

DUALITY IN ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEX IN KAMALA DAS' WORKS

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Women in Indian societies are never free to think or act for themselves. Their lives are filled with taboos, implicit and explicit. The constraints imposed upon them have been innumerable and therefore it is only women with indomitable courage who have been able to come up in life and make a mark for themselves. Indian women are known for their sense of patience, self sacrifice and passivity and most important of all, their sense of submission before the men around them. Hence they have always been dominated by their fathers, husbands and later on even by their own sons. They have been brought up to think that their entire life is meant to be a warehouse to store the problems of the male sex. Hence it is not surprising that they hardly use their will to do anything on their own or even for their own benefit.

Once in a while though, some such women are born who try to change the perception of the male on one hand and the society on the other – the perception that women cannot do anything on their own and that they always require the protection of the male to survive in the society. One such woman was Kamala Das from the southern coast of Malabar who was known as Madhavi Kutty in her home town, later as Kamala Das the writer and still later as Kamala Surayya after her conversion to Islam. She rose slowly yet steadily in the sleepy town to become one of the most celebrated women writers in the global world.

This surely goes to show that a woman need not wield the sword like her male counterpart to become known or other means, fraudulent or otherwise to come to the top. Just the soft strokes of her pen, written from the most profound feelings emanating from the depths of her heart are enough to stir the world out of complacency, sit up and think about how cruelly they have been treating the fairer sex since centuries. The worst thing is that, it still keeps going in spite of all the fantastic strides made in science and technology.

Kamala Das hailed from a family noted for its literary genius. Her mother Balamani Amma and her great uncle Nalapat Narayan Menon were noted poets in Malayalam. Infact, Kamala Das never says anywhere that she took to writing because it came spontaneously to her. She said on many occasions that she took to writing the autobiography titled, 'My Story' because she needed the money to pay the mounting hospital bills when she was hospitalized. On some occasions she maintained that she kept writing poems because it was a sort of escapism for her. She was then in a position to tell the world indirectly of what was going on in her mind and what were the things that were depressing to her.

She was torn between happiness derived from sex and happiness derived from spirituality. She had a dual attitude to sex. In some poems she speaks of unsatisfied sexual union, in some others she speaks of its excess and in still some others she speaks of its weaknesses and strengths. She was able to speak of the divine in human terms, even in respect to sexuality. One

can observe this in her poems like ‘Ghanashyam’, ‘Vrindavan’, ‘Krishna’ or ‘Radha Krishna’. Then there are poems in which the physicality merges with the spirituality. Like for example in ‘Ghanashyam’ there are metaphysical tones. She seems to be looking out for that elusive cosiness of the nest which she expects from her husband. However, since it is elusive she resorts to the cosiness provided by Krishna who is capable of providing her a nest which would give her permanent warmth. She says,

‘.....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.....’¹

Here her feelings for Ghanashyam are different for the feelings that she mentions in ‘The Looking Glass’, where she needs or speaks only of physical pleasures. In ‘The Looking Glass’ the love that she mentions is purely physical. It goes as follows

‘..... Stand nude before the glass with him
 So that he sees himself the stronger one
 And believes it so, and you so much more
 Softer, younger, lovelier..... Admit your
 Admiration.’²

She is in great ire that the society always sees woman as a plaything for man, to warm his bed and to satisfy his lust as and when he feels the need for it. Girls are brought up on these lines only, like as if sex is the only thing in life and the girls should become a part and parcel of this programme set out for them in the long run by the society. In her poem, ‘An Introduction’ she says that people expected her to act in a feminine manner, think in a feminine manner and show only feminine characteristics.

‘..... Dress in sarees, be girl,
 Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
 Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, Oh,
 Belong, cried the categorizers.....’

Here she is expected to behave as the society expects her to behave, unmindful of what she wants from either her man or the society. Here in this poem we come to know that she has yet to learn about sex, its comforts and discomforts, its pleasures and pains. Yet again the very same poem she speaks of spirituality. She suddenly begins to realize that she is not different from the divine and that she is part of a whole, the universal. She is one of the smallest specks in God’s great circle. She has a sudden realization that she cannot be different from the divinity that she is aching for. The lines

‘..... 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.’³

Then when we examine the poem, ‘Luminol’, we can clearly feel that she cannot share with someone what is her own. She feels the desire to have her own private space which she can call her own, including her body. She is unwillingly to share her body if she can have no control over it.

If a woman is unable to do this, then she will feel futile and the only way she can stop from being guilty and not letting someone else take advantage over her body is to take luminal. The lines from the poem portray these feelings aptly.

