

THE WOMAN SPEAKS IN TONIGHT, THIS SAVAGE RITE: THE LOVE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

Dr. S. J. Kala

Associate Professor of English
Fatima College
Madurai – 625018

The status accorded to a woman in a community and the man – woman relationship in a society have been changing from one generation to another. In the Vedic times a woman shared an equal position with that of her husband. That is because of the Hindu belief that a girl born into a family is like a piece of jewel that has to be handed to its rightful owner when demanded.

Even though Manu imposed too many restrictions on women it still stated that women must be honoured by all men irrespective of being a father, brother, and brother – in - law so that they could court their own welfare. Besides, a woman then was privileged to be considered the divine form of prosperity. The respectable position of women in the past can well be contrasted with that of the one in the present which is an effect of an evolutionary process.

A woman who was in the epicentre of the domestic world in the Vedic Ages was considered to be perfect only when she was integrated with a man in a sacrament called marriage that accentuated conjugal intimacy. But, when Buddhism evolved, Buddha did not deem the Hindu views of a woman playing an imperative role in conducting sacrificial rites with her husband as indispensable. He felt that marriage was a sort of economic and social contract and that it had no religious binding. He also preached and followed that the either partner was free to leave his/her home and to take religious life. He did not deify or look upon women as someone honourable.

Like Buddhism, Jainism also preached the same perceptions and shared more or less the same ideals. It discarded the teachings of Vedas and reckoned celibacy superior to all sex relations. But, in the religious life, the nuns were adjudged inferior to the monks. This position of women explicitly talks about the secondary standing of women in the society at that moment.

Totally different from the women in the previous ages were the women of the Puranic / Epic ages. They had to encounter polyandry and polygamy. A woman was considered to be the property of her husband after marriage. Despite these a woman was either equal or superior to her male counter parts. In this age marriage was thought to be an institutional ceremony and an obligatory sacrament. Gradually child marriage was becoming popular. Monogamy seemed to have been in practice only in the royal families. In the royal households the systems of Purdah too was prevalent.

Women in the first or second century, the date of Kamasutra were looked as either Ganikas or housewives. A housewife had to bear preferably sons and remain faithful to her husband. Whereas quite contrarily, a Ganika, was free from moral bonds. She was expected to perform her duty of pleasing others failing which she was believed to be committing sin. Regardless of widow marriages being in practice, remarried widows were looked down upon.

The later Puranic period talked of just merging of a woman into a man in a marriage ceremony. It did not insist on the union of two souls as was believed in the previous ages. The rights of women in this age corresponded to the rights of the Sudras. A woman was considered eligible for a marriage only if she was physically attractive. A married woman was bound to worship her husband. To reach heaven a woman was to be married. Feminine literacy was considered the accomplishment of prostitutes. Temple dancers or Devadasis emerged in this period. Being pressed down by household chores, a housewife appeared unattractive to her husband and eventually he was lured by concubines. Sati was an approved and well practiced social phenomenon.

During the British period, child marriage, polygamy, sati, prostitution and purdah system subsisted. The political turmoil aggravated the miseries of the Indian women. The position of women in India was the worst in the British rule. But, little by little due to the undying efforts taken by social reformers polygamy was disfavoured, child marriage and sati were abolished, prostitution shunned as a social evil and widow marriage was accepted. In the fullness of time, women also achieved an equal status in the field of politics. If this was the condition of the women in Pre-Independent period then the women of the Post-Independent India enjoyed a much better position than their predecessors. Now, in such a context, Kamala Das a Pre-Independent and a Post-Independent woman speaks of her position as a woman in most of her poems and also in *Tonight, This Savage Rite* that vouches for her status in the Indian Society. The woman in the mentioned collection of poems speaks about her place at home and in the society in which she lives.

Kamala Das was born into a royal family in Kerala in 1934. Influenced by her mother Balamani Amma, a popular Malayalee poet and by her maternal great uncle Narayan Menon, a prominent writer, she started writing at the age of six. Her first poem was published when she was fourteen. In 1949 at the tender age of fifteen she was married to Madhava Das, an employee of the Reserve Bank of India who was much older to her. Her romantic illusions were shattered by her incompatible marriage. Quite unexpectedly after the death of her husband Kamala Das adopted Islam and changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya.

Her internationally acclaimed poems voice out her position as a woman in the Indian society. In the collection of love poems *Tonight, This Savage Rite* Kamala Das speaks about herself, as a loner at times; as a wife bestowed with various responsibilities and as an object of sexual pleasure; as a friend; as a granddaughter; as a mother and as a poet.

