

‘BHOGI TO YOGI’ IN POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

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Abstract

The hundred and eighty years of British rule in India were just one of the unhappy interludes in her long story. She would find herself again this statement was penned down by J. Nehru in his famous book *Discovery of India*. Kamala Das, a major Indian poet in English, has painted the canvas of her poetry with love, sex, lust, identity and women questions. In her poems, she begins her journey with physical love which ultimately results in love with Krishna. She sings the songs of love and sex and the world listens to them wondering her boldness and candidness in choosing the forbidden theme. During her journey in love, she oscillates between love and lust but, finally, the dilemma ends in her transformation from ‘*bhogi*’ to ‘*yogi*’

Keywords: Love, Lust, Possession, Krishna, Sex, Body, Identity, Feminine sensibility.

Kamala Das (1934-2009), better known as ‘Kamala Surayya’ who, with her fiery poetic collections namely *Summer in Calcutta*, *the Descendent*, *The Old Play House*, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, *Tonight This Savage Rite* and *Closure* has carved a niche in the domain of Indian Poetry in English. Her conversion into Islam is a private matter which neither affects nor equips a sincere critic with prejudice in making an evaluation of her poetic corpus. Her autobiography *My Story* created hullabaloo in the literary world where people were shocked at her frankness and candidness and for this she had to tolerate the opposition from the family though it failed to stop her from her forthright articulation. Her early marriage at the tender age of fifteen proved to be a failure because she was not mature enough to understand the meaning of marriage and love.

As she is a pilgrim of love, she begins her journey of love. She starts treading the path of love which never runs smooth. Initially she understands that the union of two bodies resulting in physical relationship is love but, later, realizes that it is not love but merely lust. She cannot neglect lust, an ingredient that leads to love. Love in absence of lust is meaningless as she believes that the physical union leads to the spiritual love or the union of two souls. She walks on the path of love but is lost in the wonderland of lust though she fruitlessly attempts to come out. She remains oscillating between love and lust. She cannot leave lust though she longs for spiritual love that is far above the lust. She likes to be a Mira who longs for Krishna. She also searches for Krishna in every man but feels frustrated when she fails to find. Everyman whom she meets longs for her body, not her soul. She drinks pain and out of pain she cries for love. Her

frustration in love, pleasure of union and pain of separation find expressions in poems after poems. She pours out her heart in the confession mode like Sylvia Plath.

As a poetess of love, Kamala Das has been consistently compared with Judith Wright, an Australian poetess. Whose poetry like that of Kamala Das, treats love and sex as major themes. Both Kamala Das and Judith Wright share the same motive. The under line similarity between them as their strength of belief in love. Both of them are candid and honest concerning to the magical power of such theme as love. Both set up their poem within the fold of marriage and family. But the difference between them is also obvious. Judith Wright writes of love and sex without tension that Kamala Das poetry reflects and voices. Judith finds fulfillment in sexual life and there is no bitterness or confession of failure in her poetry. On the contrary, Das' poetry reflects her confessional mode with sincerity of expression and urgency of purpose.

Kamala has emerged as the spokesperson of the countless women who suffer and become the victim of the male chauvinism in the male monopolized society. It is man who does not give space which initially belongs to her. Rather he keeps her at the periphery and whenever she attempts to come to the centre, he begins to repress her in various ways that crush her identity. But, it is Kamala Das who articulates the feelings of the women on the periphery and talk of their due right by making the male society realize their significance.

Basically she is a love poet who continues to sing the songs of love—a beautiful emotion possessed by every human heart that articulates in innumerable ways. The feeling of love gets nourishment in sex which takes a person to the height of ecstasy. She translates what she articulates but this practical experiment often results in failure though every failure makes her determined enough to make bold statements. Love and sex are correlated in the manner of flower and fragrance. Sex and love are the sensitive issues which she has raised in her poems which bubble with feminine sensibility.

Kamala Das' early marriage which resulted in total failure prepares the raw material for her poetry which at the later stage becomes ripe enough to develop into the real poetry that touches the hearts. The poem 'Introduction' is a key that unlocks the heart of Kamala Das who reveal everything whatever lies there. She does not feel any shame when she voices. In the beginning she is poor enough to know and understand what love is and so whenever she asks for love, she gets response from him thus:

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman badly felt so beaten
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me- I shrank
Pitifully. (*Summer in Calcutta* 62-63)

What she does as a reaction is that she ignores her "womanliness" and starts wearing a shirt and her brother's trousers after getting her hair cut. She does not mind the protest which she has to face in the family.

Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows. (*Summer in Calcutta* 63)

Gradually she attempts to fit herself in the world of her husband. Being a woman, she needs a man just as a man needs a woman. She begins to make love and feels a kind of shame. She feels suffocating while having sex as a rattle has been put in the throat. But, she herself realizes that she cannot live without sex and so feels that she is sinner as well as saint.

It is I who laugh it is I who make love
 And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
 With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
 I am saint. I am the beloved and the
 Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
 Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I (*Summer in Calcutta* 63)

She performs sex-act but remains unsatisfied as she feels somewhere something is lacking. Body gets trapped in body but not soul in soul. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar writes in this connection: “under the Indian sun, although sensuality lures irresistibly, yet it fails to satisfy; feeling and introspection but sounds the depths of the oceanic sense if frustration; and the calm of fulfillment eludes forever. Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself and again and again” (677).

