

Kamala Das's Monomaniac Pursuit for Transcendental Love: A Thematic Study of Her Poetry

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Abstract

Kamala Das dominated outstandingly the domain of Indo-English poetry in the post-independence period by the wealth of her prodigious poetical works that augmented her position in the galaxy of her contemporary poets. She revolutionized the conventional trend of versification by characterizing her poetry with the unconventional features of exploitation of personal voice, rebellious tone, manifestation of feminism, conventional outburst of her revolutionary reaction and manipulation of unusual idioms and jargons. Her poetry is reckoned as the first milestone along the avenue of Indian English poetry on account of her unprecedented poetic craftsmanship. Kamala Das dominated outstandingly the domain of Indo-English poetry in the post-independence period by the wealth of her prodigious poetical works that augmented her position in the galaxy of her contemporary poets. She revolutionized the conventional trend of versification by characterizing her poetry with the unconventional features of exploitation of personal voice, rebellious tone, manifestation of feminism, conventional outburst of her revolutionary reaction and manipulation of unusual idioms and jargons. Her poetry is reckoned as the first milestone along the avenue of Indian English poetry on account of her unprecedented poetic craftsmanship.

Keywords: Kamala Das, monomaniac pursuit, transcendental love

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It is axiomatic that Kamala Das has established herself as an accomplished artist, who laid the foundation stone of confessional poetry in Indian English poetry. Although her predecessor Ezekiel exploited poetry to give vent to his Indian sensibility, yet Kamala Das predominantly voiced this

sensibility in all her verses. Her poetry by the quality of its distinctly original character imparted a different identity to Kamala Das as a poet among all her contemporaries.

Although Kamala Das herself has written verses under the influence of the Western confessionalists yet she has given prominence to her own creativity and originality. She has been boldly individualistic in her thematic conception and exploitation. Nevertheless, the impact of the Western poets is surfaced in her poetry. She has certainly written her verses under their influences. Her susceptibility and responses to Western influences are discernible in her poetry. The Western confessionalists who have exerted much impact on Kamala Das are Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Judith Wright, Margaret Atwood, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell and S.W. Snodgrass. The enormity of their impact on Kamala Das can be determined and assessed in terms of similarities in the poetry of Mrs. Das and that of the poets mentioned above. Their influences are crystallized in the verses of Kamala Das who seems to have imbibed their modes and conventions of versification in respect of theme, concept and style.

In the annals of Indo-Anglian poetry, the poems of Kamala Das won considerable recognition on account of her unconventional treatment of love in them. The distinctive feature of her poetry is her preoccupation with the theme of pursuit for attainment of transcendence in love in mundane life. She has professed her

aspiration and longing in poem after poem with a monomaniac yearning.

In the context of her inclination for pure love, she asserted how she consistently craved for an experience of true love, but it proved unattainable to her in this world of physical love and lust. A study of her poems leads the readers to the conclusion that her conception of love was essentially spiritual and not physical as most readers often misconstrue from the lines of her poems. In her own words, her poetry is a journey into the mind of a woman in search of true love. True Love presupposes Platonic love that transcends the sphere of physical contact and sexual relation. Kamala Das states without feminine inhibition how her story is a story of a woman who moved from man to man for a taste of true love. To her utter disillusionment, she found only lust and hunger for sex in every man she met. She writes in the poem "An Introduction": -

I met a man, Loved him, Call him
not by any name, he is every man 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.

This discovery of sexual hunger in every man embittered her sentiment and provoked her to ventilate her disgust about the crude masculinity of man as a class of people. To her awareness, all men are selfish and self-centered in their amorous relationship with women in their marital life. They want a woman for erotic

enjoyment rather than for having a taste of pure love on the level of moral and spiritual sphere. They are barren of a spiritual heart in which pure love can flower for a woman or a wife approaching with a thirst for an experience of celestial love. She looked upon every lover to be a betrayer. Her frustration in love is poignantly revealed in the lines of the poem "A relationship":

That I shall find my rest,
my sleep, my peace and even death
nowhere else but here
in My betrayer's arms.

Her disappointment in love in marital life outraged her sentiment and propelled her to seek the same pure love in another man. She writes with words of confession:

"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". (An Apology
to Gautam)

The intensity of yearning to be loved is revealed in the use of the word "must" and in the triple repetition of the same phrase "I love".

