

KAMALA DAS: THE EVOLUTION OF HER CREATIVE ETHOS

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Abstract:

Kamala Das, born in 1934, a publishing poet from the 1960's onwards, and winner of India's Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984 and shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in literature along with Marguerite Yourcenor, Doris Lessing, and Nadine Gordimer, has had many labels attached to her „modernist poet“, confessional poet, feminist poet, poet of love and desire, „a woman poet“ etc. It is not unusual that a poet with a substantial body of work has published several volumes of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems* (1984) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996)—should be referred to by one or more of these terms. In this article shows the development of creative art of the poet as to how it developed step by step. The poem-wise analysis is given, in brief, in the best possible way.

Keywords: Kamala Das, Poetry, Creative Ethos, creative art.

Introduction:

There is hardly any doubt that Kamala Das has become a unique literary phenomenon in contemporary Indian English literature. Frank, bold and controversial in life and literature she has made enormous contribution to the growth of modern Indian English poetry. Although she has ventured into the realm of fiction also, it is as a poet that she has excelled herself and has won a world-wide acclaim. Indubitably she deserves a place beside the very best women poets of the twentieth century. She is a woman poet, acutely conscious of her femininity with all the contradictory demands made on it by the family, society and her radical companions. She is „aggressively individualistic“, according to ICR. Srinivas Iyengar; yet full of social awareness, ever political awareness to her more careful readers. Her poetry shows a gradual widening of concern over the years as she liberates herself from her initial obsession with her gender identity and extends her sympathies to entire section of suffering humanity—the marginalized, the poor, the minorities, the fighters for justice, women, children, and abandoned youth. This commitment, however, does not turn her deaf to the call of her inner self. Kamala Das has already attracted a good deal of attention from scholars and critics. There are already more than half a dozen full-length critical studies such as Devinder Kohli's *Virgin Whiteness: The Poetry of Kamala Das*, Anisur Rahman's *Expressive form in the Poetry of Kamala Das* and A.N. Dwivedi's *Kamala Das*

and Her Poetry, etc. and several anthologies of critical articles on Kamala Das such as *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum* edited by R. Mittapalli and P. Piconeco, and dozens of critical anthologies, and journals on Indian English literature containing stray articles on Kamala Das have already appeared. In her poetry she tries to find out

her own identity. Therefore, her poetry, in itself, is a search for self as she roams about to know the concrete reality of life and death, Of body and soul. The purpose of the present work is to make a humble endeavour to do the same, since no such study, so far as we are aware of, has been attempted.

The Evolution of her Creative Ethos

The present project intends to discuss in detail the evolution of Kamala Das's creative ethos in the best possible way. Her bulk of poetry passes through stages. She mounts higher and higher in the field of poetry rung by rung. Her poetry develops through stages and for our own sake we can divide it into at least three stages i.e. the first, the second and the third stage. The first or early stage includes the poems published in 60s in two volumes, viz. *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *The Descendants* (1967) while the pieces that appeared in 70s in two other volumes, viz. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1979) in collaboration with P.

Nandy constitute the second stage. In the third stage fall the poems written since 1980 and included in *Collected Poems*, Vol. I (1984). Only *The Soul Knows How to Sing* (1966) and the poem "Yah Allah" published in 2000 have been commented upon to estimate her poetic achievement. We shall now see in detail the poetic innings of Kamala Das.

The poem celebrates the mood of a casual victory over the defeat of love. It can be understood as an Indian poet's creative relation to the torture of the Indian summer. The April sun brings a sense of sensuous repletion and warm intoxication rendering the poet drunk on the gold of suns. The first line of the poem is related to the last. It means the harmony is maintained throughout the poem with single line, "What is this drink but juice of April Sun". The questioning line sets forth the tone of the poem: "What is this drink but The April sun-squeezed Like an Orange in My glass? I sip the Fire, I drink and drink Again, I am drunk Yes, but on the gold of suns." (*Summer in Calcutta*)

Here the sun is transformed into juice, heat is transformed into laughter and despair is transformed into hopeful desire. The poem, thus, celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over "the defeat of love". The word, "squeezed" pervades the meaning of the poem. K.R. Srinivas Ayenger writes that it "scatters its fall out of heat, sweat and weariness over the entire volume 'Summer in Calcutta' (677). However, the significance of the poem lies not in its evocation of heat and sweat but in its instillation of a regenerate mood of sensuality and passion through absorption of sensuousness.

