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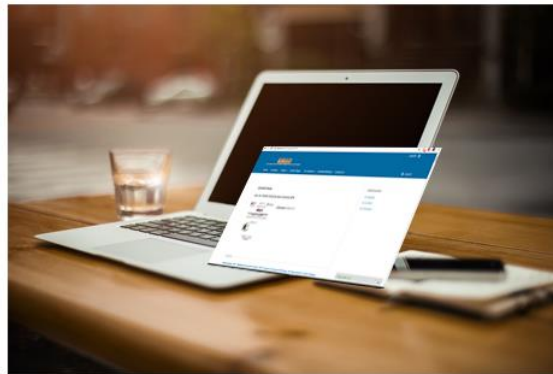
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*“Fragrance of Feminism and Rewriting in Kamla Das”*

Abstract

Kamla Das occupies a very significant place among the moderns but even in Indian poetry in English by women as a whole. She embodies the most significant stage of the development of Indian feminine poetic sensibility. Her poetry voices to the full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian woman's journey from tradition to modernity, from past to the present, but even the Indian woman poet's sense of conviction to reality. Born in 1934, she hails from Kerala and started her literary career like her mother as a story-writer in Malayalam. Her fame shot up as an Indo-English feminist poet with *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). Her poetry highlights the spirit of the modern Indian woman torn between frustrated love and a keen desire for the fulfilment of sentimental touch. This is the amalgamation of her feminine sensibility with that of masculine that intends to project the poet's experience in all its nakedness and as a thing-in-itself. The physical tensions dominate her poetry followed by a quest for the beautiful and serene. Her poetry basically deals with the basic themes of love and marriage. Among her best-known poems are *The Dance of Eunuch*, *the suicide*, *Man is a Season*, *Forest-Fire*, *the Suicide*, *An Intensity* etc. projecting an intensity of feeling combined with unorthodoxy and protest. She was also awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985 for her significant contribution. She is almost exclusively concerned with the personal experience of love in her poetry. For her ideal love is fulfillment on the levels of body and mind and it is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfillment from the husband leads to her search for it in extra-marital relationships with other men. Because of absolute frustration and loneliness, she turns to poetry as the exclusive medium for its cathartic release.

Kamla Das has beautifully scattered the fragrance of feminism and rewriting in her poetry by maintaining an interrelationship between the tradition and myth of the past and revolutionary and radical ideas of the present. She happens to be one of the strongest voices of women writing in India today. By employing a highly self-conscious idiom, she is committed to aim

at 'a release' from the male-dominated literary tradition that had always succeeded in marginalising women.

In this context, it is really pertinent to study the different shades of feminism that has now developed as a strong post-modern trend. This feminist movement can be phased into three distinguished periods-

- I- The first phase (1840-1880) marked insignificantly during which the women writers chiefly focused on copying the style of great male-writers in order to attract a wide readership. They also borrowed "a male pseudonym" to get their works see the light of the day.
- II- The second period (1880-1920) responded a stronger emergence to protest against the male hegemony. As the Women Suffragette movement gained momentum, Virginia woolf, raised her voices the predicament of women in her A Room of one's own. "It is unpleasant to be locked out ..... it's worse perhaps to be locked in".
- III- The third period (1920 to 1980) emerged as the most significant and meaningful period during which writers of the calibre of Simon de Beauvoir, Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Gilbert and Gohar etc delivered through their writings a real punch on the Male Ego, and compelled him to convince if not a superiority status, but at least an equal one. They talked in terms of the Obliteration of Male Sex. Elaine Showalter demolished the traditional image of women- Monster and Angel- and invoked the woman to use strong language to silence the Man.

It is in this context, that we have to study Kamla Das's feminine sensibility and her projection of these revolutionary ideas into her rewritings of poetic achievements.

A historical study of the role of women in the male-dominated society of both the developed and under-developed worlds-and in particular India, the land of pati-parameshwars and Karvachauths- would categorically claim that man has successfully connived to keep woman confined within the walls of the socio-religious traditions, by allowing her no freedom and by instilling a constant fear in her mind with convenient and conservatives images like God, king, man and roles like father, husband, son etc.

Kamla Das happens to be not the first woman-poet to revolt against the male-dominated literary traditions of this land. Right from the Therigatha poems (Songs of the Nuns) of the pre-Aryan times to the present, the germ of revolt has always been there in women.

It is in this context that I would like to mention that the poetry of Kamla Das is the product of her powerful instinct of self-assertion. A great psychologist Mc Dougall Calls it-

“an inherited or innate psychophysical disposition to objects, of a certain class, and to act in regard to it in a particular manner or at least to experience an impulse to such an action.”<sup>1</sup>

Kamla Das’s self-assertion even in her poetic expression is certainly a climax of her narcissism. It is the spirit of her self-love and the inadequacies of her life have made her viewpoint narrow, gender-biased and self-centred.