In the love poetry, Kamala Das deliberately projects a woman as a persona with a view to voicing her emotional feeling and psychological reaction regarding frustration in her love. Her poetry is, therefore, a portrait of a woman craving for a state of satiety and ecstasy in love. She states that a woman uses her sex

with the objective of experiencing pure love but to her disappointment pure love is not attainable in mundane life. Her manipulation of sex is purported to appease the male lover. In her own words she reveals "I was in love with a husband who did not want love and it was a sweet torment to lie with my face against his feet while he slept Mine was a crushed love, a beautiful and futile emotion" (1). These lines are certainly the frantic outburst of bitterness for lust:

In the poem "An Introduction" Kamala Das writes:

"I asked for love not knowing what
else
to ask for, he drew a youth of sixteen
in to his
bedroom and shut the door. He did not
beat me but my sad
woman body felt so beaten".

These lines are obviously expressive of her disinterest and disgust in sexual relationship. The lover of the woman represents all other men of animal passion who love the voluptuous body of a woman which he uses for sensual gratification. They never dive deep into her pure heart and mind longing for pure love. Her hope for tasting pure love proves a mirage and disillusions her in all her contact and relation with lovers. In the poem 'The Old Play House' the poetess writes: -

"My mind is an old
playhouse with all lights put out the
"strong man's technique

is always the same. He serves his love in lethal doses.”

In these lines of the poem Kamala Das denounces man’s love for the body of a woman which he uses as a means of erotic appeasement. She even censures her husband for his thirst for sensual love and for not having a desire for celestial love. In the same poem she further reveals her abhorrence of erotic love.

“Glass” is one of these poems that manifest her inner urge for pure love. She further points-out its frailty in the following lines:

“I went to him for half an hour as pure woman,
pure misery, fragile glass, breaking, crumbling.

The words misery, fragile glass, breaking, crumbling are suggestive of transience of earthly love.

Her hope is blighted because the lover disappoints her by his thirst for sensual love which she loathes heartily and longs emotionally for pure love with monomaniac yearning. She further realizes that physical love is sterile, evanescent, and futile. It desecrates the body and mind of a lover. It cannot afford

a state of ecstasy, which Mirabai attained in her life. The sense of vacuity and sterility of sexual love is poignantly revealed in the poems “The Freaks” and “The Seashore”. In the poem “The Freaks” Kamala Das writes referring to the insensitiveness of lover’s heart:

The heart, an empty cistern,
Waiting through long hour, fills itself
with coiling snake of silence ... I am
a freak..... Empty of life-giving water
of true love.

The phrase “dry cisterns” implies lack of intensity of emotion in love. In the second poem “The Seashore” the same note of frustration in the lady lover is discernible. She externalizes her feeling of disillusionment and despondency in the following lines:

“I see you go away from me
and feel the loss of love. I never
received?”. (The Seashore)

Her persistent failure in love and her bitterness for lust impel her to divert her attention from mundane love to Platonic love and concentrate on aspiration for its attainment. Her yearning for celestial love went on increasing and manifested in the mythical poems written by her.

Her desire to escape from the snare of sexual love is crystalized in the poem "The Prisoner". As she was invariably indignant for betrayal of the lover, she decided to bid farewell to earthly love which she expresses in her poem "The Prisoner":

As the convict studies
his prison's geography
I study the trappings
of your body, dear love,
for I must someday find
an escape from its snare. (L, 1-6)

Kamala Das is considerably inspired and enthused with the spiritual love between Radha and Krishna. Like Radha and Mirabai, she seeks mythical love the celestuality of which she hopes transmutes her love into transcendental love. A hope stirs in her to merge with Radha with a view to experiencing fulfilment in her love with the mythical lover Lord Krishna. In the poem 'Radha' she invokes Lord Krishna with the intensity of love.

Now we quote the lines from the poems Radha, Radhakrishna, Ghanashyam, Vrindavan and Maggot in order to unmask Kamala Das's monomaniac aspiration for

attainment and realization of transcendental love. These poems are revelatory of her intensity of eagerness for experiencing the love of Lord Krishna:

"O' Krishna, I am melting, melting,
melting

Nothing remains but you". (Radha)

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 and flashed, frequently in her mind.

