

Celebrating Sensuality: A Critical Study of Love and Longings in the works of Kamala Das

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Abstract

This study critically analyses the intimate feeling of love and sexual desires as expressed by Kamala Das. The sexual experiences and the physical and mental exhaustion represented in her poems could be visualized as an endeavor to achieve self-identity through her poetry. In the poems that celebrate love and lust she attempts to convert the loss into pure presence of joy. Her confessions are dubbed revolutionary and by extension become quite controversial, creating a block in the hithertofore accepting readership. This research also would evaluate the response of critics and society on the rebellious works of Kamala Das.

Introduction

Woman's sexual freedom has been the topic of contemplation of women writers across globe for about two hundred years. In a patriarchal country like India, a woman's expression and opinions on sexual desires and longings are generally not very well received. However, Kamala Das has been a unique literary phenomenon. Bold and controversial as she is labelled, she ventured into the restricted zone. She celebrates femininity, woman's body and sensuality with great pride.

Kamala Das was such a poet who grabbed the attention of her readers and critics for her extraordinarily bold poetry. She shocked the people either with her behaviour or her statements. Appreciation of female body is an inevitable part of her poetry which is also evident in her other works as prose and paintings. Be it her readers, media persons, her family or her critics; she left everyone pondering over her frank and open expression of female body and sexual desires.

Literature Review

Usha V.T., in her paper "One Woman's Autobiography: Kamala Das's My Story" explains that when the female body is exposed at length, there is a risk of other factors of female identity becoming sidetracked or ignored completely. The writings of poets are then subjected to phallogocentric criticism and are marketed as saleable commodity.

N. V. Raveendran, in his well acclaimed book "The Aesthetics of Sensuality: A Stylistic Study of the Poetry of Kamala Das" explores and explains the poetics of sensuality. He bypasses the usual charges laid against Ms. Das of being extremely bold and defines her sensuality in an altogether different manner. He attempts to unravel the art and thought of Ms. Das using the tools of stylistics and allied disciplines.

P. Mallikarjuna Rao in his paper, "Body and Beyond: Love Poetry of Kamala Das", examines the love poems of Ms. Das in the light of two traditions; the Indian and the Western. He writes that she ventilates her

personal experiences and humiliations and also the intensity of her bruised married life experience. And that MsDas's poems stand apart as they fruitfully combine the indigenous traditions such as Abhisarika and Sahaja.

O. J. Thomas in his paper, "Kamala Das: The Tragedy of Life is not Death but Growth", rightly points out, that women are dolls in the hands of men. According to the poems of Ms. Das, modern women need freedom, self-respect and they are prepared to shoulder responsibility.

Research Methodology

The research plan consists of critically analyzing the primary and secondary data with reference to various perceptions of literature and law in general and Kamala Das's views on laws in particular. A critical analysis of works and famous Poems by Kamala Das has been done with special emphasis on her opinion on feminine sensuality, internal conflicts, situations in which these quotes were stated, and also external factors which affected the lives of protagonists in several possible ways.

Also discussion with thinkers, writers, poets and educators leaves a clear trail of investigation and gathering of information. Library work, both real and online, forms the base of this research. A series of literary investigation pertaining to special critical appreciation and literary criticism of selected works is the method of research. Moreover, analysis is done from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources for this study are works of Kamala Das; Only the Soul Knows How to

Sing, and My Story. The analysis and interpretation of both the works focus on understanding and evaluating the views of the renowned English writer Kamala Das on female love and longings. A vivid and detailed study of literary devices has been adopted for further exploration of conditions, varied interpretation and relevance in the current scenario.

Due to complexity of the topic the secondary resources contribute largely in conduction of this research. The secondary resources are research papers written by Usha V.T, Raveendran, Mallikarjuna and others. Qualitative information that contributes to this study has also been taken from Arjun Puri's blog. The critical analysis done by other writers and research scholars is also referred to, for an easy comprehension and interpretation of the works. The electronic references have played an important role ranging from web articles to blogs.

The analysis of the works is done step by step:

- Critical reading of the poems
- Interpretation of the works by the critics
- Appreciation of the theme, and plot
- Personal analysis and responses addressing the topic

Statement of Problem

Kamala Das, more than any other writer, has written about feminine sensibility. Her writings push her concepts of physicality to its limits, sometimes even widening them beyond essential. Her work is innovative

and packed with meaning and by studying it we are studying the height of English literary achievement. This is the reason it is still relevant in today's world.

These four questions form the base of this research work:

1. To what extent has Ms Das affected the female psyche?
2. What are the key features of MsDas's poems?
3. How does she thematically treat the concept of love and longings in her works?
4. Does she remain consistent throughout her works or her opinions are situational and thematic, and vary?

Through examining these questions, it is hoped to achieve an understanding of MsDas's perspective of feminine love and physicality, and how it is distinguished from that of other writers. The main objective of this study is to understand different interpretations of Das's views on human psyche. This study is highly relevant to evaluate the conditions and situations that may have provoked him to write so much and so openly about female desires.

Findings & Discussions

Kamala Das is a well-accepted confessional poet. All confessional poetry spring from the need to 'confess' and according to Robert Phillips, it is 'a declaration of dependence', or of guilt, or of anguish or sufferings. As part of the process of redefining self and accentuating the differences / uniqueness of the female, Kamala Das often explore her body as well as the biological sensations in sexual terms. Lucy Irigaray, the noted feminist psychoanalyst warns against

highlighting of the woman's biological essentialism:

It is legitimate to expose the oppression, the mutilation, the 'functionalization' and the 'objectivation' of the female body, but it is also dangerous to put the female body at the centre of a search for female identity.

