

## FEMINIST ETHOS IN KAMALA DAS'S POETRY

**Dr. G. Mohana Charyulu**  
Assoc Prof of English,  
Department of English,  
K L University, Vaddeswaram,  
Vijayawada - A P (India)

Kamala Das, a woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature writes feminist ethos in her poetry. She is a bilingual writer writing in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty and in English. Her poetry expresses chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Her readers sympathetically responded to her frankness with regard to sexual matters. Her early poetry mirrored fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice. All of them lamented for the lack of attention to structure and craftsmanship of her poetry. It is understood from the reading of her poetry that she led an unhappy, dissatisfied life even from her childhood being a victim of patriarchal prejudices and discrimination. For my examination, I took her works like *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems I* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). Actually they are praiseworthy for their versatile exposure so even the scholars such as Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, Sunil Kumar and a host of others find a powerful feminist imagery in her poetry, focusing on issues of marriage, problems in motherhood, women's relationship in different manners, and the roles women in traditional Indian society.

While discussing about her conversion into Islam, it said that she hoped herself for spiritual fulfillment of life after life in man and woman relationship. She later confessed it as a folly. Actually she longed for an eternal life with her body and soul after her life on earth because of her frustration by love and loneliness. She loved her body as she loved her soul. Her bodily desires are not satisfied by her life so she wants to achieve it in any way. Here comes the matter of Religion. Hinduism does not permit anyone either male or female for such life. Unfortunately it is more stressed on female than male in course of its practice during the time immemorial. She converted to Islam in 1999 taking a new name Kamala Surayya. It was an action that she had been contemplating for many years. In her words:

“Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is the Purdah.  
Second is the security that Islam provides to women.  
In fact, both these reasons are complementary.  
Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world.  
And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women  
a sense of security. Only Islam gives protection to women.  
I have been lonely all through my life. At nights, I used to sleep  
by embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is  
my company. Islam is the only religion in the world that  
gives love and protection to women.  
Therefore, I have converted.” (“Kamala Das” ? ?)

Her conversion caused much ire and furore among Hindu fanatics and they started threatening her through letters and phone calls. Most dejected she bade goodbye to her ancestral house and native place and sought refuge in his son's house in Mumbai.

She was bitterly wounded by her patriarchal prejudice ever from her childhood days which lead to unhappy and dissatisfied life. She is married off at the age of 13 to a cousin who being very busy employee. In *My Book* she describes, her "father was an autocrat" (91) and her mother "vague and indifferent" (20). Her parents considered her "a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to a relative when she was only a school girl (82). Thus she was compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She complains about it in her poem "Of Calcutta":

I was sent away, to protect a family's  
 Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some  
 Abstraction, sent to another city to be  
 A relative's wife. (*Collected Poems I* 56-60)

Her husband's willingness to let her have her sexual experiences with others was a further blow to her ego. It is this pressure of family background that created a tension in her poetry. The earlier woman poets of India had adjusted themselves to the situation having no feeling of revolt. But Kamala Das raised strongly her rebellious voice against the unjust patriarchal domination. In the same poem she presents the image of a doll to portray a woman's miserable condition: "Yet another nodding / Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to / Warm his bed at night" (*Collected Poems I* 56-60). She hates traditional sex roles assigned to women by the patriarchy. In the poem "Introduction" one finds resentment and refusal:

. . . Then I wore a shirt  
 and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of  
 this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife,  
 they cried. Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreller  
 with servants. (*The Best of Kamala Das* 12-13)

The indifference of man to woman's miseries is depicted in her poem "The Stone Age." To quote from it:

You turn me into a bird of stone,  
 a granite dove,  
 you build round me a shabby drawing room  
 and strike my face absentmindedly while you read.  
 (*The Best of Kamala Das* 97-98)

"Though the love affair gives her excitement in the beginning it is accompanied by disillusionment. Her lover is incapable of giving her a blissful experience" (Raveendran 16). Thus her frustration is expressed through her poem "The Freak":

. . . Can this man with  
 Nimble finger-tips unleash  
 Nothing more alive than the  
 Skin's lazy hungers? . . . (*Only the Soul* 59)

Kamala Das longed for protection of her identity which was crushed under the shackles of tradition and culture. As result, she conceives of the male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the women loses her identity. Her poetry reflects this ideas very strongly including freedom to rebel. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds

up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry . . . Many of her poems convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage. Their love is a disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. Her life is considered as an experiments with love and the repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love. (34-35).

The woman's spirit of rebellion against male domination and ego is found in the poem "The Conflagration."

"Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried  
 Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive.

A world extend a Pot beyond his six foot frame." (qtd. in Iyer 214)

"The Old Play House" also voices her protest against the male domination and the resultant humiliation:

. . . Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies . . . (*The Old Playhouse 1*)

The plight of a married woman, chained to her husband's house is depicted in the opening lines of the poem "The Old Play House":

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her  
 In the long summer of your love so that she would forget  
 Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but  
 Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless  
 Pathways of the sky. . . (*The Old Playhouse 1*)

Thus Kamala Das is exclusively concerned with the personal experience of love. "For her ideal love is the fulfilment of the levels of body and mind. It is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfilment from the husband leads her to search for it elsewhere. Each relationship only intensifies her disappointment faced with the sense of absolute frustration and loneliness" (Iyer 203). Though she seeks the perfection of masculine being in every lover, it ends in failure because of the impossibility of realizing this ideal in human form. The experience of frustration sets the psyche in the attitude of rebellion.

"I must pretend  
 I must act the role  
 Of happy woman  
 Happy wife" (The Descendants p. 2) (qtd. in Iyer 204)

Kamala Das writes in her poetry about the position of woman and resist the dominance of man. The influence of patriarchy is found in all religions as well as their scriptures. As the religious leaders were all men, the scriptures written by them were male-oriented and as a result, women were given inferior position in families as well as societies. There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry—a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu. Kamala Das's is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world . . . Of course, the endless reiteration of such hurt, such disillusion, such cynicism, must sooner or later degenerate into a mannerism, but one hopes—and her exceptional talent offers the ground for such hopes—she will outgrow this obsession in due course and find her way to a season less trying Her poems

reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, acute sense of isolation, fragmentation and loss of identity. Modern Indian woman's ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. She seems to have the combination in herself—wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. While her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love, she is also proud of her being the seducer, the collector especially of those men who pose as lady killers (Iyer 193-194).

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