

Sex in the Poetry of Kamala Das: Moving Back To Traditions and Customs

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Kamala Das (1934-2000), the writer is the pioneer in imparting a straight forward strip-tease expression to the feminine sensibility in the Indian English Writings. Born in Kerala in a Hindu family she was married at the young age of sixteen. As a bilingual writer she has given a bolder expression to the Indian feminism through her writings in English and in Malayalli under the maiden name Madhavikutty. Frustrations, disillusionments, inhibited expression of love and sex, emotional dissonance in marital relationships are candidly portrayed in her poems. Her first anthology is titled *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) has fifty poems with a few charming poems of love and lust in it. The second anthology is *The Descendants* (1967) comprises twenty-nine poems on love and the third anthology *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) has thirty three poems of which twenty have been taken from the two previous volumes and thirteen new poems are added. . *My Story* (1975) is her fictionalized autobiography. The theme of love underlines nearly all her poems with a few exceptions. Her poetry marked with shocking revolt against the banned sexual openness surely reveals courage and strength. She does not advocate for anything new about female sexuality, instead her movement is fuelled by the past. The paper unravels the association of Kamala Das's revolt and protest to the customs that prevailed in the Indian continent. It is surprising to find her protest *in lieu* of the Hindu Traditions and the customs that prevailed in the past. At The Vedic Hinduism preached equality between man and woman. Rather all the rites and rituals associated with the Hindus advocate for equality for example as in marriage. The Vedic Hindu concept of the bonding between man and wife through marriage as the source of *dharma* (duty, ethical conduct), *artha*(material gain, polity), *kama* (desire) and even *moksha*(salvation)¹ is forfeited in the modern society. *Brahma* divided his body into two; one half became male and the other female. So divided, man and woman becomes a perfect unity when they unite in wedlock and the wife is called *ardangini*. The important rites including the seven steps walked together are symbolical expressions of union of the two. The male dominated society has over the years interpolated the theories by not putting the sacred oaths into practice and the woman has ever since been devalued. Through marriage the identity of the woman is lost. The Hindu concept of *Ardhanarishwar*, half man half woman, making a

complete identity neither male nor female as the symbolic representation of the *shiva-linga* worshipped by the Hindus is projected in *Convicts* where she expresses:

“(...)When he
And I were one, we were neither
Male nor female.”² (*The Descendents*)

At the same time she wonders if the union is a mere mythology. She doubts of the idea of the existence of half man and half woman in any sense associated with the eunuch. They have both the partial physical qualities of man and woman yet are incomplete, neither male nor female as in the poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, they move and dance

“(...)with skirts going round and round”³ (*Summer in Calcutta*)

The image of a circle is used to postulate the one that has no ends and thus indicating the sexual confusion. The practice and preaching thus baffle her. Her suppressed individuality surfaces and demandingly probes the society.

Hinduism preaches the Yogic philosophy. Kamala Das's emphasis on sex-activity in man and woman is on the basis of the prejudiced dealings deeply rooted in the sub-conscious alike the Hindu Yogic psychology which postulates the centres of psychic activity or *chakras*. Desire for physical love is a natural state. Human needs to be in complete hold of the desires, *indrayi*, and not let the desire overtake the mind and turn it into lust. Through poetry Kamala Das acknowledges that the primitive consciousness in man is pre-natal and not due to cognizance. Woman is equally inclined to the physical demands as men are. She emphasizes on the sexual experience to liberate the imprisoned creative psychic powers of the embryonic women. The patriarchal society has converted sex into lust where it is no more the pleasure of life-giving secrets of companionship between a man and woman with their joint labours to produce the means to exist. Kamala Das uses straight forward words to describe the lifeless association. All her description of the physical union is jarred and never suggestive. Her direct use of language forbidden for women reflects her idea of physical procreation attuned to excitement of the senses. She is not obsessed instead she uses the sensuous physical details to highlight her repulsion towards sex, because sex is considered as a means to deny woman of her rights and freedom. It enhances the man's notion of owning his woman or wife. In her description of the marital act one seldom finds any tenderness instead it is the sensuality piercing like the chilly breeze banging straight on the face, a stark reality in the male-dominated Indian society. Kamala Das postulates like D. H. Lawrence that marriage without the basic sex-function is hollow and pretentious. The wife has to seek pleasure from others to satisfy her urge like Connie in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. While D.H. Lawrence advocated for

the man's freedom, Kamala Das proposes total freedom of man and woman with no concept of using or being used. The Hindu She suggests that in the polarization of sex woman is the victim of man and she needs to struggle and keep her individual identity and not submit completely to the man's spiritual and physical resources to the needs of woman. A psychic striptease is projected through the poetry in *The Conflagration* as she questions,

