

Search of Self in the Poetry of Kamla Das

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Search of self remains the favorite topic of most of the prominent female writers of the world like Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Annsextton, Judidh Wright, Anita Desai & Kamla Das. Kamla Das in her poetry reflects the multifaceted self i.e. the poetic self, inner self and feminine self. Other selves like artistic self, creative self, ego self, mythical self, sexual self and love self come under these three categories. Her poetry is always 'self begetting' As Jussawala Opines.'

“Her self as a woman and her self as a poet and artist are tied together. The feminine sensibility can be described as her personal self : her feelings as a woman , her physical desires and her evolution from teenage bride to adulteress and mother figure.” (1)

Kamla Das's poetry revolves round three major selves namely – poetic self, inner self and feminine self. Let us take some finest examples from her poetry to prove this point. The poem, “ An Introduction” is the representative poem in which Kamla Das raises questions against do's and don'ts settled for a girl by the so called male-dominated society. She asks,

“ why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you ?
Why not let me speak in
Any language I like ? .(2)

The restrictions of the society for a woman are best reflected in the lines,

““Dress in sarees, be a girl
Be a wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants’ .Fit in. Oh,
Belong cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On walls or peer in throughout lace-draped windows
Be Amy or be Kamala. Or better
Still Madhavikutty. It’s time to
Choose a name, a role.” (3)

The last lines of the poem best reflect the personality of Kamla Das ,

“ I am sinner
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.”. (4)

The urge of a woman which was strongly represented in the poetic works of Kamla Das, who from her own experiences brings forth the inherent pain of a woman & portrays herself in her female protagonist.

At an early age of 16 she got married with a man twofold of her age. For her husband the only meaning of marriage is sex. It was a mechanical routine for her. In this marital life she found herself “the victim of a young man’s carnal hunger” (5). Because of this repeated sexual exploitation and betrayal of her husband, she now decided to revolt against the male dominated society and began to search true love outside marriage.

“I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage. I would love to look for it outside its legal orbit.”(6)

Actually in Indian scenario marriage is a social construct which comes handy for men to exploit women. Once the sexual exploitation is over, man spurns woman. She protests against the inferior and insignificant social role assigned to her. Marriage turns out to be a fleeting bondage, a dream that vanishes as naturally as darkness at dawn. Living in a swamp of sexual and marital commitments emaciates woman’s individuality. A man,

who fails to sustain a woman by genuine love and marital happiness, attempts to make up for his failure with adulation and flattery. Often man passes off as an unbeaten romantic hero who lifts woman into a world of make-believe. Kamala Das portrays wonderfully the failure of love and marriage in sustaining man-woman relationship. Man and woman cannot keep any abiding companionship by sex without self in marriage or outside its legal orbit.

The life of kamala Das is a record of feminine sensibility. As a singer of feminine sensibility she explored her whole heart in her poetry. The very first line of her first poem reveals the feminine urge in her.

“Wipe out the paints unmold the day
Let nothing remain of that yesterday.” (7)

Now she was a new self. She decided not to lead a loveless and miserable life. She searched true love outside marriage and got repeated rejection, disillusionment and betrayal in love. It seems as if,

“Love is crucified in sex and sex defiles itself again and again. Life is a cruel mocking bird like a dance of eunuchs.” (8)

But in spite of this betrayal she finds peace and happiness in the arms of her lover,

“My body’s wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayer’s arms.....”(9)

The poems like “The Old Play House”, “Convicts”, “The Freaks”, “In love” and “Dance of Eunuchs” reflect poet’s feminine self and depict her own bitter sex experiences. In these poems Kamla Das reveals the futility of lust or nothingness of lust. These poems also reflect the loveless barren life of Kamla Das.

Kamla Das finds herself in the dance of eunuchs. The unfulfilled and insatiable love of the woman in the poet is described through the dance of eunuchs which is a dance

of sterility. Let us see how beautifully Kamla Das depicted the barrenness of life without love through the eunuchs and their dance;

“Some beat their drums: others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry, like half burn logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. (10)

The loveless heart of the poetess is compared with an empty cistern in the poem “The Freaks.” The poet asks, “Who have lived so long/ And have failed in love ?” and the answer is ‘heart. The heart has become an empty dry cistern, empty of the life – giving water of true love. Empty cistern is symbolic of emotional sterility and barrenness. It waits for long hours for the water of love to fill the cistern of her heart but instead of water it gets filled with snakes of silence. Silence is horrible and deathly to the woman as snakes but it is only such snakes that fill her heart.

