



Re-echoing the Self against the Male Politics of Denial: A Study of the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract— Kamala Das has brought into the discourse those issues of women which were generally shied and shielded in the Indian academia. That women have been marginalized not only in terms of their social positions but also in terms of the basic needs of body and mind have never got that campaigning as have been aggressively expressed in the poetry of Kamala Das. She has created her distinct discourse augmenting upon those issues which European authors such as Ibsen, Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath and others have done at best. Woman has the right to feel her body and its needs. Man is supposed to respect this. If not, then, Man is just one animal sans sensitivity. She enacts the whole psychology of female desire and sexuality and finds man completely miserable to understand this. Her poems aim at giving those messages on the art of love as given by Pablo Neruda in his poems.

Keywords— chauvinism, confessional, ego, extramarital, hegemony, menstrual, sexuality, subjugation.

I. INTRODUCTION

What takes a woman to lose her body to a man or say both the body and soul to a man? Is there a possibility of a reverse process? Or, both require augmenting each other's dignity by either losing or gaining together. Is the relationship between man and woman that of gain and loss for one or it ought to be a gain and loss for both at the same time? Is there a conservative necessity to qualify the lust of a woman as 'poor lust' and that of a man as a persecutor on 'poor lust'? Is physical build a constant superiority on the physical delicacies of a woman? These are some of the various questions that Kamala Das, as a personally lived agent of womanhood against the 'monstrous ego' of manhood, wants to investigate and get answers in her poems. Macho superiority with a senseless subjugation of the body of a woman gets a very tough response from Kamala Das. The *Old PlayHouse and Other Poems*, *Summer in Calcutta*, *Collected Poems* and many independent poems bring out the complete picture of this male hegemony over the female body and psyche that Kamala Das wants to question. She is closely compared to

Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath in terms of confessional poetry.

II. THE ARGUMENT

Probably she is one Indian author who set the perspective on femininity and feminine sexuality vis-a-vis male supremacy and sexuality into the most convincing metaphors. There is a scientific temper that renders her confessional poetry of the female body and then needs a very rational and yet emotional color. She is successful in introducing that equipoise in her presentation of sex and sexuality that brings a natural agreeability with her ideas. MK Naik (1982) in his *History of Indian English Writing* writes: "The most self-evident (And to the easygoing reader vivid) include is of Kamala Das' poetry is the uninhibited bluntness with which she discusses sex, alluding, non-chalantly to the musk of perspiration between the bosoms, 'the warm stun of menstrual blood and even my pubis'." (Rathee 2018:178)ⁱ

The most attractive part of Kamala Das' poems is their expressions. Her poems are textured in a rich imagery of varied sort from vine and vintage to animals and birds to

varied male-female emotions that get categorised in masculine and feminine compartments. She has exemplary, audacious and bold expressions on the physical and mental torture of a woman by man that gets executed under the garb of pious morality of marriage and relationships. She can be seen as the most experimental poet in this sense to come to an idea after reassessing her need inside and outside the nuptial bonds. Vrinda Nabar observes: "My Story and her responses to my questionnaire suggest that she began seriously writing verse because of her intense unhappiness in her marriage."ⁱⁱ

Kamala Das in no sense is looking forward to being a rigid rebellious woman against the insensitive lustful man. She has the courage to appreciate if the men who she wants to connect herself understand what she as a woman wants. However, to her utter disappointment she is unable to find the Man in the crowd of many. To exhibit her frustration she records them meticulously in her confessional poetry. Eunice de Souza rightly observes: "While Kamala Das plays out her various roles in the poems, unhappy woman, unhappy wife, reluctant nymphomaniac, she also talks of the 'said lie/ of my unending lust'."ⁱⁱⁱ

The postmodernist liberated woman is obviously skeptical of the ruling patriarchal mindset that sees women in certain fixed perspectives. Women have every reason to desire and search for freedom, self-advancement and a penchant for passion to fulfil their dreams the way they want to. The protagonist of Kamala Das' poems is the woman who instead shows her prowess to bring the house in order and brings out the emotional and physical anguish of her in a male dominated household. She feels as a caged bird in her 'ought to be' own house under the constant seen-unseen presence of her male governor: "Your room is/ Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always/ Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,/All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers/In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat"(The Old Play House).

