

## **Denunciation of Kamala Das's Personality and Poetry: Her Vindication in Mythical Approach**

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Kamala Das has been unfairly and unjustly criticized by her contemporary critics on the ground of underlying obscenity and salacity in her poetry. The critics have injudiciously mispronounced their judgments about her personality and poetry on the basis of miscomprehension of the themes of her verses. They misconstrue the objective and purpose of her poetry and allege that it is designed to encourage adultery and debauchery in the elite society through her salacious verses. With this assumption and presupposition, the critics denounce her character with comment that Kamala Das has not only denigrated her personality but also tarnished the quality and elegance of her poetry by way of versification of poems of obscenity.

In like manner criticism is showered on her poetic achievements from time to time on the basis of superficial apprehension of implication of her verses. In response to such unjust and irrational vilification of her personality and poetry, some sensible readers and critics were provoked to revolt against unfair criticism levelled on her by her opponents. They deemed it expedient to vindicate her solicitously by refuting the charges of promiscuity and nymphomania. In the light of her verses the supporters of Kamala Das observe that critics, who malign her for versification of salacious poetry, have miscomprehended the thematic implications thereof and misinterpreted them and hence they are mistaken in their appraisal of her personality.

Among the opponents, who make condemnatory remarks on Kamala Das and her poetry are Bruce King, Anisur Rahaman and A.N. Dwibedy. These critics have never delved deep into the inner region of her sentiments and emotion with a psycho-analytic insight and perspective. It is therefore incumbent on the supporters of Kamala Das to challenge the criticism levelled against her by way of re-interpretation of her verses with a view to exonerating her from the charges of adultery and obscenity.

This article seeks to establish by way of argument and substantiation the immaculateness of Kamala Das and in this context relevant extracts from her poems have been quoted to authenticate her righteousness. It is devoted to re-examination and re-interpretation of Kamala Das's Poetry in order to vindicate her against the charges of promiscuity, nymphomania, obscenity and adultery levelled on her by critics mentioned above. Her candid confessional articulation of her thirst for love in her poetry has led readers and critics to misunderstand her and treat her as an immoral lady and an adulteress. For instance Bruce King comments "Rather than the seduced, she (Kamala Das) often appears the seducer".<sup>(1)</sup> Other critics have also written articles on her theme of love and sex and branded her as a lustful lady on the ground of eroticism and salacity expressed in her poetry.

In response to such criticism about her poetry, it is essential to re-examine Kamala Das's Poems and find a new interpretation with a view to exonerating

her from the charges of nymphomania and promiscuity. Hence, an attempt is directed in this article towards exploration and exposure of her interior mind that consistently thirsts for Platonic love, which Radha and Mira Bai had experienced through devotion and dedication to Lord Krishna. A reinterpretation of her poems leads to establishment of the fact that Kamala Das was obsessed with pure love that inspired her to struggle for attainment of a state of transcendence in love.

In the light of thematic study and interpretation of Kamala Das's poems and confessional statements made in her autobiography "*My Story*", let us assess her personality and character. The distinctive feature of her poetry is her preoccupation with the theme of love. Her concept of love is Platonic not sexual. Her poems reveal her aspiration for attaining sublimity in her love. She has stated in her poems how she was craving for pure love as a pure woman but it proved unattainable to her in this world of lust and sex. In her own words her poetry is a journey in to the mind of a woman in search of true love. Her story is a story of a woman who moved from man to man with a monomaniac pursuit for a taste of true love that transcends the realm of sensuality and perversity. To her utter disillusionment, she found lust and hunger for sex in every man. She writes in the poem "An Introduction".

Later, I met a man, loved him, call him  
not by any name he is everyman,  
who wants his  
woman. Just as I am every woman  
who seeks love  
in him the hungry haste of rivers, in  
me the ocean's

tireless waiting.

The expression of sexual hunger in her husband embittered her sentiments and provoked her disgust in the crude masculinity of man as a class of people. To her, all men are selfish in their marital life. They want a woman only for sexual enjoyment rather than for taste of pure love. They are barren of a sensitive heart in which pure love can glow for a woman. In the words of the poet:

"The heart an empty cistern  
waiting through long hours, fills  
itself  
with coiling snakes of silence".