Kamala Das who was born in the Pre-Independent India got married in the Post-Independent India at the age of fifteen. The Child marriage that took place in her life was quite acceptable to the society in which she lived then but unacceptable to her. Since, then Kamala Das experienced subjugation. In her poems, she “questions this blind acceptance of matrimony and its inherent quality of subjugation of women unfairness of this union” (Farahnaz Yousefi 2) She feels that like the women of the Vedic ages she was not glorified but like the Puranic and Post-Puranic women she had to consider marriage as an obligatory sacrament.

For quite some time as a married woman, she felt stifled and suffocated. She speaks of herself as a prisoner in the short poem titled. “The Prisoner”.

*As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love, ... (16)*

She says that like a “convict” who crams the prison where he is imprisoned, she studies about the physique of her husband that traps her, implying her physical subjugation to her husband. A similar imagery is found in her poem “The old Playhouse”, where she compares herself to a swallow that her husband tries to tame.

*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.... (14)*

In the difficult process of taming she had to forego her parents and their homes, her own self and her inherent nature to be free. If in “The Old Playhouse” she talks about herself as a caged /trapped swallow in “I Shall Some Day” she says “I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon/ You built around me with morning tea...” (27) The cocoon built around her strangles her to death. The cocoon and the life within it are unbearable to her.

As a young girl she got into the bond of marriage with all hopes. While talking of it in ‘A Relationship’, she pronounces her disappointment in her married life through the line “This love older than I Myriad...” (32) She discovered an egoistic man who knew only suppression and cruelty. Like the women of the Vedic ages who were considered as an ornament Kamala Das’s husband too identified her as “glittering gem called ‘wife’” and he considered her as a “domesticated women who is required to look after his house and children and attend to his whims and freaks”. (Dwivedi 35).

This attitude of the husband was quite similar to the attitude of the men towards women during the Kama Sutra period. In spite of her pains and her helplessness that she meets head-on and articulates about it in “Sunset Blue Bird”, “The Old Playhouse”, “A Relationship”, “I Shall Some Day”, she tries to escape from them by all means as she expressed in “The Prisoner”. “For I must someday find/An escape from its snare” (16) Being tired of her lustful husband she imagines of a flight of escape from him which she articulates in the same poem as follows

*... I shall some day take
 Wings, fly around, as often petals
 Do when free in air, and you dear one.
 Just the sad remnant of a root, must
 Lie behind, sans pride, on double – beds
 And grieve.... (27)*

As a wife Kamala Das was not contented with her marital life. “In Love”, Kamala Das thrashes out the lustful liaison that she had with her husband.

*Sky remind me... oh, yes, his
 Mouth, and... his limbs like pale and
 Carnivorous plants reaching
 Out for me, and the sad lie
 Of my unending lust.... (7)*

To her the relationship with her husband was nothing but physical. The words like “pale” and “carnivorous plant” used by Kamala Das to talk about her unfulfilling love bring out her disgust for sex sans love. She feels that her husband approached her only to gratify his sexual urges and that he never had any emotional attachment towards her. This emotional attachment that her husband failed to give she sought in other men and she shamelessly and honestly admits it in ‘The Caretaker’.

*...moving
 On the other's skin, they knew they were but
 Humble caretakers, for a short while allowed
 To make their home on another's lot... (20)*

In addition to these many a time she questions about her marital status as revealed in the lines from “In Love”, “The Verandah sleepless, a/ Million questions awake in /Me,” (7)

Most probably the malfunction that she stumbles upon in her married life propels her to a state of frustration that directs her to self – inquiry. “She questions the very basis of socially accepted marital love. ... she questions and probes into herself to unearth what kind of a woman she is....” (Pandeya 36) This snooping into her Self puts on display a wife who has to perform umpteen social duties in this traditional society.

The duties that are expected of her are more than what was projected of a wife in the Vedic, Puranic or Post – Puranic ages. At the outset, as presented by her in “The Suicide” she had to be a wife who had to

*But
 I must Pose.
 I must pretend,
 I must act the role
 Of happy woman,
 Happy wife.
 I must keep the right distance
 Between me and the low.
 And I must keep the right distance,
 Between me and the high (9)*

She had to pretend to be a “Happy Woman” and a “Happy Wife”. To pretend to be something else that a person is not is the most difficult task to be undertaken by any human being and that Kamala Das was expected to do.