A study of her poetry exhibits that a woman in order to find the suitable sensitive treatment for herself tries the marital and extramarital boundaries but finally reaches a point where no more such experimentation may promise the soulful gratification. Some of her poems such as "The Sunshine Cat", "The Freaks", "Composition", "An Introduction", "The Looking Glass", "The Descendants" and "The Stone Age" may be analyzed to bring out the imagery of male chauvinism and female subjugation and suffering there on. She brings out this angst in one of her interviews: "A woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother, before she could become anything

else". She further says that fulfilling her role-bound duties, if at all she had any energy left to exercise her intellectual creativity". She was allowed by her husband to write late at night, that too with a caveat, that it would add on the family income.^{iv}

Kamala Das relapses in pragmatics of rationalization of the sexual humiliation of scores of women under the institution of marriages by associating herself with them in her autobiography *My Story*. She describes the horrific cruelty of a compartmentalised love in the boundary of a married house. Unfortunately the institution of marriage itself on many occasions becomes denial of the conjugal rights one is expected to receive. Of course in a patriarchal set up the donor is predominantly a male and the receiver is the woman. So many a time it turns out to receive on the whim and mercy of the donor. "The Sunshine Cat" wonderfully depicts the anxiety, anguish and torture of a woman put into the fence of marriage under the denial of many things. Kamala Das brings out the sad nemesis of a 'poor lust' that biologically as a woman she is entitled to fulfill. She brings out the horrific cruelty within the fence of marriage in "The Sunshine Cat". The free and fair spirit of a promising young girl is just arrested in the shackles of marriage. *She describes the scores of men in around her to love her but many of them turn as cowards and cynics: "they said, each of /Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not / In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you."* She gets into the shackles of a husband who- the husband who neither loved nor /Used her, but was a ruthless watcher.../Her husband shut her/ In, every morning, locked her in a room of books/ With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like/ A yellow cat to keep her company/...she was a cold and/Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men" (*The Sunshine Cat*). She maintains a scientific temper in saying this. The poor sexual lust, if not satiated, then at least, could be channelised towards a meaningfully more engaged work of talent and apprenticeship, but the chains of marriage even denies that too. She turns to other men to get the kind of love she deserves. However, they all show their inflated masculine attitude. They would invariably say: "I do not love, I cannot love, it is not /In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you" (*The Sunshine Cat*).

Her autobiography *My Story* may be taken as the rational theory behind the sexual wantedness in her life. What they feel pride in exhibiting towards women is the male axiom that they can be kind to them as if kindness towards women is the only fine sense out of an otherwise cruel mind. The big question that Kamala Das puts forward is the loss of irreversible time and beauty, which once lost, is lost forever. A dejected and defunct body and soul she becomes a cold and / half dead woman now of no use at all

to men” (The Sunshine Cat). Carolyn Heilbrun write “women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over- take control of – their own lives”^v

A big question is how Kamala Das would have reacted to Sigmund Freud’s controversial reading of the mental landscape of women. Freud’s sweeping comments were almost anti-women. “Women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own,” he wrote in a 1925 paper entitled “The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes” and further said “The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’”^{vi}

There is a constant angst in her poetry. As a woman she clashes with herself to discover and survive. Morning followed by light and evening followed by darkness help her placing before the agents that tell her who she is and what she ought to have been. Kamala Das expresses this occasional ecstasy of a gleaned woman’s body to fall in, however, in drab and disappointment later in “The Looking Glass”. This poem brings a very close parallel with Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” in which Plath establishes a mirror like ‘silver and exact’ no preconceptions no repelling unmisted by love or hate. The mirror compares herself to the ‘eyes of the little god’ ‘four cornered’. A beautiful metaphor. She wishes to relay that even the gods too look helplessly to those who atone regretfully the waning of their age without love and affection they deserve and were left in puzzled anxiety to the questions who they are and why they are under the mercy of human will and ostentatious display. The Hare Krishnans (devotees of ISKCON) attach great deal of importance to the regular treatment of Krishna’s idol as living embodiment and serve him constantly. Probably Kamala Das yearns for that. What Kamala Das wishes to convey is the robbing of her such god-like exuberance and innocence by the uncaring cruel mistful man albeit husband. In “The Looking Glass” she writes: “Getting a man to love you is easy.../Stand nude before the glass with him/ So that he sees himself the stronger one/ And believes it so, and you so much more softer, younger, lovelier.” She finds the physical love and its warmth and affection very ephemeral as the man who realized the gains of this orgasm of love for himself and leaves her languishing in despair and want after the love of body is over. There is a big disappointment afterwards as there is no continuity of perpetuating this ‘gleaming body like burnished brass’. It then turns out to be ‘drab and destitute’.

