



Interrogating the Gendered Binaries towards Symbiotic Wholeness : A Study of Kamala Das's Poetry

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Kamala Das is one of the most celebrated Indian poetesses writing in English. Like Tom Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan, she deals with the Indianness in her poems. A critical searchlight on her poems, stories and other columns reveals a strong feminist streak in various forms. A concentrated study of her poems brings out powerful protest against the arbitrary stereotypes which subject female sensibility to patriarchal domination. Hence the readers and critics who are exhilarated by the romanticism of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu feel startled by a new stance in the poetry of Kamala Das. This is a new voice of modern and uninhibited confession and questionings in the psyche of 'persona' mostly as the representation of a sensible soul in Kamala Das. It would seem that chief stuffs and substance of Das's poetry spring from her most immediately felt trials and tribulations of her personal life. Questioning the gendered binaries i.e. male v/s female signifiers emerge as the natural corollary of her troubled and traumatic life. The present topic "Interrogating the Gendered Binaries towards a symbiotic wholeness" is a humble attempt to critically unfold Kamala Das's poems to vindicate how the poetess begins with the poignant interrogation of male-made markers against female kind thereby experiencing a new niche through recourse to natural and psychological explorations.

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It seems that lack of harmony and mutual understanding in her personal life accounts for saga of sorrow and sufferings as expressed in her poems. In her autobiography, *My Story* she writes : "My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched". (Das, 5) Her marriage to K. Madhava Das, a man much older than her indulged in sex with other women brought in her frustrated conjugal family life. Quite naturally, quest for true love remains a recurrent strain in Kamala Das's poetry. Moreover, jeremiads against her dissatisfied married life devoid of bliss constitute the crux of her feminism. Hence her furious protest against gendered binaries in a powerful plea towards establishing the identity of woman. So she always attacks the sexist society for enforcing stereotyped roles on women. Her father got her married with her first sari at the tender age of 15. Here was a totally incompatible marriage without any love. Her mismatched marriage led to her complete failure in married life. Hence in her poem 'Next to Indira Gandhi', she laments the loss of identity/individuality due to misfit matrimony :

It was not the right most groove for me
It wasn't my cup of tea
It was never a husband and wife bond
We were such a mismatched pair

.....

(The Descendants, 4)

Not for a moment did I own him, So unhesitatingly. She questions her father as to if he really wanted a female child :

Father, I ask you now without fear
Did you want me
Did you ever want a daughter? (The Descendants, 5)

As she started growing, patriarchal forces began to catch hold of her. The masculine authority reduced her to a mere doll. All the stereotypes categorically expected her to behave like a girl, a wife, a daughter and not



like a human-being. In her poem 'The Suicide', even her female guardians internalized her womanly characteristics to have played havoc with her passion for swimming in the pond:

My great grandmother cried
you must stop this bathing now
you are much too big to play. (The Descendants, 6)

Her representative poem "An Introduction" categorically deals with gendered binaries of assigning stereotypical roles to women in the male-dominated society:

Dress in Saries, be girl
Be wife, they said- Be embroiderer, be cook
be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, oh belong. (The Old Playhouse, 27)

It is really the society that Kamala Das, along with Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf thinks responsible for belittling and marginalizing a woman's character. Tirading against the masculine authority which has reduced a woman into second sex', Simone de Beauvoir writes in her classic observation :

"A Woman is not born; but rather becomes, a woman,"
(De Beauvoir, 295)

The rebel in the poetess comes to the fore. the complete absence of love between her and her husband enabled her husband to frustrate her inner urge for fulfilment. Her despair is poignantly expressed in the poem 'The Freaks' when she writes :

Can this man with nimble finger tips unleash
Nothing more alive than skin's lazy hungers". (Summer in Calcutta, 10)

The male body for the poetess becomes merely an agent of corruption and subjugation. Her choice and happy employment of apt imageries as regards her partner like "such – stained cheeks", 'dark cavern mouth', 'stalagmites of uneven teeth', 'puddles of desire', 'coiling snakes of silence' depict the persona's broken mood to question the male-apartheid to demean and degrade a female. In the end of the poem, 'The Freaks', she aptly suggests :

It's only
To save my face, I flaunt at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (Summer in Calcutta, 10)

The gap between man and woman and the mere sex-encounter created for her a crisis for identity as a woman. Her life has been that of confinement and confusion. So she interrogates the male hazards as personified through her husband in the poem 'An Introduction':

He did not beat me
But my sad, woman body
Felt so beaten
The weight of my breasts and wombs crushed me
I shrank wombs crush me pitifully. (The Old Playhouse, 27)

and she reacted hereafter :

I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. (The Old Playhouse, 27)