The heart of male is empty of life giving water of true love. The phrase "Empty Cistern" is suggestive of vacuity of emotional and intellectual love. To Kamala Das her lover is always a betrayer. This denial of love by her husband and by her lover antagonizes her against the male as a section of the society. "A Relation" is a poem that poignantly reveals her frustration in love:

That shall I find my rest, my  
sleep, my peace and even death  
no where else but here in  
My betrayer's arm

She also expresses her discontent regarding the indifference of her husband to her yearning for love. She writes:

"I was in love with a husband  
who did not want love and it  
was a sweet torment to lie buried  
with  
my face against his feet, while he  
slept.  
Mine was a crushed love, a  
beautiful and futile emotion". (2)

These lines are the spontaneous outpouring of a woman's aspiration for love and not lust.

These lines are expressive of her distaste for sexual enjoyment. This treatment of her body by her lover also leads her to generalize him: "He is everyman who wants his woman". Her disappointment results from her frustration in seeking pure love from her husband as well as from other men she approached. She found that male as a class of people represents animal passion that excites a lover to love the body of woman for sexual gratification and not the heart and mind of the lady lover. Kamala Das also expressed her contempt of male's body and physical enjoyment. The poem "The Freaks" presents a queer picture of the body of her husband. His mouth is a dark cavern where stalactites of uneven teeth gleam and his limbs look pale. What Kamala Das has got in the name of love is nothing more than 'skin's lazy hunger'. His kisses are like the bite of a Krait and the nip of maggots.

In the poem "The Old Playhouse" Kamala Das denounces the love of man for the body of woman.

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 lonely face and yet it must  
seek at last"

In the context of sexuality Kamala Das casts her views on man-woman relationship: "A man not loving a woman, but only feeling lust, has no right at all to touch her and defile her it is like counterfeit money" (3). This remark shows that the poet condemns man's craze

for sexual enjoyment. Kamala Das has all along searched for true love in men and when she found lust in place of love, she was disgusted. Ramakrishna Nair says in favour of Kamala Das "she is not a woman of free love. On the contrary she upholds the sanctity of domestic love and marital relationship. (4)

A woman does not lose anything from a love affair when she is in search of ideal love. Kamala Das's only purpose was to attain love and if the same is not to be had she prefers to die just die. K.R. Nair says "The woman's ideal relationship is based on mutual love without least, passion without desire and possession and sympathy without condescension" (5)

Harish Razada also gives the identical opinion that "what the woman hungers for is not lust but love simple love which she considers a necessity of her life. If she does not get the necessary love in her relationship with her husband what does she do?" (6) She finds the alternative in her death. In consideration of the views cast by the critics in support of Kamala Das's moral character a rational reader should not look upon Kamala Das as an adulteress or a nymphomaniac.

When Kamala Das was deprived of pure love in her marital life, she turned to look for the same love in other men but each one of them disappointed her by treating her body as an object of sexual appeasement. She confesses her extra-marital relationship which she intended with a view to seeking pure love. In the poem "An Apology to Gautama" she writes:

“Another voice haunts my ear  
another face, My dreams but in your  
arms I must today lie and find  
an oasis. I must hear you say  
I love, I love, I love”.

The repetition of the word ‘I love’ suggests the intensity of lady’s yearning for love. There are a number of poems which evince her quest for true love. “The Looking Glass” is one of those poems which manifest her inner urge for pure love. She writes:

I went to him for half  
an hour as pure woman  
Pure miserly...

Her aspiration proves futile because the lover disappoints her of pure love by approaching her with a carnal desire. The poem “The Looking Glass” reveals the deep agony of a woman, who longs for the taste of Platonic Love and detests sterile sexual enjoyment.

The poem “The Sea Shore” also manifests the lady’s desire for love and her despondency for denial of the same love. The poet writes in despair.

“I see you go away from me  
and feel the loss of love  
I never received”.

Similarly in the poem “Toy” the lady lover accuses the male lover of treating her like a toy and remaining irresponsive to her sincere love.

“A Man is a Season” is a poem that suggests the desire to transcend the ancient hungers of sensuality and e step to spiritual tranquility. In the first three lines of this poem the poet dismisses sexual pleasure as nothing better than death.

All the extracts from Kamala Das’s poems lead us to assume that a woman with an exuberance of hunger for pure love moves

from man to man in search of it and finally wishes Krishna to love her as Radha. She desires the whole-hearted emotional involvement of the lover in his expression of love for her but with out the slightest urge for sexual enjoyment. In her love poetry Kamala Das has deliberately projected a woman as a personae in order to voice her emotional feeling and psychological trauma. She exploits this personae as an objective co-relative and reveals with unusual candidness her urge for attaining satiety and ecstasy in love. Her poetry is a portrait of a woman longing for an experience of true and pure love. It was this kind of celestial love that Kamala Das was hankering after. With an aspiration for a state of transcendence in love she devoted her life to Lord Krishna. Her own pronouncement on love is quotable here. In the poem she wrote:

Love is beautiful,  
whatever four lettered name  
the Puritans call it by.  
It is the foretaste of paradise.  
It is the only pastime that involves  
the soul.

