

KAMALA DAS'S "FOREST FIRE": CELEBRATION OF AN OVERWHELMING HUNGER

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ABSTRACT

In the History of Indian English Poetry, Kamala Das has achieved a phenomenal status for her autobiographical or confessional style of writings. She has spread out her personal life story into her poems. In these poems she is caustic enough to raise protest against the patriarchal social system. Her famous autobiography "My Story", inspite of some negative criticisms, can be cited as a source of interpretations for the understandings of her works. However, in this article I've tried to discuss her "Forest Fire", one of her significant poems. This poem, another offshoot of confessional style of writing, focuses on the process of the creation of a poetic self which camouflaging Kamala Das's personal life projects a universal impression. She displays an overwhelming hunger which on the other hand generates wide range of experiences resulting into writing poems.

Kamala Das (1934-2009) has neither written innumerable numbers of poems nor are these poems varied in themes. Moreover, her poems repetitively talk about love and death. She has not applied any complex poetic technique and the mode of expression is very colloquial in manner. Her English is the ultimate form of 'Indianization of English Language'. And consciously she is never worried for experimentation in the poems. In spite of these limitations she is very much popular in the Indian subcontinent as well as in abroad. And this is due to her 'honest' declaration of self which establishes her as a 'confessional' poet. Among her contemporaries she is much debated, disputed and criticized poet. But undoubtedly Kamala Das is accepted as a universal poet whose lived experiences are beautifully portrayed in her poems. May be this is the reason for which she has been awarded many times. Those awards include i) Nomination for Nobel Prize in 1984, ii) Asian Poetry Prize in 1998, iii) Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries in 1999, iv) Asian World Prize in 2000, v) Vayalar Award in 2001 vi) Sahitya Academy Award in 2003 vii) Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 2005 and viii)

Ezhuthachan Award in 2009 . So it must be acknowledged that her poems are able to evoke a universal outlook. Whatever she tries to say in her poems immediately touches the readers.

In my paper I'll try to locate Das's "Forest Fire" describing "human consciousness" which is the originator of a poetic self. Her poems deal with the frank disclosure of her personal life. In her famous autobiography "My Story", she has dared to step into the sanctimonious marital life and brought out the plight of a traditional Indian wife. Uninhibitedly she exhibits the torture she underwent in the early years of her marital life when her husband found her just as an object of the satisfaction of carnal desires. All her protest was in vain. She almost succumbed to the traditional fate of Indian women. Just then her poems helped her to get out of that crushing existence. She found her poems as a medium to relieve her suppressed and humiliated self.

This transcendence of life over death is portrayed in her poems. In some poems like "Composition" and "The Suicide", 'life' is so much humiliated and disillusioned that it has to take refuge in 'death'. In "The Suicide" she says:

O sea, 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... (50-55)

and in "Composition" she wants to take ultimate rest into the sea :

All I want now
Is to take a long walk
Into the sea
And lie there, resting
Completely uninvolved (223-227)

However, in "Forest Fire" the poet consumes whatever comes before her and as a result she achieves "brighter charm". Like a forest fire, which leaves nothing behind it, the poet swallows up everything that happens around her:

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest fire that
Consumes and with each killing gains a wilder,
Brighter charm, all that comes my way . (1-4)

There is the suggestion of reproduction in this process. And Kamala Das positively brushes aside the approach of death which she thought as the only solution to escape the burden of living. 'Forest Fire' shows how Das tries to transcend the barrier of personal moods and feelings and through a poetic assimilation projects the universal. Anisur Rahman describes, "She assimilates the fond details of life in myriad form and projects an inclusive human consciousness in her best poems" (78).

This poem becomes one of those where Das expresses her own experience of becoming a poet. It'll be unjust to treat her just as a love poet. Rahaman rightly says that the prime target of Das is to project 'human consciousnesses'. She consumes, as a forest fire engulfs and destroys whatever comes in its way, all human experiences and out of them creates her poems. Rahaman says, "...courage to own all that comes her way arises probably from the circumstances of her desperate love-life and emotional wreckage" (78). This description of love-life and suffering in her life has already been depicted in her poems and memoirs. 'Forest Fire' appears almost at the

end of her poetry collection *The Summer in Calcutta*. It doesn't fit in the category of 'searching for self' or 'desiring for love'. Somehow it consciously gets itself detached from the confessional writings, with which Das is often labeled. Anisur Rahaman observes: "(In)...Forest Fire, she has engulfed the world beyond the self" (78). And Devindra Kohli almost supports Rahaman when he says:

Kamala Das' involvement is poetically more appealing as well as more convincing when she is able to liberate herself from her sense of her own suffering." (33)

She uses this liberation of self as a technique in her poems through the medium of confession. Kohli continues, "Forest Fire, though not a conventional poem of involvement, is an example of the force with which the world outside can move her to poetry" (33). In "Forest Fire", Das compares herself to a forest fire which consumes everything within its fold. Like the fire in the forest she becomes 'brighter' and more 'charming' with each new experience that she absorbs within herself.