Always, Always I shall love you, I told him, only you will be my husband only. Your horoscope will match with mine (2).

She has always formed a vision of her association with God. She celebrates her longing for idealized phallus manifested in the divine figure of Lord Krishna. She glorifies Radha's eternal waiting for God and envisages herself as a lover of Krishna. She feels like Radha and imagines her experiences of celestial love with him. She writes:

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. (Krishna, L.1-4)

In the following poem "Radha-Krishna"
Kamala Das devotes herself to seek the
companionship of God:

This becomes from this hour
our rivers and the old Kadamba
tree ours alones, for our homeless
souls to return some day
to hang like bats
from this pure physicality

In the poem "Ghanashyam"
Kamala Das visualizes herself as a nest
which Lord Krishna like a cuckoo builds
and abides in it:

You have like a koel built your nest in
the arbour of my heart.

My life until now a sleeping jungle is
at last stirred with music.

You lead me along a route I have never
known before,

But at each turn when I near you,

Like spectral flame you vanish. (L.1-5)
(13).

Again, Kamala Das expresses
her heavenly love for Lord Krishna in
the same poem "Ghanashyam":

Shyam O Ghanshyam

You have like a fisherman cast your
net in the narrows

Of my mind

And towards you my thoughts today

Must race like enchanted fish... (L.67-
72)

Radha is an epitome of Platonic
love which she attains because of
monomaniac devotion to Lord Krishna.
Similarly, Mirabai, too remained
devotionally absorbed in love for Krishna
and became immortal as a devotee of God.
The ecstasy of fulfilment of love springs
from Radha's total surrender to God. Her
mythical love is expressed in her poem
Vrindavan.

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's
mind

and the flute luring her

from home and her husband.

She invariably seeks like Radha to
win the divine love of Krishna by
surrendering to Him heart and soul. Her
complete absorption in the contemplation

of God is revealed in her poems of mythical love.

In the poem *The Maggots* which is also thematically related to Radhakrishna myth. The poet muses upon the futility of sexual union. In the heat of love that makes women body turn into a corpse and the male is represented as a maggot the nibbler of her body.

What is it to the corpse

If maggots nip? (*The Maggots*)

The poetess imaginatively experiences a transmutation of her love into a transcendental love on account of her monomaniac pursuit for the love of Lord Krishna. 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" (3).

Kamala Das tries to rise spiritually to a height of mystical union with the invisible lover Lord Krishna. Her realization 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.

These lines suggest that the lady lover aspires to merge with Lord Krishna with the intensity of spiritual desire. The tone of frustration revealed in the poems mentioned above resembles that of Philips Sidney who diverted his mind from earthly love to divine love in view of its invulnerability:

The lovers scorn whom they love doth
possess?

Do they call virtue their
ungratefulness?

Sidney's sequence was inspired by his frustrated love for the lady Penelop Devereux.

Thus, the extracts of the mythical poems cited above convince us of the fact that the poetess was all along pursuing for attaining pure love with exuberance of hunger. She yearned for ecstatic experience of transcendental love. She was struggling

psychologically and emotionally to attain a sublime state in love that would elevate her to the spiritual level of transcendence in which earthly love is transmuted into Platonic love. Although some of her poems on the surface seem to be based upon perverted thoughts about sex and sexual life, yet it is inferred from her own pronouncement and interpretation of love that her urge was inwardly for attaining a state of transcendence that transcendentalizes love. Once she wrote in this context “Love is beautiful, whatever four lettered name the Puritans call it. It is the fore taste of Paradise. It is the only pastime that involves the soul”. These lines manifest her concept of heavenly love (4).

This conception of purity of love inspires Mrs. Das and impels her to establish her spiritual communion with Lord Krishna and His beloved Radha. Her aspiration is no more for attaining fulfilment in earthly love with an earthly lover, but she wholeheartedly cherishes and pursues monomaniacally to attain the love of Lord Krishna who she believes can uplift her to the level of transcendence in which she can never experience any frustration or disillusionment in love.

