



## Women's Role in the Poetry of Kamla Das

□ DR. Seema Rani Jain

**Abstract-** *Kamala Das has made a niche in the literary world. She is the recipient of many prestigious literary awards. She has emerged as one of the leading female poets of Modern Indian Poetry in the English Language. In other words, she has made a mark as an Indo-Anglian poet and has made a substantial contribution to Indo-Anglian Literature. She has also brought much credit to herself by virtue of her originality and novelty on the one hand and by her daring beliefs and convictions on the other hand. She is known by different names: to her Malayalam readers as Madhavikutty, to her English audience as Kamala Das and her latest avatar as Kamala Suraiya, but the spirit is the same bold, forthright and often painfully honest. She is known internationally for her profoundly feminine lyrical English poetry and at home for her short stories in Malayalam. She is one of the very few writers from Kerala who writes effortlessly both in English and Malayalam, yet maintaining high standards in both. Kamala Das was born on March 31, 1934 in Malabar in Kerala.*

She hails from a typical upper caste Hindu family, conservative in many respects. Her adherence to religion was at best ambivalent. Together with a traditional upbringing, she was open to intellectual influence and modern knowledge. She is the daughter of late Balamani Amma, a renowned poet and late V.M. Nair, a former Head of the popular nationalist daily Mathrubhoomi. She had another literary lineage: her maternal uncle Nalappattu Narayan was a romantic poet. She was educated at home and married at 15 to K. Madhava Das, a former officer in the Central Bank of India who died a few years ago. He encouraged her to associate with people of her own age, and also encouraged her for writing. He was invariably proud of her accomplishments, even when they were

controversial.

Kamala Das is the first woman writer who has made sarcastic comments against the male complacency. She defies the age-old conventions boldly and confesses openly her extra marital relations. She hates men who want to have only lustful sexual relations. She says:

"You were pleased With my body's response, it's weather, its usual shallow Convulsions.

My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices....."(The Old Play House and Other Poems:17)

Bibhu Prasad Pandhi proclaims: "Apart from her expert use of language, she has a sincerity of feeling and an honesty of experience that most of the women poets of India lack." She

addresses some burning issues related to women and children in many of her essays and interviews. She is very much conscious about the sufferings of women since time immemorial. But her world is not devoid of men like other feminists. The section depicts that Kamala Das was a feminist of different kind. She is full of feminine sensibility and understands the importance of man-woman relation.

In her poetry, several faces of women are exhibited, woman as sweet heart, flirt, wife, mother, middle aged matron and above all woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of the psychological processes behind femineity and masculinity. Her poetry offers a poetic model of a feminine mind confronted by the male-oriented society of Southern India. It centers on sexual insufficiency for the gratification of woman in her. All her works of poetry reflect the confessional tone of feelings of such situations in her personal life. These situations quickly shift and assume new postures, new attitude of defiance.

The woman becomes indifferent or neutral after bearing the cruelties of her husband. Her mind is reduced only to an Old Play House with all its lights put out. Her attitude to love, sex and lust is realistic, frank, autobiographical, vivid and candid. Her bold expression differentiates her from other contemporary Indo-Anglian love poets.

A Doll for the Child Prostitute is a collection of short stories featuring tales of innocence and eroticism. Kamala Das here presents a gripping picture of exploitation of women by men. Light is thrown on various shades and roles of women as a stereotyped wife, as a prostitute, as a mother, as a child bearer and last but not to the least as an object of

entertainment for men. The most touching story in the collection is the title story, which shows the tortures on a female-child being forced into prostitution. The other stories, namely, A Little Kitten, Darjeeling, and Sanatan Chowdhary's wife, The Tattered Blanket and Leu Kaemia present different images of woman as a sexual object.

Kamala Das thought herself to be one of the victims of the prevalent orthodox attitude towards the Indian Women and of male domination over them. Having personally experienced what she thought to be her husband's ill-treatment of her and of his cruel neglect of her feminine needs, she could not help giving vent to her grievances in her poems. She expresses the vehemence of her emotions and her resentments. She made her poetry a vehicle for the expressions of her resentments against her husband and subsequently her grievances against all males because of her sad and bitter experience of her indiscriminate sexual relationships with a large number of men. She strove to establish her identity as a woman through her poems; and she, in fact, tried also to impart an identity to Indian women as a neglected class of Indian society. She writes:

"You let me use 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 (A Man is a Seasons:23).