It now becomes very interesting to place side by side the exploration of love by Kamala Das and Pablo Neruda. Lets see the desired perpetuation of love beyond the temporary physical and juxtaposition to the ‘drab and destitute’ feeling of a wedded woman of Kamala Das in ‘Sonnet XVI’ by Pablo Neruda. The very initial expression itself is that of everlasting promise, companionship and a journey together as if the other can not move in the void of the other: I love the handful of the earth you are.../I have no other star. You are my replica.../Your wide eyes are the only light I know.../your deep mouth and its delights, that much sun;.../So I pass across your burning form, kissing/you — compact and planetary, my dove, my globe.” In ‘Sonnet XVII’ Neruda further sums it up: “I love you as the plant that never blooms / but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers.../so I love you because I know no other way/than this: where I does not exist, nor you.”

Probably the “Old Play House” is one such work of Kamala Das that successfully relates the western epithet of a woman’s plight and subordination with that of the Indian subcontinent. Ibsen’s Nora in *A Doll’s House* and autobiographical Kamala of closely titled piece of art protest the same rottenness of oppression under a towering egotistical male pride. How an institution may kill the innocence of the ‘whole raw seasons’ and clip the wings of a flying bird to be caged under the ‘towering monstrous ego’ that will fill the whole environ with its suffocating ‘sweat and breath’ and would demand servile favours at its will vis a vis the ‘poor lust’ of a woman is well expressed in this poem: “The strong man’s technique is/ Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses./ For, love is Narcissus at the water’s edge, haunted/ By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last/ An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors/ To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.” She here has successfully assimilated the rhetorical expression of Sylvia Plath

Kamla Das does a total psychoanalysis of what a woman wants. She however does not put any economic, social or political condition for a true love. Love does not seek conditions of riches and palaces in abundance but in moderation which she biologically needs ; this need seeks rather the art of making love, an intellectual but artistic maneuvering in which the man and woman are beyond any subjugation or superiority. Nobel prizewinner Vicente Aleixandre brings out the consummation of real and ever satisfying love in his poetics of ‘kissing’ *Poems of Consummation*. The volume of 50 poems cherishes a special place for ‘el beso’ “The Kiss”. There is an ethereality involved in this simple amorous act. In the poem “Kisses are like the *Ocean*”, he writes what stands

in stark contrast to what Kamla Das writes in "In Love". Aleixandre writes

"You were more substantial,/ more lasting, not because you were kissed,/ nor because kisses burned you more firmly into existence./ But because the ocean,/ after its fearful rush on the sand, grows deeper./ In greens or in foamy whites the ocean happily retreat."^{vii} Let's see how Das describes the disgust of a lusty kiss in these words: O what does the burning mouth/ Of sun, burning in today's,/ Sky, remind me....oh, yes,/ his Mouth, and....his limbs like pale and/ Carnivorous plants reaching/ out for me, and the sad lie/ of my unending lust./ Where is room, excuse or even/ Need for love, for, isn't each/ Embrace a complete thing a finished/ Jigsaw, when mouth on mouth, i lie,/ Ignoring my poor moody mind".

III. CONCLUSION

Kamala Das, therefore, inspires the inflexible man to rise beyond the artificial shackles of rigid societal mindsets and explore the art of love in a free and fair environment of mutual respect, admiration of each other. There is a constant angst in her poetry against male domination on a woman's body. She instead advocates a mutual translation of love into a sublime existence beyond the physical lust. She believes in a truly romantic approach of adventure, conflict and upheavals of married life into a more organized force of two bodies and minds to further yearn for such adventures. This, thus, takes away the repulsiveness of an isolated tormented soul and keeps the love growing overtime afresh.

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