In the poem “An Introduction”, which is no less than a poetic manifesto, she happens to register the graph of her growth and consciousness, love and despair and her contentment revealing herself in an alien language along with her mother tongue:

I am Indian, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages.....  
It voices my joys, my longings my  
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cowing  
To crows or roaring to lions.<sup>2</sup>

In her poetry, her repulsion for physical love and lack of sincere love occupy a very significant place. She abhors the male body. In “An Introduction”, she tells about her marriage and her initiation in sex.

“I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
For he drew a youth of sixteen in to the  
Bedroom and closed the door, he did not beat me  
But my women body felt so beaten  
The weight of my breasts and wombs crushed me”<sup>3</sup>

1. Vatsyanan, General Psychology (Kedar Nath Ram Nath, Meerut, 1997-98), P. 122
2. Kamla Das, Summer in Calcutta (New Delhi, 1965) P. 59
3. Ibid, P. 59

In her poems dealing with man’s lust, we notice her hatred and rejection of male body.

He talks, turning a stained  
 Cheek to me, his mouth a dark  
 Cavern where stalactites of  
 Uneven teeth gleams, his right  
 Hand on my knee, while our minds  
 Are willed to race towards love.<sup>4</sup>

In such a situation, a woman has nothing to do except surrendering her body to a hungry hawk that is she what she reveals in 'The Looking Glass',

Gift him all  
 Gift him what makes you woman the scent of  
 Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts  
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your  
 Endless female hunger.<sup>5</sup>

Apparently there is no such negative mechanism in the behaviour of Kamla Das as for as love is concerned which we find in Sylvia Plath. She has a longing for a lover and in its absence; she finally epitomizes her love in the form of divine love of Mira for Lard Krishna:

Vrindaban lives on in every woman's mind  
 And the flute luring her  
 From home and her husband.<sup>6</sup>

4. Ibid, P. 10
5. R. Parthasarthy, Ten Twentieth Century Poets (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991), P. 27
6. An Anthology of Indo-English Love Poetry, ed. Subhash C. Saha (Calcutta, 1976), P.64

In her poetry, there occurs a situation of tension in which discards the earthly love and craves for divine love. But we don't see any solution to the ongoing conflict in her poems. Suresh Kohli says: "It is difficult to say whether Kamla Das succeeds in resolving her tension between physical and spiritual aspect of love".<sup>7</sup>

Her poetic work which manifests feminine sensibility again and again projects Indian woman as a weak, servile and inferior creature. Her sympathy towards the other suppressed women, eunuchs, prostitutes etc. are like small eddies in the vast ocean of her own self. She has attempted to universalize her frustration, lack of love, anguish and gender complex through different idioms and images but has not met with desired success. In every poem, it is Kamla Das who appears, speaks and acts.

Her use of the word 'I' is visible all over her poetry like an umbrella sheltering her from sun and rain.

Thus she has published three volumes of poetry in English, viz. *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants* and *The old Playhouse* and other poems, while Pritish Nandy's *Anthology of Indian poetry in English (1947-1972)*<sup>8</sup> contains eighteen of her uncollected poems.

Gauri Deshpande's *An Anthology of Indo English Poetry*<sup>9</sup> has seven of them. Apart from her occasional writings in English, her autobiography in Malayalam has been published in English as *My Story*. Her works in Malayalam include more than 14 books, a majority of them being collections of short-stories. She was awarded the Poetry Award of The

7. Devendra Kohli, Kamla Das (Delhi, 1975) P. 49
8. Pritish Nandy (ed.) *Indian Poetry in English (1947-1972)* (New Delhi Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, 1972)
9. Gauri Deshpande (ed.), *An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry* (Delhi : Hind Pocket Books, N.D.)

Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 for a collection of short-stories in Malayalam.

The relationship with the husband forms the basis of her love-experience and hence provides the most important dimension for its exploration. The beloved's psyche is strenuously burdened by the bitter realization of the husband's inability to offer spiritual fulfillment despite that of the physical as in:

“ Can't this man with  
Nimble finger-tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers?

(The freaks, *Summer in Calcutta*, P. 10)

The poet tries to explain the nature of unfulfillment in love from the husband in her statement:

“Sex I can get in abundance from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for”<sup>10</sup>

The feminine psyche is awakened to the true significance of the painful love-affairs as being the progressive steps towards the final realization of its relationship with God, as in:

Any stone can make  
 An idol loving this one, I  
 Seek but another way to know  
 Him who has no more a body  
 To offer, and whose blue face is  
 A phantom-lotus on the waters of my dreams .....  
 ('A Phantom-Lotus')<sup>11</sup>

10. Kamla Das in a personal letter dated- 26.01.1979, to Sunanda P. Chavan.  
 11. Kamla Das, 'A Phantom-Lotus', The Indian P.E.N., Jan, 1972, P. 7

The poet's search for ideal love often takes the form of Radha's yearning for Krishna in some of the poems.