Being a woman she had to conceal her feelings, emotions, desires and attitudes and disguise herself into a wife that fits into the society. Soon after her marriage she wanted to know more about herself but her male chauvinist husband infused more and more understanding about himself. As a wife she could know only about him due to the dearth for time to spend on herself. In “The Old Playhouse’ she accuses her husband as,

*.... 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. I lost my will and reason, to all your
 Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (14)*

The mentioned lines bring to fore the identity lost by Kamala Das because of the assigned role of a wife. To add on to these duties that she performed as a wife to her husband she had to entertain his guests too. In the poem, “Ghanashyam” she voices out her anguish in engaging his guests. She inks, “When the guests have gone/ The plates are washed/ And the lights put out....” (19) Although she performs all of these wifely duties, she does not get anything in return. She does not get the much needed love from him. Eventually, she hunts for that in other men of which she complains in “A Man is a Season’. She declares,

*... you let me toss my youth like coins
 Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
 You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
 Seek ecstasy in others' arms. But I saw each
 Shadow cast your blurred image in my glass, (21)*

With great remorse in the same poem she feels guilty of going astray. She says, "...perhaps / I went astray. How would a blind wife trace her lost/ Husband, how would a deaf wife hear her husband call?" (21) For all these she blames her husband who failed to understand her. She proclaims it in "The Suicide"

*...I am fed up
 I want to be simple
 I want to be loved
 And
 If love is not to be had,
 I want to be dead, just dead (9)*

Probably these circumstances force her to commit suicide. In "The Suicide" she outrightly talks of it in the following lines.

*I have enough courage to die,
 But not enough,
 Not enough to disobey him
 Who said: Do not die
 And hurt me that certain way.
 How easy your duties are.
 How simple.
 Only roar a hungry roar,
 Leap forward,
 And retreat (8)*

Though she has the courage to die her wifely obligations and the ignominy that she would bring on her husband by committing suicide press her to decide against it. Like any other Indian woman she says that she does not have the courage to disobey her husband and so she decides to live at least a duplicitous life.

Kamala Das could just not understand how even when she was with her friends, thoughts of her husband haunted her. She documents that haunting experience in "Sunset, Blue Bird" as,

*when i am with my friends and talking i remember him
 and suddenly i can no longer talk they ask me what is wrong
 why have you turned pale and i weakly shake my head
 nothing nothing (13)*

The relationship with her husband is quite irksome and she is not able to be her normal self even with her peer group, a company that everyone hankers to be in.

Incidentally all these force her into loneliness. Loneliness was either imposed on her or at moments she opted for it. She ruefully narrates in "Ghanashyam" how her husband would desert her after his sexual intimacy with her.

His ageing body in its pride needing the need for mine

*And each time his lust was quietened
 And he turned his back on me
 In panic I asked Dont you want me any longer
 Dont you want me
 Dont you dont you. (18)*

The above lines put forth the husband's habitual behavior of casting her off after a sexual game. The coldness on the part of the husband was so horrendous that she sought the warmth in other men.

Kamala Das's husband almost imposed on her the loneliness that she dreaded the most. In "The Sunshine Cat" she recollects how "... Her husband shut her/ In, every morning; locked her in a room of books/ With a streak of sunshine lying near the door" (22) The lines refer to his rejection of his wife, his inattention towards her and his detachment from her. If the husband imposed or wrought loneliness on her there were times when she too wanted it as mentioned in "Line Addressed to a Devadasi". She asserts, "And you sit on the temple steps/ A silent devadasi, lovelorn/ And aware of her destiny ..." (20) Kamala Das indisputably refers to herself as the devadasi and picturises herself as silent and lovelorn. There is no specific mention of her being lonely nor is there any mention of her in a company. But it is conspicuous that a woman in such a position would have been only lonely. Moreover, "The repeated articulation of frenetic and unabashed sexual love or frustration and incompatibility with her male – lover may be partly responsible for her feeling of loneliness and isolation." (Asnani 74)

This lonely woman, already proficient in writing since her six years of age continues to unleash her creative spirit even after her marriage and that proves to be a saving grace to her. But, still at times she felt that she was unable to rise up as a writer. She puts across that in her poem, "Morning at Apollo Pier". In the poem her friends present unto her the facts that she can no more be a writer.

*They tell me, all my friends, that I am finished,
 That I can write no more, they tell me
 That the goose which laid the golden eggs can lay
 No more, they tell me that your love is
 A morass where I must sink, if not today,
 Tomorrow (15)*

But, to the amazement of everyone she combats "defeat", musters all courage and tries to overtake her contemporaries in the race of writing poems, where again she is forced to speak about her husband and her quest for true love.

