



KAMALA DAS: POETIC REFLECTIONS OF CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL IMAGES

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is regarded to be India's foremost confessional poet writing in English today. Her frank utterances and powerful use of words with immediate pin-pointed effects leave the readers overwhelmed. Admittedly, her themes provide a direct contact with the readers confounded with intimate subjects, possessing an intense quality of an impressive writing. Her passions and boiling cauldron of emotions stir deep chords in the mind of readers leaving them baffled and restless. Her poems give voice to several pains and pressures that a modern Indian woman has to face in order to uphold the sanctity of domestic happiness and marital relationship. An imperceptive reader might feel offended by her unorthodox flashes and neurotic obsessions, but her frank, bold and revelatory handling of her actual experiences awaken one's sympathy towards her in the face of a conventional society.

INTRODUCTION:

Kamala Das's poetry has been called a "sort of compulsion-neurosis",¹ where her own personality serves as a raw material for her poetry. She has dealt with private humiliations and sufferings. Her poems are concerned mostly with herself as a victim of circumstances and sexual humiliations. Being subjective and autobiographical, she lets us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche relating to the paradoxes and complexities of the female sensibility. Confessional poets are generally concerned with their own disturbed consciousness or disrupted self and its impact on the hostile world. Though the origins of this poetry can be traced to Shakespearean soliloquies, Wordsworth's autobiographies or Browning's dramatic monologues, it was Robert Lowell who practised such writings more



effectively and called it “confessional poetry”. This kind of revealing inner emotions is particularly characteristic of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das in the modern era. Confessional poetry in the modern times is “an attempt to present the poet’s own naked self and unrationalised, uncensored actual feelings and behaviour.”² Kamala Das, as a true confessional poet, unleashes the psychological pressure that overrides her sensibility. Her poems are marked by effective candour in exploring the miseries of ‘self’. Like other confessional poets, Das’s ‘self’ becomes the nucleus of her poetry and the speaker acts as the central character in her poems.

Poems of Kamala Das fulfil all the requirements of confessional poetry. Her themes deal with personal and private experiences, accurately exploring intimate subjects like marriage, love-affairs, sexual life, childhood reminiscences and terrifying incidents of the adult world. In fact all her themes can be coalesced under a single theme of love, lust and frustration. Bruce King discovers a number of important themes in her poetry including marriage and love, man-woman relationship, soul and body contrasts and the need for assertion and domination. He writes that with her frankness and boldness Das has

*. . . opened areas in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling; she showed how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the poetic world.*³

It has been said that it is a predicament of her inner self that manifests itself in her poetry. She believes in reality and writes her poems largely based on the real experiences. In her autobiography *My Story*, she remarks:

*One’s real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inward, will realise that his routes have no end.*⁴

Referring to the modernist movement in poetry, she believes in sincere treatment of the material and therefore shakes off the old poetic norms. Regarding ‘self’ at the centre, she gives unabashed expression to her personal themes and consequently transforms them into the semblance of universal truth. Like other confessional poets, she has a tremendous capacity for ruthless self analysis and a tone of utter sincerity.

Confessional poets speak in terms of an I-emphasised lyricism and the speaking voice of twentieth century English poetry unmistakably becomes that of the poet himself. Such poetry is generally a first person rendition, where the poet tries to fit himself as the sole character. She has described this first person pronoun as:



*Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I; in this world.
He is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath.*

She views the poet's "I" as self sufficient which fits in the poetry as tightly as "sword in its sheath". This is not true for Kamala Das as her "I" is more exposed to the public eye all the time and does not hide in a sheath. In "An Introduction" she asks each and everyone "Who are you" and "You" is turned into "I", as an echo is heard back or if she is facing a mirror with her own reflection in front.

She projects a psychological equivalent for her mental state and gladly bares her life and personality. She writes:

*A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality. I
could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.⁵*

Because of such a predicament, her poetry becomes a reflection of her life in all its nakedness. She deals with private humiliations and her poetic self violates the chiselled, systematic and traditional norms to follow an unconventional and modern point of view.