The male-dominated world has made her suffer badly and she regards the mankind as worthless as she writes in 'A Losing Battle':

Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood. (Summer in Calcutta, 12)

And the persona feels irreparably wronged as she writes in her poem, 'Drama':



I am wronged, I am wronged

I am so wronged. (Summer in Calcutta, 12)

The noted critic K. Srinivasa Iyenger rightly remarks : “Kamala Das’s is a friendly feminine sensibility that dares with inhibitions to articulate the hurt it has received in an intensely, largely man-made world.” (Iyenger, 680) She dilates upon her predicament as a wife, as a human being and she outrightly questions the male-discrimination against a woman. Her contempt for marriage arises from male arrogance to use and throw woman as a commodity. As she beautifully writes in her poem, ‘The Old Play House’,

Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and

Become a dwarf, lost my will and reason to all your

questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (Summer in Calcutta, 3)

So she takes her sexual exploitation by man with abhorrence, no wonder, her mind becomes a playhouse of only wish-fulfilment. She tenderly writes:

My mind is an old playhouse

And singing and dancing are gone. (The Old Playhouse, 3)

So many a time, the persona in her poem had to put on masks to simulate and dissimulate throughout her life

I must pose

I must pretend

I must act the role of happy woman

Happy wife. (The Descendants, 6)

So she calls upon her fellow-beings to respond to the inner callings and not to blindly succumb to the so-called husband’s dictates. In her poem ‘composition’, she appeals to all her near and dear ones to act on her advice :

Here is my advice to you

Obey each other’s crazy commands,

Ignore the same

Turn your house into a merry dog house

Marriage is meant to be all this being arranged in

Most humorous heaven. (The Descendants, 12)

What distinguishes Kamala Das from other feminist poetesses is the profound warmth of her affirmation. She seemed to have begun writing poetry with a deep sense of despair, decay and disillusionment, but then one cannot but notice in her writings what Devendra Kohli, a famous critic calls “celebration of beauty and courage of being a woman.” (Kohli, 68). Quest for regaining the lost love which she had been blessed with her grandmother and father overtakes her like a haunting ghost. She touchingly writes in the poem, ‘My Grandmother’s House’ :

You cannot believe, darling

Can you, that I lived in such a house and

was proud and loved. (Summer in Calcutta, 5)

Through her poems one easily feels a silver lining of hope in the hovering cloud of vicissitudes of life. Like, Showalter, Sylvia Plath & Andrienne Rich, she does not outrightly reject the composite co-existence of both male and female. As she vibrantly writes:

Tragedy of life

Is not death but growth

The child growing into adult. (The Descendants, 29)

Sometimes it seems that tired and torn by the challenges of her personal and family life, the searching soul of persona finds a refuge in the harmonious relationship with nature. Hence through her poetic creations, she gives vent to her pent up emotions, as bare herself, her felt experiences amidst her troubled times. This



seems to justify the confessional mode/autobiographical genre which he resorted to throughout her creative career. She would agree with Virginia Woolf to secure a room of her own through writings to keep her identity intact. As Woolf aptly and vividly writes:

The impulse towards autobiography may be spent. She may be beginning to use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression. Among these new novels one might find an answer to several such questions. (Woolf, 85)

Kamala Das's autobiographical mode also enabled her to have a liberated life for herself. As she boldly declares in her autobiography :

But how happily I meddled to satisfy that particular brand of readers who liked me and liked my honest approach. I was useless as I housewife anyway. I could not pick up a teapot without gasping for breath. But writing was possible. And it certainly brought me happiness. (Das, 218)

As AN. Dwivedi rightly remarks: "Kamala Das is largely subjective and autobiographical anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche. Thanks to her that a reliable poetic voice has been heard in contemporary Indo-English Verse at long last". (Dwivedi, 50)

As Emile Bronte writes : "What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here." (Bronte, 169). So Like Shashi *Deshpande*, she rises to occasion and carves out a niche in the world of trials and tribulation. As *Deshpande* prophetically remarks:

Come, my brothers, come, my sisters,
Let us join our hands;
a new road, a new way
a new age begins. (*Deshpande*, 44)

Like *Deshpande*, Kamala Das does not end up with an isolated life cut off from the larger life encompassing men, birds and beasts. This shows her growing faith in the unbroken continuity, and wholeness of existence which may be termed as symbiotic/harmonious. There is something synthetically inclusive about it. Her poem 'The Wild Dougainvillea' deserve mention at length. The poem begins with the persona's grave mood of visiting the metropolis of Kolkata about which she writes:

Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights
which build for me the said poem that
I used to write in my diary in those days.
It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute.
Gaudily pointed like a cheap bazaar toy. (Summer in Calcutta, 5)

