

Reticence to Self-Assertion: Changing Nuances of Love in Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das

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O take my yearning soul for thine oblation
. . . Let me be lost, a lamp of adoration
In thine unfathomed waves of ecstasy.
(Naidu, 'Ghanshyam')

. . . love became a swivel-door
When one went out, another came in.
(Das 'Substitute')

Love has been a primary subject in women's poetry since the days of Sappho, but its meaning, significance, mode of expression and nuances have been different in every age and have changed with the passage of time. Who can forget the sustained passion of a woman's address of love to a man, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets From the Portugese*? The different approaches to the same sentiment – love – reminds one of the observation made about love as being just a part of a man's life, while it encompasses the entire existence of a woman. This is an important observation when we come to undertake an analysis of literature, especially poetry, by women. Following from this discussion it would be interesting to study and probe into the poetry of two very important Indo-Anglian women poets – Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das. Coming to the poetry of Indian English women poets the subject of love becomes even more integral and indispensable part of their poetry, as it is of their minds and lives. Though there is a gap of almost half a century, almost a generation, between the active literary careers of Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das, one common thread runs through their poetry, making them both poets of love. Apart from the obvious difference in the time of their writing, there is a wide difference in the two writers in their outlooks towards this universal emotion. Sarojini Naidu writes almost half a century before Kamala Das but despite this wide difference the two women write from within the precincts of the same Indian traditions and the same Indian sentiments ingrained in them. This is what makes their poetry similar despite the differences in the imagery, language and modes of expression. Love remains a quest for both, though the means of attaining it are different.

Separated by almost half a century these fragments from the poetry of the two stalwarts of Indian writing in English, show that the nuances of love, though a universal sentiment, have undergone a profound and drastic transformation in its meaning and expression in women's poetry. These lines reveal that in Naidu love is a form of

submission through devotion, whereby she wishes to mingle her being with the eternal God of love Krishna. But for Das on the other hand the search for love has yielded only the sad realization that it is an elusive and unattainable thing in the temporal world, though lovers may come and go love is something which remains unattainable for her.

Sarojini Naidu's reputation spreads wider than just her poetic acumen, being one of the vanguards of women who fought in the forefront of the national struggle against British imperialism. At a time when the presence and involvement of women in the national movement and the Congress were miniscule, she was a venerated and active nationalist. Though majority of Indians know her as a nationalist Naidu's acumen as a prolific poet is little known apart from the epithet bestowed upon her by Gandhi of being the – 'Nightingale of India'. Just as nationalistic fervour underlines her poetry so also does love. Deeply influenced by many strands ranging from British Romanticism to Persian and Urdu poetry, Sarojini Naidu's Love poetry mirrors her intensity and her subdued and submissive expression of love. Love in her hands is ethereal, incorporeal and spiritual; it is far away from eroticism, the physical demands and purely based on the union of the heart and soul, as she thus expresses in this lover's rhapsody:

O Love! were you a basil-wreath to twine
among my tresses,
A jewelled clasp of shining gold to bind around my sleeve,
O Love! were you the keora's soul that haunts
my silken raiment,
A bright, vermilion tassel in the girdles that I weave;

O Love! were you the scented fan
that lies upon my pillow,
A sandal lute, or silver lamp that burns before my shrine,
Why should I fear the jealous dawn
that spreads with cruel laughter,
Sad veils of separation between your face and mine?

(‘A Rajput Love Song’)

Love, in Naidu, is thus, an unnamed and unfathomed force which alone has the power to act as the bridge which crosses over the barriers of distance and worldly separation and thus the beloved yearns for her lover and wishes him to take other, often even inanimate, forms which will disguise him from the world but unite them without the looming shadows of separation. M.K. Naik in his comparative study of the poetry of Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das comments that Naidu in her deep adherence to aestheticism and the Romantic legacy made her concept of love aligned to the earliest definition of love by Plato who said that though at the outset Man and Woman were undivided and one they were separated only by the anger of Gods, there is thus an incessant propensity in them to reunite again and again. Thus, the essence of love is as Shelley has defined in his poem ‘Love's Philosophy’ as the mingling of the ‘being’ of lovers (Naik 44). Naidu's poetry with such close affinities with the Romantics is almost devoid of the physical dimension of love. It is thus very rare in Sarojini Naidu's poems to come across the shedding of

inhibitions about the body and sex, which are an integral part of the feeling called love. As an Indian woman, brought up in and expected to conform to reticence, the farthest that Naidu ventures out is akin to Keats's 'kisses four' of *La Belle*. It is in fact a rare bold step when Naidu writes in the poem 'The Vision of Love' that '[a]ll joy is centred in your kiss' and states:

Forgive me the sin of my mouth . . .
 If . . . it assailed you . . .
 And ravished your lips and your breast.
 . . .
 Forgive the sin of my hands . . .
 (for their) tremulous longing to touch
 Your beautiful flesh, to caress,
 To clasp you

These are rare expressions, overstepping demure femininity and self-submission which marks Sarojini Naidu's poetic oeuvre. Her poetry shares the nineteenth century Victorian ideas of womanhood that was part of the Indian social matrix, where women were thought and expected to be fragile, weak and creeper-like clinging onto men for support. And though on the personal front Sarojini Naidu did break out from this typical and expected norm of womanhood by marrying out of her caste and later stepping into the public arena of the national movement, in her poetry she subscribes to the aforesaid image of womanhood. J. H. Cousins comments thus, '. . . she reflects in her poetry the derivative and dependent habit of womanhood that masculine domination has sentimentalized into a virtue: in her life she is feminist up to a point but in her poetry she remains incorrigibly feminine . . .' (Cousins, 262).

Very different from and contrasted to the Romantic aestheticism of Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt is Kamala Das – a pioneer in the evolution of a feminist poetics in Indo-English poetry. It has been commented that her poetry and prose 'reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in a male-dominated society, and in them she appears to be a champion of woman's cause' (Dwivedi 20). Feminist concerns are undoubtedly present in Das's poetry, but above all what emerges from a reading of her poetry is an eternal and insatiable quest for love which is a kind of journey which begins each time with hope:

Yet I was thinking, lying beside him,
 That I loved, and was much loved.

but ends in inevitable disillusionment:

It is a physical thing, he said suddenly,
 End it I cried, end it, and let us be free.
 This freedom was our last strange toy.

(‘Substitute’, *The Descendants*)

Love then is more than just self-submission and ethereal emotion in Das, it is a multifaceted experience where mind, body and soul are all subsumed, and apart from momentary encounters with lust, lip-love and dalliance, love eludes her forever. Kamala Das has been labelled essentially as a poet of lust and uninhibited sexual expression rarely found in Indian women writers and poets. What has been perhaps less emphasized is the fact that Das seeks to find the eternal and sublime love and each time that she believes she has found love it gradually and invariably peters out into mere lust:

. . . .his limb like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me . . .

And she sinks again into the nadir of disillusionment as she watches her lover, who was in her embrace a while ago, in a new light, as he:

After love, smooths out the bedsheets with
Finicky hands and plucks
From pillows strands of hair?
. . .How well I can see him
After a murder, conscientiously
Tidy up the scene, wash
The bloodstain under
Faucet, bury the knife . . .

Though '[s]he 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' (Khanna 5). While Sarojini Naidu was able to cross over the barriers erected for Indian women in personal life through her marriage out of her own caste and her involvement in public life through the freedom movement, Kamala Das was not given such an opportunity in personal life and she sought to free herself from all forms of emotional repression through her poetry where the woman persona is a rebel, unabashedly expressing her need for love and venturing out to find it beyond the ambit of the marital bond. In her marriage with an older man Kamala Das had sought intellectual as well as emotional succour, but incapable of satisfying either need he pushed her into despair and an incessant search for love and self-identity. Her traumatic experience in love and marriage made her such a sensitive poet, and the utter disregard with which her husband let her get into numerous affairs was a great insult to her ego and she was pained at his condescension:

You let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrine, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others' arms . . .