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man?” (*The Descendents*)

The *Dharmashastra* stressed on fidelity and devotion to the husband as the guiding principles of a wife. To justify the concept of *pativrata* the woman's sexual impulse was exaggerated, “The sex urge in her is so great that she will cohabit with any man she meets, irrespective of his age or appearance.”⁴ The supersession of the wife which was intended to be exercised for a limited purpose and with great restraint eventually gave a privileged status to the husband. Kamala Das approves of the Vedic Hindu sensibility and raises objection to the concept of the *pativrata* preached by *Dharmashastra* where the restraints are forced arbitrarily on women and men are set free from sexual morality. She justifies her stand in an interview, “I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little.”⁵ The fate imposed on women is thus questioned and abasement of woman is volunteered.

Kamala Das on the confessional mode bares the most bold and candid expressions. The Indian reader was aghast at the direct description of desires and sexuality in her writings and professed her to be too modern for consideration. To understand her writings one needs to get accustomed to the practices followed by the Nairs, a societal group from Kerala (Malabar). Kamala Das was a Nair Malayalam. In *Marriage & Family in India* K.M. Kapadia concludes from the works of Kunchan Nambiar that the Nairs practised Polyandry till the Eighteenth century (Kapadia78). Her poetry is in sync with the customary practises of the Nairs. In her poem “An Introduction” she hints of the age old practice of *tali-kettu-kalyanam*. In this ceremony a small piece of gold, a *tali*, was tied around the neck of the girl before she attained puberty and made to surrender her body to the *tali-tier*. On the fourth day the cloth dressed by the *tali-tier* would be torn signifying that the union of the two had come to an end. The refusal to this ceremony of ceasing the girl's virginity was considered as a sort of religious impurity. The young girls dilemma and fear is revealed in the poem *An Introduction* through the lines

“(...) he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my said woman body felt so beaten.” (*The Descendents*)

The description of sexuality and the change of partners is blames her husband for her infidelity. The practice of the Nairs where a girl before attaining puberty and fit for consummating is ceremoniously married to a person who has preferential claim over her and thereafter allowed to live a free life in regard to sex (Kapadia 82), is thus hinted in the poem *Conflagration*:

“(...) you let me toss my youth like coins
 Into various hands
 (...) let your wife
 Seek ecstasy in other’s arms.” (*The Descendents*)

Kamala Das seems confused by the juxtaposed position of the social standing of women in the modern times, tied between the male dominated society and the inclination of the customs. A sense of melancholic frustration fogs her indignation against the society. She is frustrated by the methods adopted by men to shift to customs at their own whims regardless of the woman’s desires. From a youth of sixteen till her later years she writes to experience the same, the only difference being that she drags herself to the bed and confesses as in *An Introduction*:

“It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
 And then, feel shame, (...)” (*The Descendents*)

Kamala Das’s poetry intrigue into the female psyche and the desire to find true love propel her to seek love outside her marriage and she even succeeds in getting it, but the pleasure is momentary. The sensual love she desires is lust for her male partners and the physical act does not give her any relief from her loveless marriage, instead the liaisons add to her woes. As D.H Lawrence writes about sex relations in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*:

“(...)There is a threefold result First, the flash of pure sensation and real electricity. Then there is the birth of an entirely new state of blood in each partner. And then there is the liberation...Sex as an end in itself is a disaster: a vice. But an ideal purpose which has no roots in the deep sea of passionate, sex is a greater disaster still. Sex passion as a goal in itself always leads to tragedy (...)”⁶

Kamala Das articulates her longing and she tries to fulfil her yearnings through sex. She accepts the custom yet seems to suffer. In the process of satisfying her psychological urge of the sensuous impulse, the woman’s heart is ripped as she states in *The Stone Age*:

“(...) ask me what is bliss and what its price.”⁷(*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*)