Kamala Das's poetic medium caresses the various shades of feelings as she brings all the four elements (air, earth, water and fire) together. The image here creates the visual impression of the eunuchs who survive and suffer endlessly like half-burnt logs from funeral pyres. The dance of the Eunuchs is in reality not a dance but a continuous convulsion, their voices are harsh and their songs melancholy. The eunuchs celebrating the birth of a child are compared to „half-burnt logs from funeral pyres” drawing at once a sinister birth-death contrast.

The „Freaks” is the second poem of the collection *Summer in Calcutta*. It is an autobiographical poem which paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive and the woman is burning with desire, but she is helpless. It is about „a grand, flamboyant lust. It is the poet's awareness of wide difference between expectation and reality that lends a grim tragic force to her works. Her poems epitomize most powerfully these sorrows and failures: He talks, turning a sun-stained Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark Cavern, where the stalactites of Uneven teeth gleam, his right Hand on my knee, while our minds Are willed to race towards love; But they only wander, tripping idly over puddles of Desire....

The poet's desire to love and be loved is driven home by the single cause „wild greed”, whereas the other side of arrogance is represented by the word „stillness”. The aroma of feminism is obviously reflected in her silent eyes which are not similarly brave and cannot look into his eyes to prompt a response. His leaving the place without saying a „goodbye” is the final jolt she receives. The poem „The Stranger and I” conjures up the image of a stranger and poet has come across everywhere. She builds up a mystique around this elusive stranger for whom her soul aches. She has been every woman waiting for that man who is recognizable as an archetypal „Everyman”. He is a lonely stranger, with despair in his eyes, walking „on and on” through the streets of town both familiar and alien. He may also be found in restaurant, his aloofness contrasting with their brittle, smoke-filled gaiety, or in gardens, or beaches at cocktail parties. The main thing about him is that he is always alone. Obviously he is a melancholy figure because „I've seen you walk around in gardens Pausing to peer at homes, knife-engraved On trees.

In the second stage of creative ethos of Kamala Das we shall study her second poetical volume which has twenty three poems in all. This second collection of poems *The Descendants* (1967) is considerably slimmer than the previous collection of poems, *Summer in Calcutta*. Of these twenty-three poems, nine are very short and two i.e. „The Suicide” and „Composition” are the longest poems ever written by her. The central idea of the poems are love, lust and disillusionment. At this stage, we find her rather matured, thoughtful and controlled. At many places, we see metaphysical concerns with time, death and decay, while some of them express a profound disgust with the obvious approach to lust into the lighting, blues of life's several aspects. The futility and barrenness of the modern world is dealt to a greater extent in some of her poems. *Summer in Calcutta* depicts external world primarily dealing with outside human world. *The Descendants* exposes the internal

world and deals with the inner self of the poet. It is more concentrated in its outlook and range of experience. The incongruity between man's guiding desires and the insubstantiality of his achievements strikes the poet leading to her vision of human destiny and tragic dimension. The collection reveals the thematic and symbolic structure of a poetic consciousness moulded by meditation over death and physical decay, ugliness of the body and the mind and the fallibility of human emotion. Discriminating the two collections, D. Kohli writes: In *The Descendants*, there is a shift from the sun-image of *Summer in Calcutta* to the sea image—from noon to night from fire to water. (Kohli, 88)

The third section reaffirms the value of sexual love as an all-embracing conflagration and elemental fire in which the lovers boil themselves into the final glory of fulfillment: We came together like two suns meeting, and each Raging to burn the other out, He said you are A forest Conflagration and I, poor-forest Must burn....

The lovers rage to burn each other out in a conflagration of sexual union. The sun is a symbol of passionate participation in love and adds to the intensity of the poem. Sex to her is hot-ail attractive banquet by any means or manner and she would gladly desist from it if she could. To escape it and enjoy the cool, remains a cherished desire. This is best expressed in the poem entitled „Convicts“:

That was the only kind of love This hacking at each other's part
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot Sun. There was a burning in our Veins
the cool mountain nights did Nothing to lessen heat.

So it is very clear that it is a poem in which sensual love is portrayed in terms of physical labour and heat.

Conclusion:

In poetry of Kamala Das death occupies a comprehensive place but it is never in negative sense. Death is a positive concept, as it is in Indian philosophy, in the poetry of Kamala Das. It spells out liberation, return to the ground of the Creator of the Cosmos. It is spiritual relaxation. The poem „Death is So Mediocre“ also revolves around life and death. In „Tomorrow“, the poet describes a

total negation of senses as death moves in. But the poem „The Sensuous Woman III“, there is a powerful sense of pervasive irony that arises out of the contrast between the inexorableness of death and the sensuous woman's desire to die in style. The poem „Woman Without Her Shadow“ deals with the death of a woman whose love life was without genuine involvement. The theme of just finally leading to the awareness of death, is a great achievement in poetry of Kamala Das.

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