

The Spirit of Revolt in The Poetry of Kamala Das

Abstract

Kamala Das treats the themes of love, Sex and lust in her poetry in a bold manner. She reveals in her poetry that an Indian traditional woman is likely to conceal and makes bold and blunt utterances about her sexual experiences. Her entire poetry is an expression of her revolt, her love-hate relationships with her husband and other men. Sometimes her poetry seems to be an expression of her neurotic personality which had remained suppressed under the patriarchal norms of Indian society. Her disappointment in marital love is painfully expressed in her numerous poems.

Keywords: Revolt, Neurotic, Patriarchal, Love-Hate Relationship.

Introduction

*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.¹*

Kamala Das liberated the Indian English poetry from its traditional romantic strains and introduced into it a strong note of modernity and realism. She treats the themes of love, sex and but in a bold manner. The present papers is an attempt two find out the note of revolt in Kamla Das's poetry in which she reveals what an Indian traditional woman is likely to conceal and makes bold and blunt utterances about her sexual experiences and thus her poetry sometimes gives the impression of being a piece of erotica. She gives expression to her suppressed libido in her writings. Feministic strains are ubiquitously found in her verse.

Kamala Das, born on March, 31, 1934 in a prosperous and educated family at Puginarkulam in the coastal region of Kerala, was married to Madhav Das who produced disgust in her mind by boastfully narrating his sexual ventures. Such behaviour not only hurt her tender mind but also filled it with a kind of revulsion for him. Her entire poetry is an expression of her revolt, her love – hate relationship with her husband and other men. She says, "I was in love with a husband who did not want love and it was a sweet torment to live with my face buried against his feet while he slept; mine was a crushed love, a beautiful and futile emotion".² After getting disillusioned with her husband, she formed various extramarital relationships platonic or otherwise, with several persons. She exhibits her connubial frustrations and female hungers in her poetry. In the last phase of her life Kamala adopted Islam and became Kamala Surayya after coming in contact with a Muslim doctor. She died on May 31, 2009 and was buried according to the Muslim rites in her home state.

Kamala Das shot into fame with the publication of her first volume of poetry Summer in Calcutta which is a collection of 50 lyrics mainly on the theme of love. She admitted that all these songs were written with the aim of wooing a man. Her last volume of poetry, Closure, hit the stands a few months after her death. A recipient of Sahitya Academy Award and the Asian World Prize for literature, Kamala Das is also well known for her autobiography, My Story, which she first wrote in Malayalam in serial form in 1975 and then translated into English in 1976. The book is so revealing that it created a great sensation immediately after its publication. Her novel Alphabet of Love shows the greed for money and lust for power of the woman protagonist who submits sexually to some powerful ministers. Her unconventional ideas are reflected in her essays which include, "Why not more than one Husband" and "I have lived Beautifully".

Kamala Surayya's poetry is an expression of her neurotic personality which had remained suppressed under the patriarchal norms of Indian society. Rajiv S. Patke maintains, "Kamala Das wrote with fierce and

Reshma Devi
Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English,
J.V.Jain College,
Saharanpur, U.P, India.

unsparing honesty about the difficulties of a woman and a wife in a society which had trained its women to suffer silently".³ Kamala Das ponders over her position in a male dominated society and expresses the loveliness of her soul in her poems. Her love remains unrequited. Her chief subjects in her poetry are: her connubial frustrations, her extra-marital flings, her constant search for a true lover, the collapse of her personality and her sense of worthlessness in the end. That is why poet-critic R. Parthasanthi observes, "Kamala Das impresses by being very much her self in her poems. Her tone is distinctively feminine".⁴ She tries to establish her independent identity in a society where woman is given a secondary place. She is deeply aware of the pathos of a woman playing a passive role in the tradition-bound society. She expresses the agony of growing up under the crushing supervision of parents through a series of metaphors. She does not conform to the rules of the society which gives a subordinate role to women. She asserts her individuality and says:

*I wore a shirt and my
Brothers' trousers, cut my hair short
and ignored
My womanliness.*⁵

Kamala Das dares without inhibition to articulate the hurts she has received from a male dominated society. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar calls her "The most aggressively individualistic of the new poets."⁶

