reflected in some of the poems of Kamala Das which resulted from her feeling of alienation from early childhood. As one can gather from her autobiography *My Story*, the poet felt alienated from her father who never directly told her that he was disappointed by the color of her skin but it was evident from his every gesture. She remembers how her father used to repeatedly shout at her and her brother to drink the purgative and told her grandma to apply turmeric and oil on Kamala's skin. She wanted her father's love and affection but she did not get it the way she wanted it. As mentioned her poem "Next to Indira Gandhi" from her poetic collection *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* she writes:

Father, I asked you now without fear

Did you want me

Did you ever want a daughter

Did I disappoint you much

With my skin as much as yours. (118)

According to *My Story* Kamala Das also felt alienated from her mother who all the time used to write poetry and had no time for children. Das's mother very naturally taught her to accept her puberty. Her mother taught her to accept her menstrual cycle as an inevitable fact for procreation. She explains herself and her brother in her autobiography as the children of loveless parents and she could feel burden of such loveless relationship. She says, 'our instincts told us to keep away from the limelight' (12). "Limelight" might mean exposure and fondness. She observes that her parents "took us for granted and considered us mere puppets moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that are developing independently"(74).

Child's behavior is much influenced by the parental psychology and relation with their kids. It seems that Das's parents did not cheer her poetic talent. She remarkably states in her autobiography *My Story* "I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses....." (15). Kamala Das notes that her parents were least concerned with what she felt yet she was much influenced by her mother's poetic passion and sacred writings. That's why she started writing poems at the age of six and each of her poems on her dolls made her sad.

Das was married off at a very early age of 15 and rather she was unhappy about her marriage. She appeared to be passive and submissive who was dominated by her parents for all her pre marriage decisions. She appeared to be puppet in the hands of her parents and was not asked for her views about an ideal husband. She expresses, "I was a burden and a responsibility, neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed" (67).

Her Alienation from Her Husband

Kamala Das felt alienated from her husband due to the way her marriage was fixed and his physical advances towards her without any emotional attachment. Kamala Das has given version of her relations with her husband before their marriage. In the beginning she used to admire him but one cannot find any account of her love and attraction for her hubby as a lover. In *My Story* she expresses her idea about her ideal lover. She says, "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 be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts (69)."

Even in her teens she viewed marriage as very ideal and romantic union. She expresses, "I thought then that love was flowers in the hair, it was the yellow moon lighting up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear (73)."

But suddenly, Das fell down to the worldly realities from her illusionary world. Love became a skin communicated thing between her and her husband. Her husband called her wife but did not give her love or affection which a wife expects. She became a plaything for her husband. She says, "At the end of the month, experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness I grew old, my face changed from a child's to a woman's and my limbs were sore and fatigue (90)."

She further says. "I was a victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children" (69).

The poem entitled *The Old Playhouse* from her collection *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* shows Kamala Das's complete estrangement from her husband. She says that woman is a lone survivor and a sensuous figure that gratify the men's sexual ventures. She has used a very strong language to express dissatisfaction and alienation for her husband. Addressing her husband she says that he had called her wife but she was the victim of man's physical hunger and did not give the love and warmth which she deserves. He had certainly made love to her and felt pleased by her bodily responses of love making. However, he failed to realize that her response of love making was purely physical and therefore, artificial because she never experienced any feeling of attachment and oneness with him. Kamala Das further says that her husband had no idea of love and affection for a wife and he treated his wife as merely a housewife and a physical partner. He used to press her whole body gratifying her sexual hunger in the process and making his bodily fluids mingle with hers. Das says:

....You called me wife
 I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
 To offer at the right moment the vitamins
 Cowering beneath your monstrous ego, I ate
 The magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will (1)

Kamala Das next tells of the domestic duties which she used to execute as a wife and as a housewife. Cowering beneath his monstrous ego, she had felt reduced to the position of a dwarf and had even lost her identity. This poem shows a complete bitterness and alienation towards her husband. Then there is another poem entitled *The Freaks* in which she openly says that his manner of caressing his hand aroused only in her "skin's lazy hungers", and certainly not more than that. Das brings emotional emptiness and intensity of the melancholy of the wife who is not at all attached to her husband. The *Sunshine Cat* is another poem expressing her complete disillusionment towards her husband. Here she describes her husband as a self-centered and cowardly man who never loved and always used her properly. She was treated her like a prisoner in her husband's house and eventually she was reduced to a "cold and half-dead woman", no longer any use to any man from the sexual point of view.

