

## A QUEST FOR THE UNKNOWN: KAMALA DAS AS A POET OF BODY AND SEXUAL ASPIRATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Kamala Das (1934-2009) expresses through her poetries the failure in love and the longing for the carnal pleasure, as the apex of love. Living in a closed society, Kamala Das was bold enough to portray the theme of sex and love for her audience inspite of 'narrow range of experience'. She did not compose for metaphysical or literary quest. All her verses overflowed while she was trying to woo a man of her choice. Therefore, her poetries are human, too human and catch our imagination for its quality of honesty and frankness. The present paper is an attempt to focus on the theme of body and sex in the poetry of Kamala Das.*

**Keywords:** Homosexuality, iconoclast, pubis, Wasteland.

### INTRODUCTION

Sex has been one of the most pre-dominant themes in the works of Kamala Das. Time and again she exploits this theme in delineating the relationship between her male-female characters. Unlike other Indian women writers, she does not resort to oblique or indirect reference to sex or love-making, rather takes up a bold and hitherto unexploited approach towards sex. As once stated by Wordsworth that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; Kamala Das epitomizes this utterance and let loose a series of emotions which find place not only in her poetic works but also her short stories and novel.

For rendering colour and life to her expressions, Kamala Das chooses words and the language which has a uniqueness of their own. Though, for a first time reader, she may turn out to be more explicit and going little overboard in her treatment of sexual love, a careful and minute study of her works will leave her readers smitten with her charisma. When her autobiography was published in a serialised form in the newspapers, it took the prudish Kerala society by storm and created a lot of furore in the middle class social circles of the time. She was pressurised by the people around her including her father, then the Managing Director of Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* into stalling her publication but our writer was too courageous to be intimidated by these antics. She has a free and indomitable spirit which is truly bent upon asserting her own freedom and creating a considerable and substantial niche among contemporary Indo-Anglican writers.

Kamala Das mentions in her autobiography 'My Story', 'A writer's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality'. It, sometimes, compels her readers to ponder whether the sexual love depicted in her works does have a direct or to the least, an indirect bearing of her own sexual experiences in life. Kamala Das was exposed to the sexual advances quite early in her life. During her schooling at Punnayurkulam, she had a firsthand experience of homosexuality when she is handed over love letters by a plump girl, her schoolmate, Devaki. Her stay in the boarding school also brought her face to face with the lives of nuns who were deprived of their sexual life and behaved in a frustrated and sadist way. She realises that sex is a big taboo in conservative Malayali society. Even the married women could not discuss it among themselves. Kamala Das writes:

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*“No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed. They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi’s legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her.”*

She also finds her hostel mates getting infatuated towards the boys of their age. She herself admits of getting sexually attracted towards the different boys though the relationship proved to be unsuccessful and did not last for long. These sporadic occurrences around her stimulated her poetic self and left an indelible impression on her sensitive poetic mind. It supplied her with the raw material to which she applies different treatments to give it different shapes in her works. Devendra Kohli writes about Kamala Das,

*“Almost, all the critics of Kamala Das have been quick to notice that part of the strength of poetry emanates from her powerful personality. But while the vigour of her personality seems to operate rather transparently, and on the surface as it were, it does not detract from the complexity of the women’s ambivalence which is the certitude and the precariousness of sexual love.”*

Apart from discussing her sexual experience at boarding school, extra-marital affairs, the writer has also given clues about the homosexual leanings of her husband. Sometimes her husband would indulge in his homosexual acts even in the presence of the writer. In her autobiography, Kamala Das writes:

*“At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after sometime my pride made me move away.”*

In her volume of short stories, Kamala Das invariably includes at least one story dealing with homosexuality. In her short story ‘Iqbal’, the writer tells the tale of a newly married couple. The husband, after marriage tells his wife about his roommate in YMCA before marriage. He was a good looking youth named Iqbal. On coming across the married couple, Iqbal feels depressed and attempts suicide by consuming overdose of sleeping pills. He is taken to the hospital where his life is saved by the doctors.

About the use of sexuality in her works, William Walsh writes, “Her poetry is self centred and unabashedly sexual although the sexuality seems more fascinating to the poet because it is hers than because it is sexual”.

