

## The Use of Krishna Myth in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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### Abstract

In Indian English literature the use of Hindu mythology is like a literary tradition. Mythology in Indian context is perhaps the most utilized and most admired genre in literature. History bears proof that Indians from every age, time and place have expressed their ardent desire to be enriched in myths, and writers have used Indian mythological characters as symbols to express their feelings. Indian writers often possess a strange link between their works and myths of their culture. They make the fullest use of myth symbolically and metaphorically. Influence of the myth working in the socio cultural and religious background colours the creative process of most of the Indian poets. This paper is an attempt to explore the use of myth in the poems of Kamala Das. Her treatment of mythical imagery is different from that of other Indian women poets writing in English. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems which influences her use of mythical characters and their relationship with the poet. In order to understand an Indian poet one needs to have an idea of the position of myths in the poet's life. Myths in Hinduism are not taken at the literal level, they have symbolic significances. They indirectly control the daily life of Indians. These myths become steps, which lead to the understanding of the subtle metaphysical truths, through scholarly interpretation. Rama and Krishna seem so much alive that we can almost see and feel them. The influence of mythology in India definitely is more on the women-folk, as they are repositories of family tradition. A much loved myth of the Indians is the love between man and woman sublimated. The cult of devotion is considered a form of love, wherein the devotee's love for God is considered as a woman's love for a man. The devotee and God become a pair of lovers for union

**Key Words:** Krishna, myth, Kamala Das

### I. INTRODUCTION

The major themes of Kamala Das are: her quest for ideal love and her failure to find it; a strong desire for freedom from traditional social and marital bondage; her emotional relationship with her grandmother and her nostalgia for the old beloved house. Search for true love is the principal preoccupation

of Kamala Das's poetry. Though her obsessive concern with physical love is quite prominent, yet she yearns for ideal love, which finally culminates in the Radha-Krishna myth. There are several poems that deal with this divine image of love, and by using it as a symbol of the soul's quest and

confluence with the divine, the poet reveals the fulfillment attained through uninhibited surrender.

## II.

Radha- Krishna myth runs throughout her poetry. She uses this myth to reconcile herself to her fate both as woman and a soul. Sometimes a reference to Krishna myth is an attempt to escape from the pain she suffers in marital life as she reveals in 'Maggots', in which she tries to transfer her experiences to Radha, who after the blissful love relation with Krishna, feels like being a corpse after her marriage

*I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha*

(My Story P.153)

In "Radha Krishna" the Krishna of Gita could not be loved, the only Krishna who could be loved was in the woods of Brindavan when Radha was his love. The river and the tree symbolize eternal life, and this yearning is fulfilled when the union becomes complete. The poem 'Vrindhavan' sums up her feelings for Krishna as a man and lover expressed in her other poems.

In parallel to her real life, there ran an imaginary life in which she thought Krishna as her husband and lover. The real life shattered her dreams that she had formed of her future husband;

*...my husband had wished to marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gain.....I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable.*

(My Story P.84)

Apart from Radha the other main devotees of Krishna is Mirabai whose devotion is elevated to the spiritual phase. This love can be typified as the love, which a woman feels either for god or husband, when their relationship has its base firmly rooted in the physical, and yet rises to spiritual level. In "A Man is a Season" we find the echoes of Mira's devotional songs. Mira was forced to man, even though she was in love with Krishna and she accuses him for this:

*A man is a season,  
You are eternity  
To teach me this you let me toss my youth  
like coins  
Into various hands*

Kamala too moved from man to man like a deaf and blind person groping for Krishna, the real one. In "A Cask of Nothing", she says:

*If I close my eyes I see nothing  
If I shut my ears, I hear nothing*

The ache of nothingness is the vacuum within, which hungers for union with the divine. It is this ache which led her to the Radha- Krishna myth, the myth being multi-dimensional suited her purpose of finding true love. This myth in colourful language symbolizes the urge of the soul with the supreme soul. Only god can fulfill the hunger for divine union. In "Ghanashyam" she accepts her love for Krishna as a divine longing. "Ghanashyam / You have like a Koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart/ My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music." Here Koel, a dark bird, becomes an appropriate image for Krishna who too was dark in colour. In this poem, she compares god with a Koel (a bird) who has built her nest in the heart of

the poet, Until now the heart or in a broader sense, her life was solitary, gloomed and ruined jungle which has now been excited is back into life by the sweet music of koel i.e. the Ghanashyam.

The music described here signifies the flute enchanted by Krishna. According to the faith of the poet, when a person listens to the music enchanted by Krishna, he sinks into the profound depth of the carol. A time comes when he realizes god and surrenders himself completely to him. But now as the time has changed, people have become more realistic and materialistic and give less consideration to god, religion and devoutness. Kamala Das considers herself to be a spiritualistic person and apart from the materialistic and man-centred society.

