



## **HUMAN IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Kamala Das in her poetic exercise ventilates her ideas and expressions with an interesting use of a wide range of human imagery that not only manifests the precision of her understanding of her life's lacuna but also her mastery of finding an objective correlative to depict her emotion in words. Hers is a life of continual quest for true love with an experience of unemotional personal relationship leading to sexual violence and realization of erosion of her female entity. Her traumatic experience in love has always made her feel a wretched victim to male carnal desire. Dissatisfied and dismayed, Kamala Das ventilates male approach to lovemaking in terms of comparing her husband with some animals who share the same spirit of violence and cruelty in lovemaking as he does. At the same time, some she uses to express her life of bondage and disgrace. My attempt in this paper is to trace some of the various uses of human imagery in her poems and explore their relevance.*

**Keywords:** ornamentation, aesthetic pleasure, concretization of emotions, Indianess etc.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Image in poetry is the making of a picture in terms of words. It is a device for making the experience of life vivid and life like. Poet deficient in this art of image making fail in his /her vocation, it exploits different sensory perceptions and pin down his experiences with precision and thereby evokes a living and pulsating picture of life. A.N. Dwivedi says: "Imagery serves twin-purposes together—that of 'ornamentation' and that of arousing 'aesthetic pleasure' in the reader" (2000:65). The process of 'image-making' involves the skillful use of metaphors, similes, contrasts, and may be equated to 'picture-making' or 'concretization of emotions'. Symbol is the use of an object for signifying something that is beyond the literal denotation of the object. It is a potent tool arising out of the vibrant

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imaginative perception of reality. A work of art without proper symbolism is as worthless as a flower without fragrance. However rich and profound a thought it may be; it has a very little significance in the realm of art and literature unless it is woven into the fabric of images and symbols. History is replete with instances that most of the poets thrived and rose to eminence with the help of putting thoughts into the pattern of images and symbols.

Kamala Das was influenced by the imagist writers and while she was composing her own poetry, she resorted to the imagist and symbolistic techniques in order to render it impressive, precise and compact. Kamala Das's diction is marked by simplicity and clarity. It is the language of her emotions and she speaks to her readers as one human being to another. In this lies her originality and her distinction. There are no abstractions, no complexities and no intricate, tortuous constructions. Her images are drawn from the familiar and the common place, are symbolic and thus they increase the expressive range of her language. The sun and heat, house and window, cremation and burning, objects of nature, human anatomy, sleep, sea, the mythic grandmother and krishana constitute her whole range of imagery. One of the dominant images in Mrs. Das's poetry is that of 'the human body'. While male body is a source of corruption and exploitation whereas the female body is a storehouse of beauty and chastity misused to the maximum. The poetess in her poem "The Freaks" presents the subtle analysis of the male physiology:

*He talks, turning a sun-stained  
cheek to me, his mouth, a dark  
cavern where Stalactites of  
Uneven teeth gleam, his right  
hand on my knee.....  
..... can't this man with  
nimble fingure- tips unleash  
nothing more alive than he  
skin's lazy hungers ? (Das, 1965:10)*

The male anatomy furnishes her with images of horror and ugliness. It is represented as repulsive and destructive. A lover is generally attractive and pleasant to the beloved, but here he is repulsive to the woman. His cheeks are sun-stained and so brownish in colour, and to her, his mouth seems to be ugly and horrible like 'A Dark Cavern'. His teeth are uneven and they seem to her to be like the white, calciferous growth which often forms on the roofs of caves. Images of ugliness here focus on her attitude of rejection and negation. It is symbolic of her revolt against male ego and the male-dominated world. It is obvious that her relationship with her husband is a forced one; there is no love lost between the two and the woman is there only because as a wife she must submit herself to the lust of her husband.

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Through images of repulsion and horror she brings out the emotional emptiness and sterility of her married life and the intensity of her misery as a wife who had to submit to her husband whom she found repulsive, and with whom she had no emotional contact at all. She is conscious of the beauty and glory of the human anatomy and is attracted by it, but its raging lustfulness disgusts her and hence the use of images like these cited above. She is also conscious of disease and decay to which the human flesh is heir to, and this awareness also colours her imagery. She says in the following lines of the poem "The Looking Glass":

*notice the perfection of his limbs, his eyes reddening under  
shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,  
dropping towels, and the jerky way he  
uninates, All the fond details that make  
Him male and your only man. 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. (Das, 1967:25)*

The images concretize her fond awareness of the intimate human details. They express adequately her abiding love for the human body as also her dislike to it. Indeed, images are her themes as well as the modes of expression. They dramatize her passion and impart certain depth and significance to her feelings. Another recurrent image is that of the sun and the heat it generates. It is used most frequently as a symbol of lust & corruption. 'In The Dance of the Eunuchs' and 'Summer in Calcutta' and in a host of other poems the sun with its scorching heat is an agent of pain, suffering & lustfulness. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" is powerful and bold and displays an admirable sense of proportion in the use of imagery and metaphor. It displays a very skilled use of imagery and symbolism.

The poetess is eminently successful in creating the impression of summer heat. The poem consists of excellent images. The poetess sympathizes with the macho-man who neither constitutes male nor female genre, yet suffer a peculiar irony of fate:

*It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came  
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals  
Richly clashing, & anklets jingling, jingling,  
Jingling, .....Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with  
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and  
They danced, oh ! they danced till they bled. (Das 1965:10)*

In the poem “In love” the drama of sterile love which brings no emotional fulfilment is enacted against the background of scorching heat of the summer scene, a symbol of the poet’s own scorching frustration as a woman. The title is ironic because poetess is not at all in love, but disgusted with the man who had her body. A sense of revulsion takes possession of the poetess and this is expressed through the use of powerful imagery. She compares the mouth of her lover to the sun which brings, in turn, both the heat and loss of love:

*Of what does the burning mouth  
of sun, burning in today's  
Sky, remind me..... oh, yes, his  
Mouth, and..... his limbs like pale and  
Carnivorous plants reaching  
out for me, and the sad lie  
of my unending lust. (Das, 1973:1)*

We find a network of evocative and concrete imagery in the poem “The Old play- house “The title of the poem is a metaphor. The poetess compares herself to an old play house with its all the lights put out. Light here is symbol of hope and poetic illumination of the poetess and lights put out symbolises her lost imagination and aspiration for flying high in the literary sky. She is no longer an imaginative person able to unrevel a new world with the help of her poetic imigination. She was completely in the grip of her husband. This captivity has been inferred through the opening line of the poem:

*You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her (Das, 1973:1)*

The swallow symbolises freedom and a carefree life and taming of swallow suggests the loss of freedom or captivity. The poetess is now a captive in the hands of her husband. The obsession of suppression and despair has further been strengthened in the following lines of the poem

*No more singing, no more dance,  
my mind is an old playhouse with all its lights put out. (I bid)*

Kamala Das makes frequent use of the Radha-Krishna and Mirabai legends to provide a mythic frame-work to extra-marital sex in her poetry. Krishna is the mythical lover, and Radha and Mirabai are the eternal seekers for their object of love, Krishna. These mythical personages are re-currently used as symbols to sanctify the quest of Kamala’s women persona for emotional fulfilment outside marriage. They also bear testimony to her

'Indianness' which is also borne out by her use of typically Indian flora and fauna, scenes & sights, for her purposes.

In conclusion, we may affirm that Kamala Das's wide ranging application of images & symbols in her poetry is immaculate. Her images are functional rather than decorative. They are quite striking and arresting and are used with dexterity and aptness. She is not always in the knack of image-making and creating symbols and she resorts to this device when it becomes necessary.

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