As a robustly optimistic poetesses, she experiences an immortal soul of growth and continuity of life even beneath the mortal tombs and monuments. This is what is expresses towards the end of the poem :

Besides
The older tombs some marigolds bloom and the
Wild red bougainvillea
Climbing their minarets. (Summer in Calcutta, 6)

The symbiotic search of the persona for the love of a friend/ a man seems to be personified through the wild Bougainvillea. She said : "I groaned / and moaned/ and constantly yearned for a wan". 'Love' seems to give the poetess a moment of bliss which she once enjoyed. She wistfully writes :

Until I found you
I wrote verses, drew pictures
And went out with friends
For Walks



Now that I love you
Curled like an old mongrel
My life lies content in you.....l. (Summer in Calcutta, 7)

Love remains omnipotent passion for the poetess throughout her life. It is an insatiable quest for her. As she writes:

You are the poem to end all poem
A poem absolute as the tomb

.....

O Love me, love me, love me till I die.

She emerges as the poetess of warmth, intimacy and affection. She vividly depicts her rapture of being one with the moments in her poem ‘The Invitation’.

On the bed with him, the boundaries of Paradise had shrunk to a mere six by two and afterwards when we walked, out together, they widened to hold the unknowing city.

(The Descendants, 10)

The creative sensibility of the poetess ransacks the world of Nature through vivid imagery and symbolism. Such nature images, fire, water, sun find recurrent expression towards communicating the organic vision of the poetess. Her soul pining a repining for merger with the whole seeks expression here. ‘Sea’ is a sort of endless expansion of her spiritual urge for unification with Divine. She aptly writes :

Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea. (The Descendants, 1)

Devendra Kohli rightly comments : “sex imagery is a part of Kamala Das’s elemental symbolism.” (Kohli). There seems to be a kind of Whitmanesque glorification of the profound life at sea in Kamala Das when she writes :

O sea, I am happy swimming
Happy, happy, happy (The Descendants, 2)

She displays her heartfelt identification with the sea when she says :

O sea
You generous cow you and I are big flops
We are too sentimental
For our own good. (The Descendants, 3)

Desiring to completely fuse with the sea in the irresistible passion of the persona, as the sea promises to her an eternal life of regeneration, fulfilment and ecstasy. So the persona declares unhesitatingly:

All I want now
Is to take a long walk
into the sea
and be there, resting
completely uninvolved. (The descendant, 1-2)

The symbiotic wholeness is the comprehensive vision of life which the persona seeks throughout her life. Disillusioned by the toil and troubles of her conjugal and daily life, she moves on to seek refuge in the lap of ‘either’ nature or mythology. As she remained devoid of love throughout her life, she always pined for true love which was quite impossible in the real world. The love of man/woman in the world appeared to her a mirage marked by limitations of lust and mistrust. It was in the Radha-Krishna mythology and their immortal love that the poetess realizes a permanent and final solution of her crisis. Her longing for Ghanshyam is the metaphor of her inner voyage from the material to the spiritual, from the end to the endless, from the physical to metaphysical. Ecstatically she describes her devotional feelings :

Ghanshyam



You have like a Koel built your nest in the harbour of my heart
My life, until now a sleeping jungle, is at last, astir with music....

(Tonight, This Savage Rite, 18)

Her sense of wholeness is psychologically justified as the 'Life Divine' is a matter of realization. It is a moment of spiritual treat and retreat: There is something like pure formlessness. The poetess beautifully writes:

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. (The Descendants, 9)

Her profound association of Indian mythology, like that of Sarojini Naidu made her feel liberated. The vibrant identification with Krishna enabled her to feel a sense of completeness and unity. In her autobiography, *My Story* She boldly tells us:

Free from that last of human bondage, I turned to Krishna, I felt that the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up, but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your faced seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, , in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Thereafter he dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat cross-legged before a lamp reciting mantras in His praise. (Das, 195)

In her poem 'Radha', she also describes her ardent desire to be one with Krishna who alone can complete and fulfil her :

And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
of Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You.....

(The descendants, 9)

To sum up, Kamala Das is the boldest poetess in Indo-Anglian poetry voicing the concerns of women's cause. Her singular preoccupation with the liberation of women is the summum bonum of her poetry. Her early poems smack of despair and disillusionment with family and social life, but then gradually in her mature poems, autobiography and other prose works, she powerfully presents her deep-rooted sense of wholeness.

The holistic vision of life. One feels a bright and beautiful streak of unity and unbroken continuity of life in her works. With the passage of time, her writings, esp. her autobiography, *My Story* show Kamala Das's spiritual autobiography, her transcendental progress towards the ultimate, the whole.

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