*Everything in me*

*Is melting, even the hardness at the core  
O, Krishna. I am melting, melting, melting  
Nothing remains but you*

She considers herself to be completely surrendered to Krishna. She has given up all the mortal and temporary worldly attractions and has devoted herself to the worship of Krishna. For her, Krishna is the ultimate destiny, beyond which there seems to be nothing. She imagines that her soul i.e. *Atma* is melting down and even her body has lost and merged with the god i.e. *Parmatama*.

*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*

“From Only the Soul Knows How to Sing”

And now that she has attained the spiritualism, she ironically satirises the so-

called wisdom of the society. The play is on the word ‘wise’. The word ‘wise’ here means the folly ideology of the society. The wise words of the people are, therefore, on contrary to the divine.

She imagines that it is the god who has led her along a route (probably her poetic career) that she was unaware of before. She has not attained this career by herself but it is god (residing in her heart) who has made her follow this path. For her, it is an apt path and it is justified to fight against the norms of the male-centered society and the orthodox beliefs.

*You lead me along a route*

*I have never known before*

“(Tonight This Savage Rite)”

But sometimes, the god that she imagines to be residing in her heart and in whom she has completely lost often makes her hopeless and sorrowful because when she tries to go near him by her devoted, dedicated and honest prayers, he vanishes like the flame of the fire, thus again leaving her in solitude and gloom:

*But at each turn when I near you*

*Like spectral flame you vanish.*

“(Tonight This Savage rite)”

These words probably depict that now that she has tried to follow the route provided by the god, she has become a victim of harsh criticism of the society that considers her a disbeliever, characterless and hypocrite woman. At such a stage, she feels that Krishna should have been with her to guide her, inspire her and helps her to fight against them but instead, she feels alone and solitary and shows her tiff with god. Kamala Das suffered a lot because of womanhood, her husband, her family and society. Thus being

frustrated and tired of these things, she complains to the god against the injustice of the society and also about her condition and indirectly she exposes the vices of the society over the woman and womanhood. Kamala Das exposes every unjust violence, of which the women are victims, before the God and also describes to us how different are our ways from the ways of god. She asks the God to help her in changing all these unjust social doctrines.

Kamala Das also exposes the orthodoxy in matters of faith that prevail in our society. Men of one faith are advised by their elders to keep a distance from those belonging to the other faith (s). We are asked to keep ourselves aloof from eating, drinking, sitting and even talking with them. A person belonging to other faith than one's own is seen as an alien or a foe. Being born in a conservative Hindu Family, The poet experiences the same thing. She is also given the same suggestions. However, when she grows up into a mature woman and recognizes the reality of such worn-out doctrines, she decides not to believe or act upon them as she has believed in Universal God (i.e. the God of all). At this, the society threatens her to butcher her.

*We  
Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a  
hate, illogical,  
And chose not to believe....  
Slay them who do not  
Believe, or better still disembowel their  
young ones  
And scatter on the streets the meager  
innards.  
“(The Inheritance)”*

Kamala Das is of the view that love is something very difficult to achieve. She exemplifies her failure in getting love with that of Radha. In Hindu mythology, Radha is the beloved of Krishna. She is elder than Krishna, but still, both have spiritual love among them. Krishna is already married to a number of other women but loves Radha the most. However, the circumstances lead to the failure of their union. Krishna is supposed to leave Radha forever as he is going to become a king. He goes to meet Radha for the last time on a river bank. They are locked in an embrace. Krishna kisses her, however, Radha seems to remain unaffected by it. She considers herself to be like a corpse. The kisses of Krishna are like maggots that bite dead body, having no effect on her. For Kamala Das, her story of unattained love is similar to that of Radha. She like Radha has everything except love. It is her hunger for the love that makes her cry,

*If love is not to be had  
I want to be dead, just dead  
“(suicide)”*

Being frustrated by her husband, family, the society, faith and unachieved love she finds no other option than the God and says :

*I want a peace that I can tote  
Like an infant in my arms*

Now that the society is plagued with a number of vices that are unbearable by the woman, it's time for a revolution It's time for an overturning. Krishna has shown her the path of revolution which she was unaware of. She, as the representative of divine ,becomes a revolutionary person for the woman of the contemporary world.

**III.**

**CONCLUSION**

Kamala Das's use of Krishna myth as a symbol for her quest of divine love renders a justification for her apparent adulterous behaviour on two grounds, primarily trying to illustrate that every woman longs for a lover who can make her feel a complete woman; and is an indirect jibe at the so called people who hide their lusts, forgetting that their culture and religion are full of frank erotic descriptions. The myths used in the poems have served one purpose they prevented her from killing herself due to guilt of adulterous actions. That does not mean that her poems are purely superficial

in the use of myth. Her poems are metaphysical not in the common sense of being concerned with philosophy of life but by being an exploration in the meaning of existence in this meaningless world.

She embraced Islam on Dec 11, 1999, and adopted the Muslim name, Surayya. She was against the Hindu way of cremating, and didn't want her body to be burnt. She had always had a strong affection for the Islamic way of life, as she says in an interview. She finally replaced Krishna with Mohammad. She felt God as an abstract entity and anyone can call Him by any name he likes. In her writing she has always referred to God as an Almighty power.

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