‘Love-lorn,
 It is only
 Wise at times, to let sleep
 Make holes in memory, even
 If it
 Be the cold and
 Luminous sleep banked in
 The heart of pills, for he shall not
 Enter,
 Your ruthless one,
 Being human, clumsy
 With noise and movement, the soul’s mute
 Arena.....’⁴

By being able to take luminol she can atleast be doing two things at the same time. She will not only stop herself from feeling guilty about sharing her body with someone without her express willingness for such an act and at the same time satisfy her mate by being in deep slumber by granting him the freedom to play with her body or do what he wants to her complete oblivion! She hates the thought that it is always the male priority that is at focus. It is never the female unless it is then, one of submissiveness, docility, endurance, selfless love and sacrifice. The man is always the prowler in the wild out to hunt his woman but it is never the other way round. Similarly, it is always the woman who is the victim of a man’s ego and never the other way round. In the poem, ‘The Stone Age’ she is full of anger when she realizes that she has to bear the brunt of the male ego, mental as well as physical. In this poem, the lines

‘.....why he is called a lion,
 A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
 Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
 Before it clasps my pubis. And then further again
 ‘.....Ask me why like
 A great tree felled, he slumps against my breasts
 And sleeps. And finally the last line of this poem
 ‘...Ask me why life is short and love is
 Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price.....’⁵

She very clearly reiterates that she recoils at the taste that is left in her mouth or the beastly clasp at her pubis which shudders at his touch. She is unable to bear the brunt of his heavy weight which falls on her recklessly against her tender breasts like the impact of a great tree that is felled. She begins to wonder whether the bliss that she so eagerly looks forward to, is finally worth it all. Wasn’t she paying a heaving price for a short spell of happiness?

In matters of sex, it is always the male who has the upper hand. He is always insensitive to the needs of his mate. He neither has the patience nor has the need to find out how sex can give pleasure to his woman. She wonders why it has been the society’s prerogative to see that only the male is entitled to pleasures and happiness of all types and why it is denied to the woman. She questions why women are assumed to be dumb. Where have the women faltered? She is unable to find the answer.

She does not want physical love if it is unaccompanied with emotion. In that case what is it the difference between animal lust and human lust? In her autobiography, 'My Story', she says there is no sense of having physical union without an equal measure of selfless love, bond, emotion and spirituality. If it is just physicality, then it is better to end such a relationship because there will be no permanence in such a relationship. She absentmindedly thinks of her husband

'.....lying beside me
 That I loved, and was much loved.
 It is physical thing, he said suddenly,
 End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free.'⁶

These lines show us how dejected she was when she found out that her husband wanted only physical relationship with her and nothing else. She begins to get a dirty feeling that she is being used and so she is just being cheap even at the hands of her own husband. When she wants love from him, she gets rejection and therefore, thereafter she tries to find it by hook or by crook. Even towards the end of her life, she was running after an abstract thing. She who all along thought would be able to conquer love realizes that it was never meant for her. Like the slipping sand it used to always slip away from her. The more she tried to keep it in her hold, the more it seemed to slip away from her. That was the predicament that she finally felt herself in.

The pain that she went through because of this, was finally instrumental in making her look forward to death. She felt that death was preferable rather being in the cocoon of the man that she did not love and neither was loved. This is clear in the poem,

'I Shall Someday', I shall someday leave the cocoon
 You built around me with the morning tea,
 Love-words flung from doorways and of course
 Your tied lust.'⁷

In 'Phantom Lotus', she expresses the serenity that she feels when she surrenders in total devotion to the Lord. Here she has a selfless love, trust and devotion for the Lord which are imperishable with time or tide. It is unlike a human relationship. There are no strange physical, mental or emotional bonds, no expectations implied or explicit but just a one sided trust towards the Lord. He alone can give unending peace to her umpteen problems. The lines

'.....I
 Seek but another way to know
 Him who has no more a body
 To offer, and whose blue face is
 A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams.'⁸

Again the same theme of turning to spirituality is noticed in 'A Man a Season'. Here also Kamala Das comes to the conclusion that physical hungers remain time bound and that it is only spiritual hunger that can make her calm and peaceful. She realizes rather late that there is no use in running after physical pleasures because along with the pleasures it brings its quota of fears, doubts and pains.

She is sorry that she has spoilt her youth in running after these temporary pleasures of the body. Had she been spiritual right from the beginning, then she would never have to struggle with her inner turmoil. The lines

'.... You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
 Seek ecstasy in others' arms. Still further in the lines, 'Perhaps I lost my way,
 perhaps I went astray. How would a blind wife trace her lost....'⁹

Husband.....’ very succinctly bring out the pathos of the wife who must have spent sleepless nights in the arms of various men for various reasons. It could be to seek love for herself, it could be to please her husband, it could be to defy the norms set for her by the society or whatever. The fact remains that whatever the reason for her straying on a wild path, she does realize the emptiness of it all. She realizes that nothing can bring lasting peace except spirituality. Tired of everything and tired of everyone, she chooses the path of ‘Radha’. In this poem, she shows the readers her utter surrender to Krishna. The final lines

‘.....O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but You.¹⁰

Here again in this poem there is the sweet enchantment in the melting of the physical with the spiritual desires. Now that she has realized that no physical relationship can endure, she is prepared to cast away her life at the lotus feet of Krishna without anything in return from him except sublime happiness.

From all this we can deduce that she was unable to fathom the depth of love or its intensity. Similarly it shows that the dividing line between physicality and spirituality or divinity was very thin for Kamala Das. Yet, it is agreeable that she did in the dusk of her life realize that purity of true spiritual love was more important and more sustainable than physical love however magical it may look.

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