Her urge is not the physical and thus the physical act seems to fail in satisfying it. Satya Saran comments that “Sensuality is a myth-sexuality is real (...) If sensuality is the scent of dreams, sexuality is the breath of passion.”⁸ Kamala Das’s poetry divulges her confused state of mind. Unsure whether she asked the wrong persons for the love deficient in her life, or had she done some soul searching her desires would have not necessarily been fulfilled but paved on the newer path, the path of salvation. She does not as a straightforward ascetic human presume sex to be the path of Nirvana but tries to seek pleasure in its purest form, yet she laments at the end of it. It is the patriarchal dominance that distorts the balance. Osho preaches that the more one suppresses it the more it binds you and the measure of acceptance becomes the measure of deliverance.⁹ Kamala Das tries to trace the traditional aspects of the physical demands wherein the demand of the flesh is the basis of pleasure, a divine primal energy that has the reflection of godliness. Woman is not entitled to repress her desires. In an attempt to know the fundamental truth of love, the first essential is to accept the sacredness of sex. She is ready to accept love in its pure and natural form but the man’s dominant ego hurdles it and the divine gets transformed into the earthly lust.

The *Vaisnava* literature professes the technique of spiritual discipline that endeavour to utilise the crude animal impulse and inherit from the prior life. The cult doctrines that the divine can be approached through a transformation of sex-impulses, described as a super-naturalisation of the natural.¹⁰ The love is symbolically represented as the bond between the wife - husband or beloved - lovers. The cult sanctifies the love of Radha and Krishna as the love between human and the divine. Kamala Das writes tries to correlate with the love of the *Gopis* and Radha for Krishna in the poem *An Introduction*:

I look for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every
Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna. (*The Descendents*)

She is unsure of her state because the love between Radha and Krishna had gained social acknowledgement and wonders at the failure of fulfilment of her desires. Her apprehension holds true. The dissonance in her relationship is due to the fact that though she is devoted like Radha the discipline of Krishna is devoid in the men she encounters. In *The Invitation* she indicates of her endless search for true love:

“After that love become a swivel-door
When one went out , another came in” (*The Descendents*, 7)

The search is incessant mainly because of the fact that though women are expected to be like Radha, men in the modern society are the seeker unlike Krishna the giver.

Kamala Das's writing is born out of struggle and has a seditious character. Her poetry oscillates from the modern to the traditional when she links the woman's extramarital affairs to the myth of Krishna and his *Gopi* in *Vrindaban*:

“Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind,
And the flute, luring her
From home and her husband,”

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems)

Here the woman like the *Gopi* at the sound of the flute, drop everything including husbands and babies and rush to the forest to meet him. Through the *Raslila*, dance or play, Krishna takes multiple forms and pleases each *Gopi* fulfilling her erotic desires. Kamala Das does not venture into the forest secretly instead like the *Gopi* she openly goes to her lover in pursuit of finding her Krishna,

“(…) I drive my blue battered car
Along the blue sea I run up forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door,
Through the peep holes the neighbours watch. ”

(The Stone Age, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems)

There is no remorse since she finds nothing ill-licit or secretive about the desire. It is the male who fail her. The desire for Krishna infiltrates all societal barriers and obligations. Kamala Das hints at the hidden desire of woman suppressed by the societal norms that need to be broken. In an interview given to *The Times of India* April 24, 1993 she comments “Traditions, ideology, customs and beliefs that have gone beyond expiry dates should be discarded”. Modern legal structures may have replaced Manu's code but, the fundamental orthodox sentiments persist to this day, ensuring the continued sexual colonization of women. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, from the ancient Hindu texts, establishes that till date, a "formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood (...) still governs the inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community" ¹¹. Das once said, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little".¹²

Conclusively Kamala Das's poetry is a reverberation of the desire for liberty from the familial obligations. She expects the society to understand the emotional cravings of women and in the process initiates the task to dismantle the image created by men. She is criticised for bringing to surface the desires put under the carpet. This criticism however points to the dogmas associated with the woman's expression of desire in the Indian society. It is strange

that in the land where sex and copulation form the basis of society and where the sex organs are worshipped, sex is considered as a taboo. Her poems find an expression to her private anguish, sentiment, anxiety, yearning and conflict. Society needs to introspect its past to understand and uplift woman from the dormant position. The solidarity of the dominance is challenged and the stability of the masculine edifice is threatened when Kamala Das professes for equality once preached in the religious context:

“(…) he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love.” (*An Introduction. The Descendents*)

Kamala Das does not introduce any new concepts instead she longs to adhere to the traditional and speaks of the customs that once prevailed. The shift is in the backward direction, to gain more energy and momentum so that the pendulum oscillates furtherer.

References

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- ¹² Shobha Warriar, Interview Rediff on the Net
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