She cherishes a mythical experience of satiety and ecstasy in Platonic love which Mirabai pursued for. She has been a source of inspiration to Kamala Das who also devoted herself to Krishna in order to win His love. She further imbibed Radha’s intensity of love for Krishna and followed her path of love with the same intensity of devotion to attain transcendence in love.

The image of a woman pining for her divine lover has its roots in the Mirabai tradition. As the legend goes Mirabai was devoted to Lord Krishna and loved Him with monomaniac devotion to Him in order to experience divine love. In this context the devotion of the Nalapat family to Lord Krishna is mentionable. Their devotion awakened in her intensity of love for Krishna. Her agony arising out of failure in enjoying pure love in mundane life impelled her to seek celestial love in her mythical relationship with Lord Krishna.

In the context of transcendental love, we relevantly allude to Sri Aurobindo’s mythical love poems of Urvashi, Love and Death, Chitraganda, and Savitri. These poems highlight the celestuality of transcendental love for which these mythical figures pursue with

monomaniac yearning. The heroes and the heroines in these poems are epitomes of purity of love. They hanker after attainment of transcendental love with their purity of love in heart. These poems tend to glorify their pursuit for Platonic love and accentuate the spiritual significance of their love.

Sri Aurobindo as a poet of love has borrowed themes from Indian mythology and Persian stories. Love is predominantly the theme of poems such as *Urvasie*, *Love and Death*, *Chitrangada*, and *Savitri*. All these poems excepting *Savitri* depict the struggle of young lovers against adversity and misfortune to assert the immortal character of their love. A few examples can be cited here.

Urvasie is a long narrative poem in four cantos based upon the mythical love between the heavenly nymph *Urvasie* and King *Puruvavas*. The young lover *Pururavas* enamoured of *Urvasie* expresses his intensity of passionate love for her in the following words:

For surely in my heart, I know thou
bravest

A name that naturally weds with mine

And I perceive our union magically

Inevitable as perfect verse. (*Urvasie*,
L. 35-39)

Pururavas is described as a passionate lover who is afflicted in the absence of his beloved, *Urvasie* for whom he undertakes a quest to reclaim and restore her to his life. The poem *Urvasie* in many respects anticipates the epic *Savitri*. Both these long poems deal with the legends of transcendental love with symbolic significance.

Another love poem based upon the mythical story of invulnerable love is “*Love and Death*”. In this poem love is characterized as indomitable and immortal. In the poem the passionate lover *Ruru* invades *Hades* to restore his beloved *Priyumvada* who was overtaken by death due to snakebite. *Ruru* barter half of his life in order to live with *Priyumvada*. The following lines suggest the intensity of their Platonic love before her death:

To him the earth was a bed for this sloe
flower

To her all the world was filled with his
embrace. (*Love and Death*, L.10-11)

While *Pururavas* braves into the kingdom of *Indra* and attains an immortal status to get united with *Urvasie*, *Ruru* on the other hand invades the

underworld to reclaim his lost beloved Priyumvada and willingly barter away half of his own life to live with her. In these love poems 'Urvasie' and 'Love and Death', love triumphs over death.

With regard to these poems Dr. K.R.S. Iyengar observes "both the narratives are quarried from the ranges of deathless romance for Pururavus and Ruru are great lovers and Urvasie and Priyumvada are truly worthy of their love" (5). Their love for each other is heavenly and not mortal or earthly.

The narrative 'Love and Death' is reminiscent of a corresponding Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice but there is a difference between these stories in respect of treatment of love. In the Greek legend the adventurer fails to conquer fate to restore his lady love Eurydice, whereas in the Indian legend of 'Love and Death' the lover exhibits the supreme power of his love over death. Ruru conquers death and reclaims Priyumvada by virtue of transcendental quality of love.

Another fragmented poem of love and romance is Chitrangada published in 1949. This poem was written almost at the time when Urvasie (1896) and Love and Death (1921) were written. Chitrangada is

a tale of mythical love between Urjooon and the princess Chitrangada. Her intensity of love is expressed in the following lines:

With all myself

I loved thee, not as other women do

Piece meal, reluctantly, but my whole heart

And being like a sudden spring broke forth

To flowers and greenness at my sun God's touch

Ceding existence at thy fact
(Chitrangada L.3-8)

The note of Chitrangada is predominantly romantic, but it also gives the impression of a transcendental love poem. In all these love poems Iyengar finds "indomitable love beating against the gate of mortality and gaining victory over death in one way or other. The poem 'Urvasie', 'Love and Death', 'Chitrangada' and 'Savitri' are the sublime sagas of love" (6).