Her Alienation from Her Other Sexual Partners

Kamala Das also felt alienated from her other sexual partners as explained in her poems. The poem *The invitation* from her collection *The Descendents* is the narrative of the mental agony of a frustrated and disturbed woman. This poem gives an account of a woman who is highly dissatisfied with her lover who used to come to her in the intervals of his office work to make love with her. She surely enjoyed having physical love with him and the bed in which they made love became paradise for her. It was the memorable moment of physical ecstasy that sustains her even during the hard times. A. N. Diwedi in his book writes "the poet rejects the way of the sea and prefers to shrink or grow in her own way. She cannot forget the self contained intensity of the moment of sexual lover:

All through that summer's afternoons we lay
 On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding
 Into throbbing suns. The head had
 Blotted our thought.(11)

But ultimately the lover's interest in her had faded and he gives her no commitment to return and love her emotionally. Consequently she felt so depressed that she wanted to commit suicide by jumping into the sea which seemed to be inviting her to drown herself in itself. So, the fact that her lover has gone never to return, the sea invites her "Come in, come in" to emphasize that the only option left is to get alienated from her lover and accept sea as her companion.

There is another Volume of Das's poems *Summer in Calcutta* in which the poem entitled *The Sunshine Cat* portrays her disenchantment for the other men with whom she began to sleep after completely frustrated with husband's harsh treatment and unemotional manner of making love with her. Her husband used to look at her at the time when she performed the sexual act with other men:

They did this to her, the men who know her, the men
 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..... (51)

She used to cling to the chests of those other men, and to burrow her face into their smells and their young lusts. She tried her level best to win their affection but they all openly told her that they could not give her that warmth and care because it was not in their nature and the result of this treatment was that she just lay in the bed weeping and building walls of tears feeling alienated from them.

I do not love, I cannot love, and it is not
 In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.
 They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
 A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping,
 For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears.(51)

In this poem she has spoken about her husband in disparaging terms, and made no secret of her fruitless efforts to please the other men with whom she has been sleeping. Only the streak of sunshine which fell at the doorstep looked like a yellow cat, gives her company all the day. But when the winter came, the streak of sunshine was also reduced to the hair thin line making her feel isolated and depressed.

Alienation from the Material World

In her personal life Kamala Das always faced frustration because her marriage proved to be an absolute failure. She could not receive the kind of love and affection from her husband which hankered for. When she was carving for love the only option left to relieve her frustration and purge her feelings was to find a better alternative i.e. spirituality. She

identified Krishna as her true lover. Das became alienated from the material world and her search for genuine love now became synonymous to Radha- Krishna syndrome. Having the traditional belief of confluence with divine and inhibited surrender to the almighty , Das revealed her feelings in her poems – for example “Radhakrishna”, “The Maggots”, “The Phantom Lotus”, “Sunset”, “Radha”, “Ghanshyam”, and later on her poetic collection “Ya Allah”.

Mr. A.N.Diwedi in his book explains that Das sometimes gives a mythical structure to her quest for true and ideal love, and identifies it with the Radha-Krishna myth or with Mira Bai’s abandoning the ties of marriage as expressed in her poem “*Vrindavan*”:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind,
And the flute, luring her
From home and her husband. (116)

In the quest of love that Das’s literary metamorphosis represents the poet’s amalgamation with Krishna and later on with Allah in her poetry as well as in her autobiography is presented as an abiding culmination. In her Krishna poems she gave mythological framework for her search of true love, and identifies with Radha-Krishna or with Mira Bai breaking the marital bonds in search of Lord Krishna. The male body that ultimately imprisons her female self is the body of her divine lover Krishna. It is through her love for Lord Krishna she endeavors to discover her identity and soul as explained in her autobiography *My Story* :

“Free from that last of human bondage I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show has ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet.” (195)