(‘A Man is a Season’, *Tonight, This Savage Rite*)

She says in one of her interviews that she ‘always wanted love, and if you don’t get it within your home, you stray a little’ (*The Rediff Interview*). Love is what the poet needs most, hunts around for in her myriad affairs and extra-marital flings, searches for it through physical union but is disappointed each time as love eludes her and all that remains is transient lust, which is just an avenue, not the destination or essence of love:

The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hour, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence . . .
 It’s only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

(‘The Freaks’, *Summer in Calcutta*)

Unable to find love and weary of waiting the poet seeks to find it through the avenue of mere lust, where lover after lover comes with the false and momentary promise of the pleasure of being loved but after every bout of passionate love-making the woman-persona of Das’s poems is disillusioned and torn apart as she realizes that her lover is incapable of giving her ‘[n]othing more alive than the/ Skin’s lazy hungers’ (‘The Freaks’). The acute awareness that love is mere lust for every man as love is an endless wait for every woman,

. . . he is every man
Who wants a woman just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him . . . the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me The ocean’ tireless
Waiting. . . .

(‘An Introduction’)

Is what makes Das’s poetry so poignant, so universal, so ethereal despite its frank treatment of sex. ‘Kamala Das’s is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world’ (Iyengar 680). Thus, very different in temperament from Sarojini Naidu or Toru Dutt’s reticent, submissive and ethereal exploration of love, Kamala Das’s often frank and uninhibited expression through striking imagery culled from the delineation of the male body or the aftermath of the sexual act, strike the reader with a shock effect and move him to feel the poignance and vulnerability hidden within the wrapper of anger, frustration and mere titillating descriptions.

The difference in the two poets and their temperaments and especially their attitude towards love can be clearly revealed from their poems about Lord Krishna. Both Naidu and Das look upon Krishna as the insignia of perfect love and the ultimate object of devotion and anchorage, but the approach is diametrically opposite. In their poems

about Krishna and Radha, Naidu's lyrics are 'are nice little songs, pleasant through their rhythm and sound, and flowing' (Blackwell, 12) reflecting the devotional aspect of the love while those of Das are more psycho-sexual and layered in nature. Their poems also reflect the antagonism within the Krishna cult of the two strands of the debate over the nature of the relationship between Krishna and Radha, whether it was just spiritual and devotional or whether there was a physical dimension to it. Sarojini Naidu writes thus:

Why didst thou play thy matchless flute
 Neath the Kadamba tree,
 And wound my idly dreaming heart
 With poignant melody,
 So where thou goest I must go,
 My flute-player, with thee?

(‘The Flute-Player of Brindaban’, *The Broken Wing*)

And stressing again and again on the devotional aspect of love, as she voices thus:

I carried my pots to the Mathura tide . . .
 How gaily the rowers were rowing! . . .
 My comrades called, "Ho! Let us dance, let us sing
 And wear saffron garments to welcome the spring,
 And pluck the new buds that are blowing."
 But my heart was so full of your music, Beloved,
 They mocked me when I cried without knowing:
 Govinda! Govinda!
 Govinda! Govinda! . . .
 How gaily the river was flowing!

(‘Song of Radha the Milkmaid’, *The Bird of Time*)

It thus becomes clear that in her definition and attitude to love Sarojini Naidu's poetry is akin to the Bhakti motif:

A favorite motif of the medieval bhakti or devotional poets of India, as well as of the later Himalayan schools of bhakti miniatures, was the *àbhisārikā* - a woman going to meet her lover, braving the elements, blackness of night, and dangers of the forest - including snakes and various categories of ghosts and goblins. She is, of course, Radha, or at least a gopi and the lover she is risking life and social acceptance to seek, is Krishna. And it is all metaphorical of the soul's (Radha) quest for God (Krishna) (Blackwell, 11)

Love equated with devotion to God becomes devoid of carnal thoughts, sheds the trappings of corporeal passion and becomes disembodied and ethereal in Naidu, in sheer contrast to Kamala Das's earthy depiction and visualization of love.

Thus, the poet, or the female persona in Das' poems, who unabashedly explores the beauty of the male form without any shyness, a woman who is in love, at least at that point, believing that he is her 'only man':

. . . the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.