Some critics and readers have charged her of being too explicit and adding too much detail in describing her love-making scenes. They claim that these descriptions would have been avoided by simply suggesting their sexual encounters. They blame her for glorifying sex or physical lust in her works. Harimohan Prasad remarks about the poetic works of Kamala Das:

*“Her poetry has been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over exposer of body or ‘snippets of trivia’. But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poet is the poetry fully obliterating Eliot’s distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating.”*

Kamala Das, being a thorough iconoclast, overlooks her criticism. These charges do not perturb her because she is fully conscious what she is attempting to convey to her readers. She writes,

*“If my mode of writing is striptease, let it remain so. There is a great difference between a patient exposing his nudity to her doctor and a cabaret artist baring herself to be provocative. The motive of the one is not vulgar, but a peeping Tom, looking through the keyhole into the doctor’s chamber, the nudity may seem exciting.”*

Notwithstanding these charges, Kamala Das has been a perpetual spring of inspiration for the other women writers and filled them with a sense of self confidence and self worth.

Kamala Das does not infer any conclusion on the basis of bookish knowledge which is apparently far from reality but on her personal experience and the married lives she observes around her. She, being a very sensitive and observant child finds that the life of the married women around her was far from satisfactory. She observes that only dissatisfaction and unhappiness exist in a licit relationship between a man and woman. She sees many women in Malayali society who were not happy with their husbands and looking for the happiness outside the ambit of marriage. She expresses it candidly in her autobiography,

*“The only heroine whose sex life seemed comparatively untumultuous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jamuna for her blue-skinned lover. But she was another’s wife and so an adulteress. In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence”.*

Sometimes, we also feel that Kamala Das’ poetry is replete with sensual terms expressing an urgent urge for sex. About Kamala Das, M.K. Naik remarks:

*“The most obvious feature of Kamala Das poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex referring to “the musk of sweat between the breasts”, “the warm shock of menstrual blood”. And even “my pubis”.*

The poet after having relationship with many men feels disillusioned with love and physical pleasure and starts thinking about the futility of human relations and existence. Here we are also reminded of T.S. Eliot’s masterpiece ‘*The Wasteland*’ where Eliot talks about the human existence and immoral practices attached to it.

Being absorbed in amorous meeting with lover does not provide her comfort and tenderness, she is looking for. She feels as if she has come out of her deep slumber and realizes that it is unreal and beauty of her body will wither soon:

*“This body which I wear without joy, this body Burdened with lenience, slander, toy, owned by man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with My Darling’s impersonal lust. Or, it shall gross and reach large proportions before its end.”*

In her poem, “A Losing Battle”, she explains how she searches for the ideal lover in her relationship with various men. She is fully convinced that the ideal love is something which cannot be achieved through the physical contacts with a man. This poem also reminds us of the famous line of Shakespeare’s tragedy ‘Hamlet’ – ‘*Frailty, thy name is woman*’ where Shakespeare points towards the weakness in the character and moral uprightness of a woman. Here, Kamala Das makes the similar attempt at the men suggesting that men are also morally corrupt and they can be easily lured into a trap:

“...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.”

The sexual affairs which Kamala Das describe in her works are not meant for seeking the sensual pleasure alone. She feels that by this means, some day, she will come across her God, the beautiful Lord Krishna face to face. She admits in ‘*I Studied all Men*’ :

*“It was entirely without lust. I hoped that some day as I lay with a man, somewhere beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, a contact would be made and that afterwards each movement of my life become meaningful. I looked for the beautiful Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna.”*

Thus, we can argue that the age and time becomes matured Kamla Das was fully aware that the objective she wanted to attain, cannot be achieved through the means of man-woman relationship or physical intercourse. Despite having met different men, she still feels a vacuum in herself. Her sexual affairs do not provide the comfort or the contentment she is aspiring. From men she turns towards lord Krishna for solace and addresses her as her lover in her poem. But her belief in Krishna is also short lived as the poet, converts to Islam amid a fierce criticism from conservative Hindus. Now instead of Lord Krishna, she begins to address her poems to Allah in 1999. Thus, we can easily observe that throughout her life, the poet seems to be searching for the ultimate lover, the unknown, who would provide her with the ultimate bliss, but time and again she fails in accomplishing her goal.

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