For Das Krishna becomes ultimate matter and the human lover just the short lived shadows. In Das’s later works she opines that human ties are just accidental and confined only to this material world. The oneness of soul with the Almighty is the only kind of bond that is everlasting:

In Actuality who is he (husband)? Who am I? Who are these three boys who call themselves my children?
We are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal, and perishable.
The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He.(148)

The poet also rejects lust in one of her poems called “*The Prisoner*”. She tells that deceitful lust is mortal and is of no significance. A fine comparison has been done between prisoner and the woman involved in the sexual act. The woman in shape of a prisoner is glued to her lover and locked in the jail of desires. It means woman in this poem finds herself caught in the prison of worldly fantasies and wants to get out of it. The poem also has spiritual meaning that soul is trapped in the physical boundaries. After sometime, the soul yearns to become free. Kamala Das realizes the difference between perishable and the imperishable. She says that Krishna is the ultimate reality and the human lover is just an illusion.

Irshad Gulam Ahmed writes “The elemental fluid imagery with its obvious sexual overtone suggests that the way fluid is absorbed in the earth the soul is absorbed in the divine Being, the only indestructible entity. In the intensity of her relationship with Krishna, the Poetic persona as literary incarnation of Radha finds herself imprisoned in the body of her

Lord. This surrender is also her supreme delight.”(97). Kamala Das writes of the pains and sufferings, of disappointment and of fulfillment as well as acknowledging the Almighty God as her real & ideal lover. Pier Paolo Piciucco in his book opines that trapped in the bitter relationship with an insensitive male, the poet escapes from the material world to divinely spiritual world and finds the ultimate solace as explained in the poem “Request”:

“When I die,
Do not throw
The meat and bones away
But pile them up,
And let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth on this earth?
What love was worth in the end?”(155)

This poem shows the sense of disgust of the physicality and meaningless of the poetess life. This poem is also related to alienation and painful quest of love which is a never-ending process. Contrary to her passion with physicality, she affirms the need to look beyond the earthly desires, transcend the human flesh and yearns for divine love rather than the worldly fantasies.

Even when she converted to Islam she quoted that she has just renamed Him into Mohammed and she still loves Krishna and that love will never die. The essence of Krishna is in her, It’s only that the name has changed. Her poetic collection “Ya Allah” – Das’s one of the celebrated collections of poem after her conversion to Islam reflects the same spiritual feeling as it was before. It contains the true reflection of her spiritual personality. In one of her poems “Submission” Kamala Das (or Kamala Surayya’s) (www.Jaihoon.com) says:

The body and soul; for ages
They were intimate companions.
The soul lives in the body;
And the body is its robe
When the body departs,
The soul would be naked (19)

Das’s spiritual poems reflect love, the love that does not reflect the attachment to the human flesh but to the bodiless. In her spiritual world she longs to achieve alienation from the corporeal and achieve complete divinity by transcending the tiers of ordinary human sentiments and submitting herself to the permanent lover by leaving the temporal love.

CONCLUSIONS

The life of Kamala Das is the voyage of her struggle with the other world as it is. Such a struggle is quite evident in her literary works. Kamala Das is one of those significant Indian poets writing in English whose poetry is all about her pangs and pains, about the intensely felt alienation from the society and her failure to achieve completeness in the relationships. The profound anguish in Das's poetry stems from her experience of alienation from her early childhood. This propelled in her acute thirst of identity in the uncongenial atmosphere of domineering patriarchy that failed to recognize and throughout misunderstood her. Such alienation stemmed out of the loneliness which became one of the most persistent themes in her poetry. Then later on as a wife and as a lover she coerced into a state of utter remoteness and found her very survival threatened. She found herself oscillated between different unfinished relationships, with her existence divided and herself fragmented. When her physical survival was at stake she moved to the Almighty to cast away the garment of her physicality and found a new asylum in the shelter of the God- the Krishna, the Allah. She declared she wears the body without joy. It must be "re-defined, de-veined, de-blooded" (from the poem "I shall Some Day" from *Summer in Calcutta*). On the other hand, Alienation accelerated the mature transformation of Das's from child to a woman and then from a physical lover to a spiritual lover. The detachment from the worldly desires and attachment to the divinity ventilated her soul and made her to reach to the supreme indifference to the human bone.

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