(‘The Looking Glass’)

Realizes that this anchor, this destination, this end of the quest is only temporary, just a fragile dream broken soon with the painful realization that the lover had used her as a stress-buster, visiting her as a means of relaxation during his intervals between work, for enjoying a physical relationship. What wonder then that she should not have faith in the disembodied, spiritualized and devotional relationship between Radha and Krishna which is sought to be upheld by most. She writes thus:

At sunset, on the river bank,
Krishna Loved her for the last time and left . . .
That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? and she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

(‘The Maggots’)

In Das's poetry Krishna and Radha are lovers, and their love is not devoid of physical consummation:

The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You

(‘Radha’)

For Das the metaphor or motif of Krishna and Radha as lovers seems to be taken for granted by her. It has been suggested that there is no suggestion of sexual union as an object of desire on the part of Naidu's Radha or "I", but that does not imply that Naidu's poems are anti-sexual, it is just that in them sex is not the concern or in the purview of the poet. Naidu's love is expressed as a non-sexual devotion. Kamala Das's poems do not treat love as devotional, though her search (through the Radha persona) for eternal and perfect love finds anchor in Krishna. Unable to achieve the eternal transcendence of love that is ethereal, she has come to live in the fragments of several affairs which offer temporary abode to her female consciousness; giving her temporary identity, security and anchor in her everlasting search for love. She is conscious that the love that men offer her is not love but lust:

. . . these men who call me
Beautiful, not seeing
Me with eyes but with hands
And, even . . . even . . . love . . .

Which she deliberately deludes herself into believing is love, because she feels the utter futility of seeking it in temporal relationships. This is borne out well in her poems dedicated to Lord Krishna, whom Das epitomizes as the ideal lover. And her quest for love signifies her intense wish for union with Him. She says:

Ghanashyam,
You have like a koel built your
Nest in the arbour of my heart
My life until now a sleeping jungle
Is at last astir with music.

(‘Ghanashyam’, *Tonight, This Sacred Rite*: 18)

Though descriptions of sex and the male and female body abound in her poetry, she has categorically denounced lust as the end of her search as a woman and believed that love is a much deeper thing which in her own mythopoeia of love is ‘fashioned after the love of Radha – Krishna. There is something very beautiful about love. I cannot think of it as something horrible’ (*The Rediff Interview*). The quest for love and the desperate need to be loved is Das's way of forging an identity, of carving a niche for herself, in the world, and in her world, and she grasps at several opportunities to do so as a drowning man grasps at any object to stay afloat. This love is not always heterosexual or carnal, it goes back at times to the memories of her childhood – its people and places. Her poems often reveal her sense of love and attachment to her parents, her sons, relatives and especially her grandmother. She writes poignantly about her loss of love, security and stability with the death of her grandmother.

In contrast to Das's eloquent, bold and unabashed expression of sexuality as the other face of love, comes Sarojini Naidu's poems which express:

All her previous joys, sorrows, anxieties and fears, with the whole gamut of her

religious and emotional life, are found fused together in this one concept of Love. For her, like Dante, it is “Love which moves the sun in heaven, and all the stars.” All her life is dedicated to Love; it is the whole of existence. And because it is the whole of existence it is possible to rise from the grosser to the finer forms of it; from love of man to love of God. It is essentially a process of sublimation. In Indian philosophy this is known as Bhakti-Yoga, which is the realisation of the Absolute God by devotion to Him in a personal form. This form may be that of a god, a teacher, a wife or child, or a lover. Indeed, some bhaktas assert that that love for God is highest which is typified by an illicit connection; and this element enters into Sarojini Naidu’s poetry. For savage intensity, for the sense of surpassing ecstasy and complete abandon, we shall have to go a long way to find the equal of these poems (Lingwood).

Yet, it is this sense of abandon and savage intensity present in both Das and Naidu’s poetic temperament which make their love poems similar despite the apparent surface differences in the expression of the same universal emotion. The difference in their poetry and the differences in their treatment of love comes from the different world view and milieus in which they wrote. In the nineteenth century Naidu could not fathom or imagine the complications of love which the modern lover of Das’s poetry has to face and hence it has been suggested that while Naidu’s poetry is akin to the songs of innocence, assured in the final run of attaining certain certainties, for Das her poetry is the songs of experience (Naik, 50) where the love is no longer the sweet elixir of life but inextricably bound not only with pain but forever elusive, the poet after every encounter with it suffers from the wounds and wonders:

Ah, why does love come to me, like pain
Again and again and again?

(‘The Testing of the Sirens’)

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