Her disappointment in marital love is painfully expressed in numerous poems In "I Shall Some Day", which is addressed to her husband, she cries out that rather than love, lust prevails in her married life. She expresses her desire to break loose from the cocoon of false love: "I shall some day leave, leave this cocoon/you built around me".⁷ Like a Hindu wife, she leads a dual existence, at once rebellious and submissive. She wants to liberate herself from the clutches of her husband and yet she returns to him. She violently protests against the subaltern role played by Indian women in their family. She feels that a woman has to willy-nilly submit to the desires of her husband. She illustrates the whole proposition in a telling way in the following words :

*That night in her husband's arms
Radha felt
So dead that lie asked what's
wrong?
Do you mind my kisses, love? and
she said,
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if maggots nip?*⁸

There is no doubt that Kamala Das's poetry is a poetry of revolt. It is an expression of her agitated soul. M.K. Naik says, "Das's poetry produces an impression of bold, ruthless honesty passionately tearing at the conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within".⁹

Kamala Das presents herself in her writings as a victim whose desires remain unappeased in spite of her liaison with several men. For her, the physical act with her husband is "tripping/ Idly over puddles/ of desire".¹⁰ Through the woman persona of "The

Freaks", she suggests that the act of sex with her husband is only a mechanical affair, sans emotional satisfaction. She makes the following false claim :

*I am a freak, It's only
To save my face, I flaunt at
Times, a grand flamboyant lust.*¹¹

There is a relentless search in her poetry for a true companion but every experience frustrates or hurts her. "The Sunshine Cat" is a striking example of the cruelty of her male partners whose only aim was to satisfy their lust. Written in a confessional mode, the poem is an expression of Kamala's sexual humiliations. Her husband, her lover and her other companions are all alike in their attitude and they inflict pain on her in one way or the other. She falls into a sulky mood and says that each one of them was insincere. The poem depicts her as a woman of endless yearnings. She illustrates this theme in another poem wherein she admits that her life had become a thoroughfare:

*Then I lost count, for always in my
arms
Was a substitute for a substitute.*¹²

Kamala Das's poetry reflects her warped libidinal impulses. She appears in her poetry as an adulterous and nymphomaniac woman with vast sexual hungers. But she strongly disapproves of those who call her a sex symbol and boldly declares that love is the staple of her life. She asserts:

*I want to be loved,
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead.*¹³

Kamala Das might have attempted to show herself as a victim but actually she is the seducer and not the seduced. In fact, "She is intent on honesty of impulse and a sense of direction of the flow of her wants and feelings".¹⁴

Conclusion

Hence Kamala Das's poetry reflects her warped libidinal impulses. Her chief subjects are: her connubial frustrations, her extra-marital flings, her constant search for true lover, the collapse of her personality and her sense of worthlessness in the end. She does not conform to the rules of the society which gives a subordinate role to women. She violently revolts against the old traditions. Hence, there is no doubt that Kamala Das's poetry is poetry of revolt. Whatever the opinion of her detractors, Kamala Das is definitely a supreme artist who articulates her rebelliousness in her lyrical outbursts. She has genuine poetic powers and her talent lives on every page that she has written.

References

- Kamala Das, *The old Playhouse & Other Poems*.
Kamala Das, "I have Lived Beautifully", *Debonair*, V-III, 15th of May 1975, P. 112.
Kamala Das, "Introduction".
K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian writing in English*, Sterling Publishers, Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1961, P. 677
Kamala Das, "I shall Some Day".
Kamala Das, "The Maggots".
Kamala Das, "The Freaks".

Kamala Das, "The Freaks".

Kamala Das, "Substitute"

Kamala Das, "Suicide"

M.K. Naik, A History of Indian English literature, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1995, P. 210

Rajiv S. Patke, "Poetry Since Independence". An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English, Ed. Arvind Krishana Mehrolie, Permanent Block, New Delhi - 2008. P. 251.

Rajiv S. Patke, "Poetry Since Independence", An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English, Ed. Arvind Krishana Mehrotra, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2008, P. 251.

Ten Twentieth Century Poets, Ed. R. Parthasarthy, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, P. 22.