These lines are revelatory of Kamala Das’s conception of transcendental love. The evolution of her spiritual concept of love is an outcome of her frustration and disappointment in marital love. Inspired with the prospect of enjoying pure love Kamala Das dreams of establishing a spiritual bond with Lord Krishna. She has a conviction that she will attain fulfillment in her love only if she becomes the lover of Lord Krishna. Her spiritual relationship with God will transmute her earthly love in to a divine love. In ‘My Story’ Kamala Das writes: I was looking for an ideal lover, I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha”. (7)



In the poem “Radha” she invokes Lord Krishna with the intensity of love:

“O, Krishna, I am melting, melting,  
melting  
Nothing remains but  
You”

In the poem “Ghanashyam” Kamala Das talks not only of physical evolution but also of spiritual evolution. You have like a Koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart”

In the following poems on “Radha”, “RadhaKrishna”, “Ghanashyam”, “Vrindaban” and “The Maggots”, the poetess imagines and experiences a transmutation of her love in to a transcendental love. She writes in her autobiography. “I have always thought of Krishna as my mate”. When I was a child I used to regard him as my only friend when I became an adult I thought of him as my lover. It was only by imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give pleasure. Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all women for did she not have his incomparably beautiful body in her arms. We do not have him physically to love us. We have to worship a body less one.” (8). For the consummation of spiritual love Kamala Das imaginatively merges herself with the self of Krishna. In order to prove herself immaculate she confesses in “My Story”: “I was entirely without lust...I looked for the beautiful Krishna in everyman. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna”. (9)

Kamala Das tries to rise spiritually to a height of mystical union with the invisible lover Lord Krishna. Such a willing acceptance of Lord Krishna as, her transcendental lover is an outcome of the impact of Oriental vision of

transcendentalism and mysticism. This contemplation of Kamala Das leads us to infer that she had no desire for sex. She admits “I have loved my husband but I have hated sex”. (10) It is evident from her self-confession in her diary. Her horror of sex is known from the statement; “And at fifteen as a bride wearing braces on my teeth, I saw a man’s nudity for the first time and was shocked”. (11)

In the poem ‘The Prisoner’ she expresses her desire to escape from the snare of sexual love. The same bitterness of lust is expressed in the following lines.

I shall someday leave leave the  
cacoon  
you built around me, with morning  
tea  
love words flung from door way and  
of course  
your tired lust I shall someday take  
wings.

These extracts from her poems and diary bear authenticity to her contempt for lust, body and “skin communicated thing” in the joy of physical union. She has undergone an attitudinal change, a radical change in her perspective. She has always formed a vision of her association with God. She celebrates her longing for idealized phallus manifested in the personality of Lord Krishna. She glorifies Radha’s eternal waiting for Him and she herself assumes a Radha like personality. She writes in the poem “Krishna”:

Your body is my prison, Krishna  
I cannot see beyond it  
Your darkness blinds me  
Your love words shut out the wise  
world’s din.  
Again Kamala Das expresses her pure love for Lord Krishna in the poem “Ghanashyam”:

Shyam, O Ghanashyam  
You have like a fisherman cast  
Your nets in the narrows  
of my mind.

Kamala Das also drew inspiration from Radha's intensity of love for Krishna and followed her path of love to attain transcendence in love. Earlier it was her physical love that held her captive but later on this skin-communicated relationship becomes an object of her abhorrence. Her desire to spiritualize her love led her to devote to Lord Krishna. In all her Radha Krishna poems her obsession for transcendental love is surfaced. In all these poems she sublimates love to a divine experience as Ezekiel does in his love poems. She considers human love as a spark of the divine.

At the spiritual level of interpretation the love poems gain a far greater dimension than those of secular poems. Kamala Das's complete indulgence in envisaging Lord Krishna and her imaginative involvement in love with the Lord Krishna suggest her quest and pursuit for transcendental love. In the poem "Ghanashyam" she refers to the many faces of Krishna with which he was amorously flirting with his beloved gopis.