We find in Das's poetry a bold treatment of private life in an attempt to redefine her identity through ruthless self-analysis. In "An Introduction" she struggles to keep her identity against "the categorizers" who ask her to "fit in". Having refused to choose a name and a role, she painfully asserts "I too call myself I" due to necessity to define her struggling identity. She comments on her own writings:

*What I narrate are the ordinary
events of an
ordinary life.*

It is an humble expression because certainly her experiences cannot be considered as common or ordinary. Her truths of life are far more complex and sometimes hard to believe in. Das's posture of self investigation is tremendous and she feels consoled by sharing her inner feelings with the readers. She writes in "Composition":

*I also knew that by confessing
By peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul.*



Her frightening frankness and candid confrontations lead her to fit in among other confessional poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. Her experiences with 'self' are unique and separate. Her poetry is, no doubt, an outcome of her desperate urge to peel off the layers of her self to reveal the terrors, pains, miseries, vexations and frustrations that threaten to engulf her. She distances herself from civilisation and society, and she believes in openness:

*Civilisation irks me with its cunning ways
I connect only with candour.*

Her poetry has a special force and appeal primarily because of the honesty and candour with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual, with a distinctive identity.

Kamala Das's major poetical works were published in the form of three collections entitled Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967) and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973). Apart from these, another unusual book entitled Tonight, This Savage Rite (1979) was published in collaboration with another Indian poet Prithvi Nandy, interacting on a common theme of love. Das contributed thirty four poems to this volume. Kamala Das is considered at her best in a separate collection of her new poems, published as Collected Poems in 1984. The themes of most of her poems circle around the variations in respect of man-woman relationship. The intensity of her love-poetry arises out of the duality of her existence. Unlike those of Emile Bronte and Emily Dickinson, her poems are intense, individual in her sexual obsession and in dealing with the themes of marital love and lust.

Kamala Das may be said to be probably the most 'feminine' among Indian women poets writing in English. Her feminine sensibility is manifested not against the male oriented world but in her eagerness to receive pure love and security. She attempts the deepest and the most permanent aspirations and doubts of the woman. Her feminine self articulates her awareness of her surrounding, its sordidness, boredom, ugliness, horror and hurts received in an insensitive, largely man-made world. She has tried to reconcile the world of flesh and that of spirit and has found herself destined to seek a definition of her self as a woman and as an artist. Writing about her role as a female poet and a writer, Feroza Jussawalla remarks that "Das's 'self' as a woman and . . . her 'self' as an artist are tied together".⁶ Her feminine sensibility revealed in her poems is related to her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution from a teenage bride to an adulteress and then a mother-figure. Das is, essentially, a poet of modern Indian woman's ambivalence, giving it a more naked expression than any other Indian woman poet. Her poems possess a good deal of conventional make-up. They are filled with orthodox references and traditional images, projecting a state of culturally bound traditional South Indian married woman.



It will be worthwhile to discuss variations of themes in her poetry. Each volume of poems may be discussed separately in order to bring out the confessional element in her poems. She speaks with a confessional urgency on behalf of her woman-persona. “Her poems”, says Kohli,

“have more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role from the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity.”⁷

Her first volume, *Summer in Calcutta*, projects the identity crisis that her feminine and poetic self encounters. The poet’s childhood memories are attached with the city of Calcutta but she is afraid of this metropolis life and longs for an escape. She writes in her autobiography:

It was from Calcutta that I lost my faith in the essential goodness of human beings.⁸

She, however, drew an inspiration to write sad poems from this city. In her autobiography she writes:

. . . yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw for the first time the eunuchs dance.⁹

The poems of *Summer in Calcutta*, not only describe about the city Calcutta alone, but also relate the traumatic experiences of Das’s childhood and early married life and also her agonised response to the external world.

The opening poem in this volume, “The Dance of the Eunuchs”, dramatises the crisis emerging from the sense of persecution, reluctant inadequacy and a quest for fulfilment of love, which lead to an awareness to the barrenness of the passion and vacant ecstasy.

*Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn - - -
Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy.*

The appalling aridity is suggested by the hot weather and “fiery gulmohur” enhances the impression of dryness, drought and rottenness in them.



*It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance.*

In this poem, the feminine self of Kamala Das is caught in a helpless situation where her man fails to fulfil the craving of her heart for tenderness and love beyond desire. The poem objectifies the poet's strangled desire within, through an external, familiar situation.

Another poem "The Freaks" holds the poet in a rather helpless situation when the minds of herself and her lover:

*. . . Wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire . . .*

She identifies love with nothing but a sort of 'a grand, flamboyant lust', and she remains

*An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence . . .*

She declares herself in a shamefully helpless situation "I am a Freak", mocking her feminine integrity. The woman persona is filled with utter disgust, isolated in despair due to an incomplete love. The poem deals with the theme of disillusionment in love, and an unfulfilled love and a desire of lust are suggested by a series of metaphors like "sun-stained cheeks", "mouth like a dark cavern", and "stalactites of uneven teeth".