When the female body is exposed at length, there is a risk of other factors of female identity becoming sidetracked or ignored completely. For instance Kamala Das's *My Story* has been subjected to such phallogentric criticism and marked as saleable commodity.

Love and sex are no doubt the leitmotif of her poetry but the depth of her distress seems to have left a constant sting in her soul, and that does not invest her identity with a certain tincture of pangs. As K. R. S. Iyengar points out, "Love is crucified in sex and sex defiles itself again and again". M. K. Naik depicts the same figure,

The most obvious (and to casual reader cheerful) feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex as referring nonchalantly to 'the musk of sweat between the breasts', 'the warm shock of menstrual blood', and even 'my pubis'.

With hot blooded sincerity, Das always expresses the need of the feminine self for love. And that is why her poetry gave the uninhibited picture of man-woman relationship with all its crude manifestations. K. R. Sreenivasa Iyengar once remarked

about her poetry that she treated her poetry as,

An attractive, protective or defiant cover to hide the nakedness of the self,

but more often than not an engine of catharsis, a way of agonized self-knowledge. (Iyenger, 662)

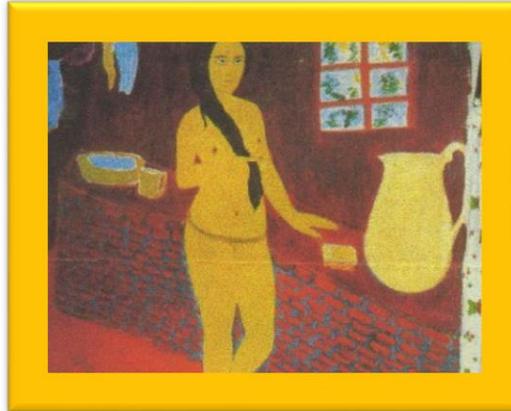


Fig. 0.01. Maid at Bath (Oil Painting rpt in Femina 23 Aug 1996, 59)

The painting of this maid seems to have resemblance with Nani of her poetry. She painfully portrays the insignificance of the house maid in the large house. In the world where people have short term memories, she not only remembers the incident but also painfully describes it in her poem 'Nani'. She, being an extremely sensitive person, finds it shocking when her grandmother refuses even to recall Nani's presence in their lives.

. . . Another year or two, and I asked my grandmother One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother shifted the reading glasses on her nose and stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she? With that question ended Nani. (OSS, 95)

Das in the poem 'The Looking Glass' says,

Gift him all,

Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of

Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,

The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your

Endless female hunger. . . (OSS, 68)

and

.....Ask me, everybody, ask me What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,

A libertine, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like

A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,

And sleeps.

The conclusive remark of having no regrets and derivation of pleasure from the writing of the text clearly shows her defiance, self-

assertion and celebrative mood against all odds. Yet, paradoxically enough the defiant stance, however genuine in tone, does not underscore the preceding act of self-justification. I don't wish to suggest that Kamala Das's self-justification is a sign of her diffidence. Rather through self-justification she reveals the inner tension and plight of the woman writer when she attempts to write about her own life. Further she says,

“And each time my husband
His mouth bitter with sleep
Kisses, mumbling to me of love,
But if he is you and I am you
Who is loving who”

As seen in the above lines, she turns philosophical and questions the existence of beings. Her love poems can clearly be bifurcated into two parts. The first one, where she talks explicitly about her love making experiences and worldly pleasure and the second one where she asserts that she finds solace only in the arms of Lord Krishna and 'it is only because of Him that she could lie beneath her husband'. Later on in life she clearly advocates human love and defying her own earlier stance she says,

“I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
only the souls may enter
the vortex of the sea.
only the souls know how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.”

Paradoxically enough it has never been the lot of any male writer to confront such a predicament. Did the genius in Henry Miller ever felt the need to justify his sado-macohistic, voyeuristic, pornographic and indulgent writings on men's endless sexual appetite and colonization of the female body? Certainly not, as a male writer he had the license to plunge into his writerly act and nowhere was he an outcast. Though his texts were once banned in his native puritan America, the bohemian French capital provided the fertile ground. Today worldwide he is consumed as a classic author not an eccentric!

Conclusion

Kamala Das is a woman, who made brave attempts to exhibit all her feelings and lived her life fully and honestly, as best as she knew, and with all her might. She loved to be the centre of attention and for that she could go to any extent. She also had elevated sexual desires which kept her on toes throughout her life looking for what she calls love. Since her first sexual encounter with her husband which she finds brutal,

"It's not enough having a God. I want a man's touch. So I tell him, 'I'm lonely, when can I see you?' that's the ultimate discovery. I think even when I'm about to depart for another world, I will try to phone him. I will not speak words to God." . . .

. "I don't romanticize God. It's not enough for me. I need the voice of the man I love saying, 'Goodbye, be strong,..." (Weisbord, 239)

To sum up, no female writer has ever written so openly and frankly not only about the sexual desires of her protagonist but mostly herself; her works mostly being autobiographical in nature. Das indeed was a bold person, who constantly looked for attention, was overly emotional and exhibited

paradoxical mind set. Though she never intended to but she, due to her innate personality traits made almost everybody uncomfortable with her uncanny stances. However like any other individual, she had a unique personality, which should be adored and appreciated by all.

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