Love for Kamala Das meant companionship, warmth and conversation and not sex. She did not enjoy either companionship or warmth of her husband. "While Kamala Das was ready to make any sacrifices to please her husband for the sake of pure love, her body was not predisposed for love making". She was aware of the distinction between love and lust. She writes in her 'My Story' "sex was far from my thoughts"(12)

Since her husband was obsessed with sex, he could not give his wife the pure love she craved for with sincerity. She had to look for it in other person. She states in her book "My Story" "if love was what I had looked for in marriage, I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit" (13). The statements of this kind have led the readers and critics of Kamala Das to misunderstand her personality and mentality. They accused her of encouraging sex outside marriage. In fact this was not the case defends Iqbal Kaur. "Kamala Das sought love in extra-marital life being obsessed with her need for pure Platonic love. She hated the idea of marriage for sex and not for love but after her marriage she came to realize that it is not love but sex that matters most in marital life." (14)

The readers who accuse her of adultery and obscenity do not realize the distinction between love and sex. Where as love is a mental and emotional phenomenon, sex implies an immoral physical activity. The readers interpret love as lust and with this concept in mind they misunderstand Kamala Das who is a symbol of true and pure love. Her friendship with several men does not mean her obsession with sex. She had nothing in her to make her resemble a "harlot". She was neither a nymphomaniac nor adulteress. She cannot be a charmer of lecherous men, a "toy fit for the roaring nights". She terribly resented the animal like unrestrained, unbridled male desire for sex and protested against the misdeed of men "who were worse than dogs". She further remarked "I hated the exploitation of my body", I hate marriage, I hate to show myself, naked to any one".(15)

Kamala Das defends her chastity in the following words:

"If I were really promiscuous and obliging I would not have gained the hate and the notoriety that my indifference to sex has earned for me." (16) There is ample evidence that she is obsessed with pure love.

Another factor that inspired her to seek love in other persons was her deprivation of parental love in her childhood. It was on this account that she expected parental love from her husband. She confesses it in the poem "Glass".

I've misplaced a father  
Somewhere, and I look  
for him now every where.

She desired to have this love from her husband. She states it in her autobiography: "I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth" (17). It was this desperate search for a father, who got misplaced in the early years of this sensitive child's life that led her from one man to another. She writes in the poem "My Grandmother's House":

I who have lost  
My way and beg now at stranger's  
doors  
Receive love at least in small  
changes.

In every man she looked for fatherly love and kept searching for the one, who she could call "My Own" one who could relieve her of her tension and share her grief. In her own words "One could "share with me the dim lit gloom". Critics also defend her in terms of her concept of transcendental love and yearning for attaining this kind of love. The devotion of Nalapat family to Lord Krishna awakened

in her the same fascination for Krishna. Her agony due to failure in getting pure love in mundane life led her to seek this love in her mythical relationship with Lord Krishna. As Kamala Das found the heart of every man barren of love, she felt disappointed and finally derived solace from her mythical relationship with Lord Krishna. In her utter disappointment the vision of Krishna lurked, frequently. She states: "Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beauteous smile of my Krishna". Always, Always I shall love you I told him, Only you will be my husband only Your horoscope will match with mine". (18)

These lines bring to light the fact that Kamala Das's love had already assumed the transcendental form. She invariably seeks to attain the divine love of Krishna by surrendering to Him heart and soul. Her complete absorption in the contemplation of God is revealed in the poem 'Vrindavan':

Vrindavan lives on in every  
woman's mind  
and the flute, luring her  
from home and her husband.

In poem after poem Kamala Das has expressed her contempt for lust and sex and asserted her purity of heart. When Kamala Das was a child she had developed in the religious atmosphere of her parents a concept of purity of love. She conceived of love as a form of devotion, a prayer and a penance. Such an ideal concept was ingrained in her impressionable mind due to the influence of her aunt Ammini who accepted an ascetic life. While Ammini was reciting the devotional love songs written by Kumaranasan Kamal Das used to listen to it and conceived that love was something

heavenly and transcendental. She says "It was while listening to her voice that I sensed for the first time that love was beautiful anguish and a tapasy. She further adds that "in the morning I went into prayer room with my grandmother and sat for an hour listening to her reading the Bhagavatham and the Gita" (19)

Thus her autobiographical account reveals how her character had been built in the sacred, pious religious and Puritanical atmosphere of Nalapat family that was devoted to the worship of Lord Krishna. The concept of love that she had formed during her childhood impelled her after her marriage to expect the same kind of pure love from her husband but he was selfishly indifferent to her emotional need. On the contrary he used her for sexual enjoyment much against her will. Her husband's concupiscence awakened in her a terrible disgust for sex which she expresses in poem after poem.