The love-experience gains a fresh dimension in her anxiety to explore it with reference to the grand mother's house. The life spent in the grand mother's house as a child symbolizes the state of innocence as contrasted with the life as a married woman symbolizing the state of experience. Her preoccupation with it echoes the subconscious anguish of the frustrated psyche to return to the state of innocence now irrevocably lost, rather than a sense of "nostalgia" as interpreted by R. Parthasarathy".<sup>12</sup>

Her poem 'Blood' (The Old Playhouse and other Poems, PP. 18-19) defines the clash between her sense of ego for inheritance of purity and her sense of disgust for the conventional sex-roles.

Another dimension that complicates the man-woman relationship in the case of Kamla Das refers to her identity as a woman involving the social compulsions to confirm to the traditional feminine role. The urge for freedom from the conventional role of a woman asserts itself early in life as in:

I wore a shirt and my  
 Brother's trousers cut my hair short and gnared  
 My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,  
 Be wife, they said

(An Introduction, Summer in Calcutta, P.44)

The experience of frustration sets the psyche in the attitude of rebellion against the pretentious life of a happy wife in:

12. R. Parthasarathy (ed.), The Twentieth Century Indian Poets (Delhi: O.U.P., 1976) P. 22

I must pretend  
 I must act the role  
 Of happy woman,  
 Happy wife

(‘The Suicide’, The Descendants, P. 2)

Her revolt as a woman against the traditional concept of womanhood is matched with her revolt as a poet against the conventional medium of mother tongue for poetry. She has instinctively chosen English as the poetic medium although she is at home with Malayalam in prose.

The dreams which form a part of the feminine psyche’s obsession with love in terms of sex seem to add the psycho-analytical dimension to the theme of love in her poetry. The poet tends to turn with significant frequency to the subject of dreams, either for their thematic or their imaginistic potential.

The peculiar nature of her love-experience might be understood with reference to the sociological dimension offered by her Nair lineage. The Nair society has, “the matrilineal, matrilocal organization” and “did not hinder the plurality of husbands to a Nayar woman”.<sup>13</sup> of course, “it treated marital relations with increasing rigidity from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>14</sup>

The Nayar lineage of Kamla Das with its tradition sexual freedom in spite of later rigidity explains the frankness of her attitude to love in terms of sex M. Elias attempts, in particular, to prove how “her sinfulness or innocence is not the product of modern conditions in India or elsewhere, but that they originate from inherited complexes”<sup>15</sup> =

13. M.S.A. Rao, *Social Change in Malabar* (Bombay : The Popular Book Depot, 1957) P. 96
14. Ibid
15. M. Elias, ‘Kamla Das and Nayar Heritage’, *The journal of Indian Writing in English*, July 1978, P. 21

The communication of experience for its own sake gives a special dimension of honesty and concentration to the poetry of Kamla Das. It is remarkable that the poetic psyche does not attempt, at any stage, to derive consolation from the assumption that her particular experience of frustration is a part of the typical lot of a woman in the man-oriented society. There is no evidence to justify Keki Daruwalla’s comment that she continues “with her obsession regarding women being playthings in the unfurling hands of the male”.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand her poems reveal the psyche's anxiety to come to terms with the special ordeal or frustration purely on the individual level. It is particularly notable in the context of her writings on various occasions as a feminist rebel against the conventional marriage. For instance, she writes in the article on 'The Sham of a Marriage' (Blitz): "I am thoroughly disappointed with my marriage and everybody else's marriage ..... The ideal marriage, continued according to the desire of our society, is a bond in which both become mental cripples and cling on to each other until death".

She has hence written very few poems on social themes although they may be notable for her capacity to respond to the area of social experience. For instance, she portrays the tragic plight of the eunuchs very sympathetically in 'The Dance of Eunuchs' (Summer in Calcutta, P. 9). They are living their life much worse than a dead man. The following lines are quoted below from the same poem—

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-burnt logs from  
Funeral pyres

16. Keki N. Daruwalla, 'South and West: Special India Issue' (Book Review), The Indian P.E.N. Aug. 1974, P. 29

Some of Kamla Das's poems seem to echo certain American and English poets though she is not directly influenced by any one of them.

In brief, it can be sincerely concluded to say that the echo of her poetry has encouraged critics like Devendra Kohli, Sivaramkrishna, Eunice de Souza, K. Ayyappa Paniker and E.V. Ramakrishnan to describe her as a confessional poet. Like Shelley, her poetry embodies the quest for the archetypal experience of love. It symbolizes in miniature the elemental quest of a woman- a deeply sexual being – for a man. She has modernized the Indian poetic psyche in terms with the man – woman relationship in its full complexity. The poetry written by her is meaningful enough to make her one of the leading woman poets in English along with Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt in the realm of Indo-English Lit.

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