*...I hide my defeat in your
 Wearying blood, and all my fears and shame.
 You are the poem to end all poems,
 A poem, absolute as the tomb,
 Your flawed beauty is my only refuge.
 O love me, love me, love till I die (15)*

The struggle to survive as a writer and sustain writing is manifested in the above lines. "The woman writer creates a space within her and around her to assert what she feels in terms of her dreams, fantasies, hopes, and frustrations." (Mohanty 45)

Conceivably through her poems she verbalizes the fight back to grab a literary space for her in this patriarchal society. She has a discussion on a similar note in the poem, “The Blind Walk”.

*i lose my way all the time he was the only landmark i could
 recognise his name is the only name i remember sweet and
 unuttered it lies cradled in my breath the poets ultimately lose their
 way inside their own minds on dark rivers they sail they sail their
 lighted boats on murky waters they go to seek their past in the
 future the sea is full of writers carcasses (16)*

The “i” reflects her subjugation in the literary arena. The above lines almost certainly convey the conflict within her in zeroing into a theme or narrowing down into the subject matter of her poems in this male – dominated society. Her dilemma to write about herself and her past is reflected in the mentioned lines from “The Blind Walk”. Ultimately Kamala Das utters about the “lost words” that “call him” from “other country” and from “other playmates”. The “him” is irrefutably a personification of love, the love that had been evading her so long, the love that was alien to her, that she had heard of in a distant land and that she had eternally yearned for.

The socially suppressed and mute Kamala Das gains recognition, fame and identity of her only because of her written articulation /communication.

Kamala does question the traditional role of woman as good wife, mother and householder. But she is not a woman liber, for after all questionings and probing, she realizes that man’s love is the last resort even though it may be crushing her own being and personality. It seems that after all the freedom and wandering, a woman has to come back to man’s love and even his scorn. (Pandeya 42)

All the feelings and emotions that prove to be scandalizing when expressed by an ordinary Indian woman are very effectively, honestly and unflinchingly presented in her poems. The woman in her speaks through her poems. When she speaks through her poems the readers hear her confessional voice that “stretches beyond the personal to include womanhood anywhere but more so in culturally dichotomised societies.” (Singh 96) The voice that we hear of in the poem is not just of Kamala Das but it is also the echo many Indian women akin to her.

REFERENCES

- Asnani, Shyam. “Kamala Das, Judith Wright and Margaret Atwood as Poets of Love: A Comparative Study”. Perspectives on Kamala Das’s Poetry. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. New Delhi : Intellectual Publishing House, 1995, 33 - 44
- Das, Kamala and Pritish Nandy. *Tonight This Savavge Rite: The Love Poems Of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy* New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1984.
- Das, Kamala, enotes10 Oct. 2009 <enotes.com/poetry-criticism/das-kamala/introductionn?print=1>
- “Kamala Das” . Indianetzone Literature 10 Oct. 2009 <www.indianetzone.com/2/kamala_das.htm>
- Dwivedi, A.N. “As a Poet of Love and Sex” . *Kamala Das And her Poetry* , Delhi: Doaba House, 1983.

- Mohanty, Niranjana. "A Feminist Perspective on Kamala Das's Poetry". Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. New Delhi : Intellectual Publishing House, 1995.
- Pandeya, Prabhat Kumar. "The Pink Pulsating words: The Woman's Voice in Kamala Das's Poetry." Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. New Delhi : Intellectual Publishing House, 1995, 33 – 44.
- Pathak, Rajdeep, "Indian Writing in English and Kamala Das: A Tribute to the Writer and Poet" Frost's Meditations 10 Oct. 2009 < martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/june2009/tribute-kamala-das.html>
- Sharma, Dr. Ram, "Presentation of Man – Woman relationship in the Poetry of Kamala Das" Amazines 10 Oct. 2009 <[amazines.com/view _author.cfm?start Row=11 &authorid=48 956](http://amazines.com/view_author.cfm?start_Row=11&authorid=48956)>
- Singh, Mina Surjit. "The Confessional Voice of Kamala Das". Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. New Delhi : Intellectual Publishing House, 1995, 89 – 98.
- Yousefi, Farahnaz, "Man – Woman Relationship: a reading between the lines of the selected poems by Kamala Das" Baloch Academy of Humanities 10 Oct. 2009 <balochacademy.blogfa.com/post-342.aspx>