The poem "In Love" brings the poet face to face with the haunting memory of her unfulfilled urges. Her love is merely a "skin-communicated thing":

*This skin communicated
Thing that I dare not yet in
His presence call our Love.*

This awareness intensifies her identity crisis and makes her realise that she is nothing but an object of mistrust and humiliation at the hands of her own man. In deep-rooted anguish, she describes the state of her heart and soul as follows:

*My heart -- the wretched being is today
Cold, like those pale green mirrors
One sees in corridors . . .*



In “In Bats”, a poem on a similar theme, she writes:

*My soul today is on its blinded most
Frightened flight, like a bat, that finds itself
In an alien zone of light . . .*

For Kamala Das poetic character, physical love and the loyalty of the body are mere abstractions, and she realises that “she cannot surrender to such abstractions which have at best, only utilitarian value.¹⁰ Her experiences in love and marriage become traumatic and her poems “. . . [a] fierce expression of the emotionalism caused by frustration when love turns into its opposite solely because of male insensitivity and self-centredness”.¹¹

Kamala Das’s poetry becomes a protest of feminine self against husband and also against the constraints of married life, fever of domesticity, male-domination and male-egotism. In this protest, the feminine self seeks physical love outside marriage and desires to be independent. She tries to

*. . . enter other’s
Lives, and
Make every trap of lust
A temporary home.*

“A Relationship” is a poem which explicitly identifies love with physical desires and by ‘entering other’s lives’ she tries to satisfy her own growing personal need. She

*. . . groaned
And moaned, and constantly yearned
For a man from
Another town . . .*

in order to distract herself from the mood of sadness and loneliness. But in spite of her efforts to pull her feminine self to her desires, she could not escape from the sense of frustration: and the awareness of being a prisoner of her own loneliness surrounds her. She reached to a conclusion:

*It is a good world
Packed with distractions.*



She realised that those attempted distractions were an unpleasant aspects of life, which her true self could never accept sincerely:

*. . . and then my hunger for a
Particular touch waned
And one day I sent him some roses and slept
Through the night.*

Kamala Das's poems emphasise and explores her frank confession of her sexual life. Such physical desires are an integral part of her feminine sensibility. Frustrated by the unprecedented love, she surrenders her will to her man:

*. . . while your arms hold
My woman-form, his hurting arms
Hold my very soul.*

The same feeling recurs in "A Relationship":

*That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My Betrayer's arms.*

Critics consider these records of the poet's love-hate relationship with her lover as one which she cannot either shake off or bear permanently, a true confession of the inescapable.¹² Devindra Kohli calls such love-hate relationship as "Indian woman's ambivalence",¹³ while Robert Phillips regards such confessions as "revelations . . . about the personal vexations and predicaments of her feminine self".¹⁴ Kamala Das's true feminine sensibility is expressed in a form where two aspects of her -- as a woman and as an artist -- coalesce into each other. The hopes, struggles, desires, disgust and pain are all part of her poems, yet the quest for an emotional liaison and her frustration to establish a communion with herself becomes the central burden of her poetry. It has been termed as a "conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe".¹⁵

We can observe two different sides to her poems. At one side Das depicts a deep exaltation which epitomises her powerful sorrows and failures. She finds in her husband a "burning mouth of sun", and "his limbs are like pale and carnivorous plants". In "The Freaks" each of her lover's aspect is presented scorn fully:

*He talks, turning a sun stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark*



*Cavern, where the stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam . . .*

Many a time with utter disgust, Das views a male body as an agent of corruption, a symbol of corrosion and as a destroyer of feminine chastity.

Ironically, against total contrast of her expressive mood which abounds in of Kamala Das's, poetry, her poem "A Relationship" depicts the mood of confession and revulsion that takes possession of the poet. She admits:

*I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must some day find
An escape from its snare.*

But following this reversal of all expectations, there is not an escape but a submission which ultimately amounts to a victory over pain and defeat, a sort of gloss on the triumph of life and the celebration and happiness over this triumph is expressed in the poem of "In Love":

*Now that I love you,
Curled like an old, mongrel
My life lies, content
In you . . .*

Regarding her sensibility, Devindra Kohli remarks :

*The conflict between love and lust is so much interrelated that. . . it
is difficult to say whether Kamala Das succeeds in resolving her
tension between physical and spiritual aspect of love.¹⁶*

In her "Foreword" to Kamala Das's anthology Summer in Calcutta, Sophia Wadia comments:

*I cannot enter into some of the moods and sentiments conveyed in
these poems but all the same find the literary artistry of much
interest.¹⁷*

Das's poetry is basically a confessional act where irremediable 'Self' becomes the poetic nucleus. Her description of physical love is so intense that many critics describe her as a love poet. C.N. Srinath, for example, comments:



*Love --- desire, genuine love, love on various planes is Kamala
Das's main preoccupation, her obsession.¹⁸*

She reveals her typical feminine persona by being love-lorn and in her poems, she illustrates the garb of Radha waiting for Krishna to redeem her suffering in love. "The Testing of Sirens" is a proof of her endless search for an eternal and perfect lover which is among the central themes of her poems.

The poem "Summer in Calcutta" derives its poetic and aesthetic meaning from the poet's intimacy with the torturous Indian Summer. The April sun brings a warm intoxication:

*What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass?*

The warmth of the April sun flows into the poet's veins providing a temporary triumph over life's despair. The simile of the sun providing warmth and energy in the form of juice which provides happiness and satisfaction is contrasted with here pain and despair. This poem has a Keatsian style of blending of moods or sentiments. Devindra Kohli has noticed some similarities between "Summer in Calcutta" and Keat's "Ode on Indolence" where the sun works as a complex symbol of indolence and inspiration. The lines "my worries / Doze" and

*. . . Wee bubbles ring
My glass, like a bride's
Nervous smile, and meet
My lips--*

Inspire the poet and relax her worries. Similarly, in Keat's world we have disturbing images of Love, Ambition and Poesy, and

*. . . ripe was the drowsy hour
. . . the blissful cloud of summer indolence
Benumb'd my eyes: my pulse grew less.*

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar feels that Das "Scatters its fall-out of heat, sweat and weariness over the entire volume of Summer in Calcutta".¹⁹ According to Kohli, Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale" is about the beauty of the nightingale's song and Das's poem is an Indian poet's creative reaction to the torture to the Indian summer.²⁰

The sun acts as an obsession to most Indian poets, and in Kamala Das's poetry it represents drabness, hostility and lust. Summer in Calcutta, most of her poems ooze the summer heat and dust and the symbol of sun fills the veins with "noble venom". In the poems like "The Conflagration" and "Convicts", the lustful lovers meet like "hot sun", raging to burn. The "touch of sun" in "Forest Fire" is the resurgence of sensual passion, while the "angry sun" in "Drama" foreshadows the sense of hurt caused by the derisive laughter of the audience:

*A red, red lamp above
Like an angry sun.*

The sun here is a symbol of passion, heat and painful lust in youth.

Poetry may be communication of an abstract feeling or a direct presentation of an individual experience. Kamala Das believes in an honesty of expression and sincerity to one's own feelings and emotions. She writes in English, because it comes naturally to her "as cawing is to crows and roaring is to lions". Despite regular protests from her critics, she continued to write in English, because she considered it "as a human speech, a speech of mind". She further says that

. . . The language one employs is not important. What is important is the thought contained by the words.²¹

In her well-known poem "An Introduction" she forcefully maintains :

*. . . I am an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two . . .*

Then, again, more she emphatically replies to the protesters:

*. . . Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.*

Kamala Das does not have any intention of giving an Indian flavour to her language. She possesses an unmistakable instinct for words and phrases that would correctly reflect her inner turbulence. Nissim Ezekiel once wrote that "the best poets wait for words"²², but words



in clusters waited for Kamala Das. She has also disproved T. S. Eliot's contention that "it is easier to think in a foreign language than it is to feel in it".²³ Without any hesitation she uses Indian terminology and phrases when occasion demands their use.

"An Introduction" is considered to be one of the best known poems in Summer in Calcutta. It also serves as an introduction to the poet. Intensely autobiographical, it presents two significantly interrelated themes, i. e. of isolation of self and attempt to express them in human terms. The style of the poem adopts a confessional tone and rhythm throughout, and its short lines indicate an abrupt and annoyed reaction to the burden of growth. The poet struggles to keep her identity against "the categorisers" who ask her to "fit in". Having refused to choose a name and a role, she feels it necessary to define her identity:

*It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels in strange towns
I am sinner
I am saint, I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours
I too call myself I.*

In "Forest Fire", Kamala Das projects herself as a forest fire which envelops everything. The images of "bald child", "slim lovers" and an "old man", represent infancy, youth and old age respectively. With a Whitmanesque super-human attitude she internalises the passions of the world.