Another factor that dismisses the reader's impression of Kamala Das's obscenity and immorality is her inheritance of Nalapat culture. The Nalapat women were orthodox, conservative and Puritanical in living in purdah. Although she opposed this traditional impositions yet she had imbibed the Nalapat concept of purity and chastity. Chastity was the summum bonum of their lives. These ancestral influences had enabled her to restrain herself from immoral activities. Besides, the poems on Lord Krishna written by her great grandmother's sister Ammalu had exerted impact on her mind and inspired her to dedicate herself to God. Kamala Das refers to Ammalu in her "My Story" and quotes the line written by her "My Chastity is my only gift to you Oh Krishna". (20)

Another illustration that convinces the readers of her chastity is her desire to conceive without sex. When she wanted to be a mother she did not want to be impregnated through sexual relation because she considered it an impure way. She desired to be a mother like Kunthi, who got a son without sexual contact. Thus, we notice from this instance that the moral value of chastity is deeply ingrained in her mind and heart and it is this moral concept and consciousness that governed all her activities in mundane life.

Since sexuality clashed with her concept of purity and chastity, she was much upset and embarrassed when she got married. She felt that her husband wanted to robe her chastity and she tried to deter him from sexual activities. She speaks of her reaction to her husband's approach: "I begged him to think of God. This is our wedding night, We should first pray to Krishna I said. He stared at me in disbelief. Was I mad ? (21)

This repulsive restraint of Kamala Das was considered tantamount to abnormality. She, however, tried to sustain her virginity about which She writes: referring to her husband's attempt to disrobe her for sexual enjoyment. She tried to resist persuasively: "Whenever she tried to strip me of my clothes, my shyness clung to me like a second skin and made my movement graceless". (22) These lines give ample evidence of her purity of heart and her proclivity to protect her chastity. To her, sex was dreadful and nauseating, an obnoxious deed. The concept of purity was deep-seated in her mind and hence she was uncompromising in her resistance against sex.

In consideration of Kamala Das's abhorrence of sexual life critics should



assume that she is not the type of woman as misrepresented in her poetry. In view of general opinion against her character, she admits in her book "*My Story*" that she has wrongly created a different image of her personality. The woman personae projected in her poetry is not a true and realistic representation of her personality. She has used the personae merely as an objective correlative. As we go through all her poems, we do not find a single poem in which she has expressed her hunger for sexual love. She has persistently given vent to her yearning for pure and true love which can be identified as Platonic love or transcendental love. Her quest for true love should not be misconstrued as her pursuit for sexual love. She all along expected this kind of love from her husband in all possible ways but to her despair she found sexual hunger in his approach. When the same love was also denied to her by her lovers, she finally expected it in her mythical relationship with Lord Krishna. This expectation and conviction to win this love from Krishan led her to imagine her relationship with Him. Since her mythical poems and devotion to Lord Krishna evince her interest in religion, she is treated as a religious poet by most of the critics.

In the absence of authenticity of her nymphomaniac tendency, Kamala Das should not be denounced as an adulteress or sexually hungry lady. In this connection the comment of K.N Daruwalla is quoted here. Daruwala in his essay *Confessional Poetry as Social Commentary* defends Kamala Das against the charge brought on her by A.N Dwivedi. He states "Dwivedi's statement against Kamala Das is unfair and unjust. She is a tortured being who is

in search of true, honest relationship. The road to such a quest is bound to lead her into situations where she can be exploited by others.(23) "In this connection the comment made by Bruce King is worth mentioning. King said "Rather than the seduced she(Kamala Das) often appears the seducer". Later on he exonerates her by making the following statement. "Her poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in the feelings of love; they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often connecting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self-dramatization and feeling of shame and depression". (24) Thus all these statements made by Bruce King, Daruwalla and Iqbal Kaur in favour of kamala Das go a long way to absolve her from the charges of adultery levelled on her by critics.

The large number of illustrations cited from Kamala Das's verses and from her confessional statements embodied in her autobiography "*My Story*" lend considerable support to the defence of her personality and character. In the light of these evidences, the readers should assume incontrovertibly that Kamala Das was not at all a nymphomania nor promiscuous nor an adulteress.

In order to refute the charges of immorality levelled on Kamala Das, a psycho-analytic study of her mind, attitude and intention is essential. Her verses and her autobiography "*My Story*" serve as a mirror on which the immaculate personality of the poetess is reflected. We conclusively establish that her character is impeachable, irreproachable and unstigmatised.