As a versatile poet she took all her experiences around her to recreate a new world in her writings. A microcosm has been created out of the macrocosm. The woman, who once found herself trapped in the snare of marital life and almost succumbed to the disheartening responses of the male-dominated society, now enjoys the life to the lees. She is no more scared of this system; rather she finds this system as a means to bring out the impulses which helps her in writing poems and other works as well. She garners this strength from the poems she writes as she in her poems raises her voice to post her protest against the humiliation. As a confessional poet, Kamala Das exposes her own self in someway or other in almost every poem. That is why her poems often appear autobiographical. But accordingly S.C. Harrex that autobiographical perspective is often used for a general one, "... but that individual voice also asks to be read representatively or symbolically" (165). Here she internalizes external experiences and plays with symbol of fire and hunger to reach up to the inner core of her private self. Different images mingle into one to create a unified whole. Her confessional tone is used here, as Harrex tells, 'representatively'. In a first person narrative she expresses her feelings of hunger. Harrex goes on to point out:

In Forest Fire, of course, the principle of creative energy is focused on through 'hunger' and 'fire' symbolism, this being an instance in Kamala Das's work where life seen as a consuming process is viewed positively (169).

This is such a poem which should come at the end of a writer's career. Deborah Pope in her influential book, *A Separate Vision*, comments:

Every woman writer has had to deal with the realization that men write out of experience that is 'universal' but her experience is likely to be regarded as trivial and private. (03)

Kamala Das dedicated her whole life to protest against these humiliating realizations. As a confessional poet it is expected of her that whatever she exposes in her poems must be very much personal and real in life. Though Das is supposed to be a very straightforward poet, sometime she uses imagery and symbols with a lot of possibilities in her poems. She has an uninhibited style of writing resembling her life style. As a feminist poet she always uses chiseled and sharp words to penetrate into the monochromatic world of suppression and humiliation. Words always come to her unmasked. But in some poems like "Forest Fire" she very beautifully

wraps herself up in imagery and symbol. A.N.Dwivedi points out, “As a poet, Kamala Das makes ample use of images and symbols” (65). Though not too often, some timely exploration of symbols prove Das’s versatility once again. As in the introduction of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Arthur Symons properly says: “Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed not even language” (01).

In “Forest Fire” Das exploits that perspective. Here she shares with us those experiences which are not confined just to women. Like Krishna in Mahabharata, she almost develops the “Viswarupa”, the whole world view. Das feels a tremendous hunger to engulf all types of experiences available in this life. She shows three stages of human life and the poems displays that the whole world exists in her. As T.N.Dhar properly points out:

As if to demonstrate the all-compassing nature of the range of her poetic theme, the succeeding lines of the poem give us explicit references to the three prominent stages of human life: “ Bald child in/ open pram”, “ slim lovers behind the tree” and “ old / man with paper in your hand and sunlight in /your hair . (21)

Technically these images are the paraphernalia of a complete life. Often we have got ample evidences of her acquaintance with these stages of human being. Those moments are expressed in uninhibited manner and meant to be the source of Das’s creativity. “Forest Fire” assembles all these experiences into a nutshell which is consequently consumed by Das just to ‘spit/ out small heaps of ash, nothing else’ (10-11). There may be an undertone of episode of “Khandava-daha”ⁱ from Mahabharata. In this episode when Pandavas were in the shelter at Khandavaprastha , Agni, the god of fire, came to Krishna and Arjuna in the disguise of a Brahmin and begged them to help him in the burning of the forest of Khandava . Being unable to avoid repetitive requests of the Brahmin, they help him in the destruction of that wide forest by ravages of fire. It is told that at that time that forest was the shelter of multitude of flora and fauna. So the destruction literally brought forth nothing but large heap of ashes. In “Forest Fire” Das takes in whatever comes in the front of her:

... My eyes lick at you like flames, my nerves
 Consume; and, when I finish with you, in the
 Pram, near the tree and, on the park bench...(8-10)

And apparently she gives out nothing. After the devastating fire nothing remains. But unlike that event Das internalizes these experiences to recreate. At this juncture the fire loses its devastating nature and becomes the harbinger of new lives. In her poem, ‘fire’ has been used as a dual symbol of destruction and creation as well. The concept of ‘Fire’ has always been of multiple implications to Das. It plays a dispassionate role. As in the book *The Summer in Calcutta*, where this poem is published, there are various uses of the symbol ‘fire’. In “The Dance of the Eunuchs” there is an indirect reference of the destruction of ‘fire’:

...beneath the fiery gulmohur with
 Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
 They danced, oh, they danced till they bled...(4-6)

In “The Seashore” the image of ‘fire’ takes us directly to ‘death’:
 On some evenings I drive past the cremation ground
 And seem to hear the crunch of bones in those vulgar
 Mouths of fire, or at time I see the smoke, in strands,

Slowly stretch and rise, like serpents, satiated,
 Slow, content...(1-5)

Again in some poems ‘Sun’ becomes the originator of fire. At the same time it nourishes with its temperate warmth and plays with the subconscious level of human beings. The Sun or on the other hand, the fire becomes the reservoir of both creative and destructive themes represented by love/lust, noon/midnight, sun/ moon, child/old age, birth/death imageries.

In “In Love” the warmth of the Sun very unlikely leads us to the futility of a marital relationship. The male partner gets her woman just as an object of carnal satisfaction. :

Of what does the burning mouth
 Of sun, burning in today’s
 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. (1-7)

In “Summer in Calcutta” ‘the April Sun’ becomes the inspiration of life:

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. (1-8)

Again in “The Testing of the Sirens” there is the dispassionate presence of the Sun or the fire:

... I
 Shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was
 No more light, no more love, or peace, only
 The white, white sun burning, burning, burning...(41-43)

However in “Forest Fire” Das personalizes these divergent experiences and instead of vomiting anything out, she harbours each of them in her and consecutively find herself a storehouse of experiences. As S.C.Harrex suggests :

Before external reality can be rendered, she argues, its objects – baby ,
 pram, lovers , old man , street –lamps , cabaret girls, wedding drums,
 eunuchs, the wounded and dying-must be possessed and devoured by the
 poet’s sensibility, must be personalized , so that images of their reality live
 on, objectified, in the world of the poetic imagination.(168)

This process fulfills her yearning as a poet aspiring for a universal acceptance and displays the creation of a poetic self.

Forest Fire doesn’t fit into the typical confessional mode. Nowhere in the poem the spontaneous Das strips her private self in front of the invisible camera. The difference would appear more prominent if it is compared with other poems by Das like “An Introduction”, “Composition”, “Loud Posters”, “The Stone House”, and “Convicts”. The ‘individual’ as well as ‘singular’ ‘I’ of “Introduction” is more personal than the ‘I’ in “Forest Fire”. Though the poet’s original identity seems more distinct in “Forest Fire” and the tone of the character is undoubtedly

the tone of the poet, somehow the exploitation of the self is covertly done. The recovery of the self from the subconscious state or the search for the suppressed identity has been given a changed outlook. Here ‘confession’ puts on a different mask to bring Das’ realization out into the focus. As Jayakrishnan Nair sums up:

Every person has experiences both agonizing and exhilarating. But only a passionate sensibility can concretize these experiences in the form of a vibrant poetic formula. (109)

“Forest Fire” investigates that ‘formula’. Nayar continues:

In order to do this the artistic self has to undergo a traumatic process through which his artistic personality develops; and the predicament encountered by the poet invariably transcends the present and assumes a generality. Thus the poet’s artistic personality develops into a collective poetic sensibility (109).

When she utters the lines in “Forest Fire”:

...In me shall sleep the baby
That sat in prams, and, sleep and wake and smile its
Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers, hand
In hand, and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of Sun. in me, the street –lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, the
Wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl coloured
Skirts and sing and songs of love, the wounded moan,
And in me the dying mother with hopeful
Eyes shall gaze around, seeking her child, now grown
And gone away to other towns, other arms. (13-23)

we can easily remember her personal life. There are the reminiscences of unsuccessful marriage, the group of the eunuchs whom she saw in her staying at Calcutta and their sad songs of love resembling her desperation in love, her ‘wounded moan’ which is produced out of her loveless conjugal life, forceful possession of her helpless body and also her mother who was forced to be dominated by her traditional husband throughout her whole life. “Forest Fire” is a microcosm of Das’ eventful life. Nair concludes:

Kamala Das has shaped her feminine poetic self on the anvil of her naturalistic experiences and visions, and her poems are the direct results of the psychic trial she underwent throughout her life on instances. (109)

This is the poem where she achieves transcendence. Surpassing the pettiness of ordinary existence she reaches the level of creativity which leads towards the immortality of self.

End Note:

ⁱ The episode is available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m01/m01231.htm>

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