The poems in the collection Summer in Calcutta, bring out the process in respect of progress of the poet through several stages. She struggles for love and security, faces agony and frustration in search of an ideal lover and finally realises the perceptions of the world, discovering spiritual peace in Lord Krishna.

Kamala Das's frank and bold treatment of her themes gives her poems a separate status. Exemplifying the various characteristics of the confessional poetry, she struggles to relate her personal feelings and private experiences with the outer world as they are. She concentrates particularly on the sexual love of her woman-persona with a confessional urgency. The spontaneity and the uninhibited treatment of a woman's passion in her poetry is unique because they are written against a conservative background and a tradition-bound culture.

Das's second collection of poems The Descendants (1967) also projects the same themes of love, lust and disillusionment. Besides, some of her poems are preoccupied with loneliness



and a corroding sense of futility. They show a greater concern with physical decay and with the forces of disruption than the poems in Summer in Calcutta. The previous collection of poems has an optimistic note and the poet possesses a sense of faith in the continuity of life. In “Death Brings No Loss” she writes:

*. . . I
Shall lose not a thing. Each
Little thing shall wait for
Me . . .*

In The Descendants, we come across a note of pessimism and a sense of guilt. The opening poem itself suggests the guilt born of sinning and questions on the validity of a renewal:

*We are never going to be
Ever redeemed or made new.*

Titled “The Descendants”, this poem defines the impossibility of redemption: --- None will step off his cross or show his wounds to us . . . The poem ends with a ring of finality where the lovers are nailed to beds:

*We have lain in every weather, nailed, not
To crosses, but to soft beds and against
Softer forms . . .*

The syndrome of lust, torture and loss of love is paralleled by that of sin, punishment and lack of redemption. The same image is repeated in “The Proud One” suggesting the agony of a jilted lover and betrayed husband:

*. . . I saw him that day
Lying nailed to his bed, in imitation
Of the great crucifixion, . . .*

In Kamala Das’s poetry ‘sea’ is the most recurring and seminal symbol of peace. Her association with sea was natural because major part of her childhood days was spent near the Arabian Sea, where her ancestral home was situated. Devindra Kohli has aptly pointed out her immediate “shift from the sun-image in Summer in Calcutta to the sea-image in The Descendants”.²⁴

The poems “The Invitation” and “The Suicide” are directly related to the sea. The poet prods towards suicide by the haunting pains of disillusionment. In these poems there is a dialogue



between the poet and the sea. The poet prefers to “Shrink or grow, slosh up / slide down” in the sea. She desires to merge into the sea and be immortal:

*The sea's hostile cold
Is after all skin deep.*

In My Story also she admits her weakness for the sea:

“Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements.”²⁵

In “The Suicide”, the sea is represented as a temptation to return to simplicity and innocence through death. A preference for the soul is expressed in the following lines:

*I throw the bodies out
I cannot stand their smell.
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.*

The vortex of the sea which refuses to accept anything less than the soul, reflects the poet's tortured psyche. Bereft of love, she even wishes to die:

*I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead.*

The sea comes here as a main source of comfort for her dead soul. The sea invites the poet: “Come in, what do you lose by dying”. The image of the sea dominates the whole poem, although we come across joint images of sun and sea in the end:

*There must be sun slumbering
At the vortex of the sea.*

This connotes a resurgence of life, and the poet asserts for a life after craving for love, settling the choice between life and suicide. “Substitute” is another poem of Das which opens with vague images of sea and death. The frustration due to unfulfilment of love is suggested



through the image of “the poor crows with the raucorous cries”. There is absolutely no understanding or mental bond between the poet and her lover:

*Our words began to sound
Like clatter of sounds in flight.*

Love becomes a mechanical affair--only a “physical thing”, and lovers become a series of substitutes:

*After that love became a swivel-door
When one went out, another came in.*

The last part of the poem acquires a conspicuous ironic tone and the irony is directed towards society as well as to the poet herself. The repetition of the line “I will be all right” communicates her sense of agony and reminds as of T. S. Eliot’s The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, where he expresses the same dilemma: “It is impossible to say what I mean”, and the repetition of lines

*That is not it at all
That is not what I meant, at all--conveys the same plight.*

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar critically examines this meditative refrain “I will be all right” in Das’s poem “Substitute” and feels that the repetition “has a telling effect”.²⁶ To Linda Hess also the lines are not merely a “quick solution to the problem of filling up a line,”²⁷ but rather help in unfolding the structure of the poem by externalising the emotional and intellectual dilemma of the speaker.

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