In the later poetry of Sri Aurobindo love is a recurrent theme but it assumes spiritual significance. Among the love poems of the last phase, Savitri stands as an epic of transcendental love. Savitri is depicted as an embodiment of purity of love by virtue of which she restores the life of her husband

Satyawan from the clutch of Yama. In the course of a conversation between Yama and Savitri, the latter asserts her love as unchallengeably true and pure. The following lines are illustrative of Savitri's purity of love:

My love is not a hunger of the heart,
My love is not a craving of the flesh;
It came to me from God, to God returns
(Savitri Book X Canto II, P.688, L.23-25)

The following lines too suggest transcendental love as depicted in the epic:

Love must not cease to live upon the earth;
For love is the bright link twixt earth and heaven
Love is the far transcendent's angel here;
Love is man's lien on the Absolute
(Book X canto- III, P. 711, L. 20-23)

The divine significance of love is illustrated in the lines quoted above from the epic 'Savitri'.

Thus, we find that love predominates in poem after poem in Sri Aurobindo's love poetry. It is obvious that

theme of love had a fascination for Sri Aurobindo and hence he borrowed situations and scenes dealing with love mostly from Indian mythology. However, Sri Aurobindo conceived of these love sequences of these poems by his extraordinary power of imaginative sensibility.

Thus, the mythical poems written by Sri Aurobindo tend to glorify the Platonic love and elevate it to a state of transcendence. The only difference between the characters of the mythical poems and Mrs. Das is that the former are heavenly figures whereas Kamala Das is an earthly figure of modern age. When the mythical lovers succeed in their pursuit of love Kamala Das imaginatively realizes her mythical love in earthly life. Her love for Krishna remains unrealized and unfulfilled. She, however, derives solace and satisfaction from her imaginative conception of mythical love.

Her mythical poems served to exonerate her from the charges of promiscuity and nymphomania levelled against her by Bruce King, Anisur Rahman and AN. Dwivedi. Their allegations against Mrs. Das are refuted and falsified by critics like Harish Razada, Ramakrishna Nair and Iqbal Kaur.

Further Iqbal Kaur a critic of Kamala Das defends her in his essay 'Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry' and comments: I personally feel that she is a woman obsessed not with lust and sex but with the concept of purity which she had inherited from the Nalapat women" (7). Another factor that dismisses the critics' 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 the 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 and pursue for attainment of transcendental love with monomaniac zeal. 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" (8). The contentious remarks made by the critics in defence of the chastity and immaculacy of Kamala Das contribute to her exculpation from

allegations. In the light of her mythical poems and in view of her autobiographical confessional outpouring of her sentimental reaction we establish her character and personality as immaculate, irreproachable and unimpeachable. Moreover, her autobiographical account of her spiritual pursuit 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.

When Kamala Das was a child, she had developed a religious bent of mind in the religious atmosphere of her parents. She conceived of love as a form of devotion, a prayer and penance. Such an ideal concept was ingrained in her impressionable mind due to the influence of her aunt Ammini who embraced 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 tapasya. 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” (9). The concept of celestial love that she has conceptualized served to spiritualize her mind and render her unsusceptible to physical needs of sex.

Kamala Das imbibed the spiritual influence exerted upon her by her ancestor because of her susceptibility to their inspiration. She remains absorbed in the contemplation of God and feels prompted to write mythical poems which surface her aspiration of Platonic love.

Kamala Das interprets earthly love as ephemeral and sinful whereas celestial love is eternal and transcendental.

In view of ephemerality of sensual love, Indian saints and monks abandon this kind perverted love and meditate for attainment of transcendental love. Spiritual personalities like Swami Dayanand, Vivekananda, Sivananda, Satyananda and Ramanan Maharshi relinquished sexual life in view of its sinfulness, sacrilege and profanity. They pursued spiritually for experiencing Platonic love that inspires many devotees of God and frustrated lovers in India to traverse along the trodden track of all these saints in order to transcendentalize their love and spiritualize their personalities.

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