“ The heart,
An empty cistern waiting
Through long hours fills it self
With coiling snakes of silence (11)

About this poem Devendra Kohli rightly remarked:

“It is the woman’s impatience and frustration with the man as well as the moment with the man because of his sexual passivity and slackness and with the moment because it marks her feminine integrity. And if she does the masculine role, if she flaunts a grand flamboyant lust. ‘It is to redeem her feminine face. “The Freaks”, thus coming from a woman poet as it does release an important facet of woman’s psychology of love in her refusal to be pinned down to a passive man.” (12)

The main cause of her disappointment in love is that she longed for genuine love that gives peace of mind and soul but she received lust, lust and nothing but lust from males. We can discover this point in many of her poems. “The Old Playhouse” presents the

social exploitation of the females by the male for his self – gratification and mechanical and tyrannical yoking of the dumb – driven – cattle to his lust. Mrs. Das revolts against this exploitation and bitterly remarks against the marital obligations, the rough animalistic rutting devoid of warmth of love and human understanding wherein the spirit of woman is made to bleed at the altar of male supremacy.

“----- you dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny. You embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter – sweet juices.” (13)

The title of the poem “ In Love” is subtly ironic because the poet is not in love with the man who uses her body. She is disgusted with him. The man is repulsive; as he does not love her and callously ignores her emotional fulfillment in love. He indulges only in the sex – act, “This skin communicated thing.” How abominable he is –

“Of what does the burning mouth
of sun, burning in today’s,
Sky, remind me..... oh, yes, his
Mouth, andhis limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust” (14)

In “Convicts” lovers are presented as convicts who are hacking at each other’s parts. They ask each other about the use of bodily hunger and regard it useless.

“.....we lay
On bed glassy eyed, fatigued, just
The Toys dad children leave behind
And we ask each other, what is
The use, what is the bloody use? (15)

Her poetry is not devoid of spiritual self. She pours her complete heart, when she had written poems on Radha Krishna myth. They also reveal her mythical self. Having been disappointed in love several times the poetess turn to Krishna and in her autobiography accepts Krishna as her ideal lover and companion. In this regards M.Rao rightly observed,

“Krishna has a therapeutic role to play in the poet’s life. Her Thoughts about Him give her relief from the asphyxiating male Chauvinism.” (16)

As such by ideal love she means the kind of relationship that exists between the legendary Radha and Krishna. Dissipation of individual self and the total identification is possible only with her mythical lover. This is illustrated by the poem “Radha” where she sentimentally depicts the ecstasy Radha experiences in Krishna’s embrace.

“Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O, Krishna, I am melting, melting
You

” (17)

In the poem “Ghanshyam” the poet compares God with a koel who has built her nest in the arbour of poet’s heart. Until now the poet’s life was like a calm, lonely and solitary jungle which was made moving in excitement of love by the sweet music of koel that is God. This koel fills her heart with delight and pain as it fills the heart of lovers when they are separated from each other. The koel leads her to the route of pure love. The poetess repents because she has missed the chance to be one with God though. He is near her. The poet says,

“Ghanshyam,
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.
You lead me along a route I have never known before
But at each turn when I near your

Like a spectral flame you vanish.”.(18)

About these lines Ansur Rahman remarked,

“The “Koel” building a nest in the arbour of heart and her
Sleeping life being caressed with music are beautiful analogues
Stressing the sense of suffering and redemption through the
Tradition – bound images. (19)

Thus throughout the life Kamla Das tried to search her ‘self’ in her poetry. Her poetry is a mirror of her own life and experiences. The search of self culminates in Krishna when she says,

“ The only relationship that is permanent is the one which
we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad
Shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to His desire. I shall
Be fondled by Him. Shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass
Through all the pathways of this world, condemning none,
Understanding all and then become part of Him. Then for me there
Shall be no return journey (20)

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