Domestic life begins to suffocate her identity. She feels that she is being exploited in the name of wife who is simply for making tea, performing household activities and satisfying the male ego. Mark the excerpt for the poet’s suffocation in her domestic life which certainly erodes her distinct personality:

You called me wife,
 I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
 To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
 Became a dwarf. (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* 1)

What she searches in husband is his insensitivity to her feelings. This insensitivity creates an obstruction to her sexual happiness culminating in her frustration on the verge of deep despair. Sometimes, she behaves like a neurotic and admits that she is a freak in her relationship. She does not care if her husband betrays her. If he betrays her, why can she not do so? She becomes bold enough to take a bold step of having relationship with other men. This is the wisdom that her body gets and for this her husband is responsible. She likes to be in love and die in her betrayer’s arms. She also makes up her mind to pay him in the same coin as she wishes to leave him out of the cocoon one day in order to be free.

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
 You built around me with morning tea,
 Love-words flung from doorways and of course
 Your tired lust. (*Summer in Calcutta* 54)

She longs for freedom and her longing results in her assertion for being treated as an individual. She is a person, not a possession. She protests against the encroachment of her space. When she fails to get proper treatment as a human being, she flings herself in other arms that, she thinks, at least gives her a sense of love and protection. It is her search for love and protection that makes her change lovers after lovers. What she got from them is not love but lust.

We kissed and we loved, all in a fury
 For another short hour or two
 We went all warm and wild and lovely.

After that love became a swivel-door,
 When one went out, another came in. (*The Descendants* 13)

She does not favour for fidelity in love as she thinks that she is simply mortal, not immortal like gods who do not feel fatigue. Life is short and to expect constancy in love is a dream.

Fidelity in love
 is only for the immortals,
 the wanton Gods who sport in their
 secret heavens and feel
 no fatigue. For you
 and me, life is too short
 for absolute bliss and much too long
 alas, for constancy. (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selection from Kamala Das* 167)

But, it does not mean that she is a woman of no character. Her dilemma is that she wants love, and when she fails to get it from her husband, she seeks it outside and for this she develops extramarital relationship. She becomes so obsessed with love that she continues to make her journey in search of love. But, a time comes when she is fed up with this life of being a woman who remains confined to man. She defines love either with physical intercourse or an unfulfilled longing. She develops a sense of disgust so much that she raises a voice of protest crying:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
 Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive
 The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame. (*The Descendants* 26)

She behaves like a convict in the jail where he studies “his prison’s geography” in order to run away from there. She also studies “the trappings” of his body so that she must “someday find / an escape from its snare” (*The Old Playhouse* 29).

Kamala Das does not relish this kind of love which results only in the satisfaction of lust. She finds herself in pervasive gloom that makes her feel loneliness which haunts her day in and day out. Hence, she registers her protest furiously against male chauvinism and cruelty in her poems. Her love obsession forces her to be away from the legitimate source and throws her at others’ doors. Such concept of love in her poems does not suit to the Indian women who remain devoted to their household and, of being infidel they cannot even dream of. With the passage of time, she realizes that physical pleasures will not last long and to make an end of such life, she cries out piteously.

Search for love is the principal pre-occupation of Kamala Das’s poetry. Love is a means to discover oneself. She writes about love from woman’s point of view. To her, the centre is not the blind worship of the husband but the consummation of love. She loves love and tenderly cares for it though she always remains unsatisfied within. No doubt, human body is a temple where worship is needed. But, what’s the use of worship if the image remains absent. Without soul, body is meaningless. Sex satisfies body but fails to satisfy soul. Here lies her predicament in love which proves a turning point from physical to spiritual. Now, she searches true love in Krishna and gets relief. She finds the body of Krishna her prison and does not wish to go anywhere. Mark the excerpt for her love for Krishna:

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. (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selection from Kamala Das* 82)

Even the place also offers excitement if it is associated with the lover. She becomes a Mira who is mad in love with her Krishna so much that she forgets everything except her love for Krishna. She follows the *bhakti* cult which requires devotion in love. It is only through *bhakti* that one can meet Krishna. She feels the music of Krishna's flute in her head and heart and, no doubt, she becomes late for home but she has a readymade reply if she is interrogated.

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind
 and the flute luring her
 from home and her husband
 who later asks her of the long scratch
 on the brown aureola of her breast
 and she shyly replies
 hiding flushed cheeks, it was so dark
 outside, I tripped over the brambles in the woods...

(*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selection from Kamala Das* 128)

Whiling singing the love song, she feels that one day their "homeless souls" will return "someday, / to hang like bats / from its pure physicality" (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 132). It is Ghanshyam who has built a nest in her heart which now echoes with the music that comes out of his flute. She sees Krishna everywhere but the moment she goes to feel his presence with her hand, he disappears. Mark the excerpt for the poet's love for Ghanshyam:

Ghanshyam,
 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.
 You lead me along a route I have never known before
 But at each turn when I near you
 Like a spectral flame you vanish. (*Tonight This Savage Rite* 22)

She oscillates between love and lust and, hence, remains unsatisfied because of her unfulfilled longings until she gets peace in the love of Krishna or Ghanshyam by becoming Radha or Mira. Soul remains while body perishes resulting in the divine union. She reads the script of body, chants the mantra to please Krishna, embraces Islam and sees Mohammad in Krishna, and finally her soul gets peace in real sense when it leaves for heaven bidding farewell forever. To conclude, her love poetry, in one sense, is the love of a girl, who had grown into a woman in the process, got married even before she could understand love and which resulted in failure. In her long journey, she passes through the veils of transformation, from '*bhogi*' to '*yogi*' and succeeds in carving a niche for herself in the annals of world literature by writing what she felt and experienced.

To conclude, her love poetry, in one sense, is the love of a girl, who had grown into a woman and in the process got married even before she could understand love and which result in failure. Her poetry can be read like a story and thereby sustains the interest of the readers. But none the less. It has poetic value. In one sentence, Kamala Das outshines in the realm of indo-English literature as well as to common wealth literature with her frank treatment of such topics,

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