Thus her poetry signals the advent of a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry. Here is fiercely feminine sensibility, which articulates without inhibitions the hurts it has received in an insensitive and largely man-made world. She may be said to have ushered a kind of new morality according to which the time honoured

virtues of timidity, submissiveness, chastity, and a dependence on men are to be thrown overboard. She writes:

"As the convict studies His prison's geography I study the trappings Of your body, dear love, For I must some day find An escape from its snare(The Prisoner:10).

According to his morality, women must gather the courage to demolish the concept of male dominance and man's egotistical superiority. In a poem entitled I Shall Some Day, addressed to her husband, she writes in a strong tone of protest:

The concern You built around me with morning tea Love words flung from door-ways and of course Your tired lust.

There are a good number of poems wherein Das registers her sense of suffocation issuing from her loss of liberty after marriage. She is iconoclastic in her approach to marriage. She treats "marriage" as "a game of cruelty". Her female ego comes to the surface when she ruefully depicts her loss of poetry. In Of Calcutta, Das exposes the intricacies of her inner pangs in stemming from marriage:

I was sent away, to protect a family's honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some Abstractions, sent to another city to be A relative's wife, a house from his home, and Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to A mother for his sons, yet another nodding Warm his bed a night (Collected Poems:59).

Once again in The Stone Age, Das laments over her loss of identity. She lodges her complaint to herself: You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep You stick a

finger into my dreaming eye. (The Old Play House and Other Poems: 51).

She derides artificiality. She intends to come to terms with her own self or this would give her the taste of liberty. She objects to making any compromise with her husband. Ironically she portrays her own plight:

It will be all right when I learn To paint my mouth like a clown's. It will be alright if I put up my hair Stand near my husband to make a proud pair (The Descendants:6). Das's poetry dramatizes an "aching disappointment," such dramatization ingrains within the desire to come to realize an "idealized phallus," which she discovers in Lord Krishna. Partly because of her disappointment in realizing an idealized form of love in her husband, and partly because of her cognition of the fleeting nature of time that takes away the youthful vigor and passion she feels the pain of her fellow women who are crucified Jesus like not on cross, but in soft beds and pillows. She says bitterly:

We have lain in every weather Nailed no, not To crosses, but to soft beds and against Softer forms(The Descendants:)

Despite all her hatred towards men, her world was never devoid of men. She is every woman endowed with all fine feminine sensibility. Unlike other feminists, she always longed for a lover, but a lover like Krishna, an ideal lover. There is a clear change in her feminist perspective in her later poetry. She celebrates her longing for the "idealized phallus" manifested in the personality of Lord Krishna. She glorifies Radha's eternal waiting for Lord Krishna and assumes a Radha-like personality and feels: Everything in me Is melting, even the hardness at the core. O Krishna, I'm melting, melting, melting, Nothing remains but

You.....(The Descendants:23)

Kamala Das was concerned not only for her subjective self but also for the objective word, and for the humanity at large. She admits in an interview:

I am unhappy because everywhere people are trying to make others unhappy-not merely the people I knew or touched or talked with but the people who are my cousins in the human race. I am unhappy because of the animals that get slaughtered for no faults of their own. I am unhappy for the human beings who get slaughtered, bombed. We have reached an unhappy stage in life, all of us. It is true, and our country is going to suffer more.

It is now evident that the feminist attitudes and hence the feminist perspective seems to have been marginalized, not because she has not realized her fantasy of the idealized phallus, but because she has, in essence, matured as a writer-whose vision has, undoubtedly, impelled her to comprehend the larger issues of life lying beyond the cocooned self. As a conscientious poet, Das is concerned about the sad plight of the humanity. But her poetry, in general has to image forth this plight so that we can say that she has come in full circle. In poem after poem, Kamala Das has given an outlet to her feeling of disappointment on not receiving any love from her partners and given an outlet to her feelings on uncertainty in this respect. In the poem *The Sunshine Cat* we find her giving expression to her feeling of disillusionment, disenchantment and disappointment so far as her experience of the sexual act with her husband and with other man is concerned she speaks about her husband in a bitter tone, criticizing his manner of making love. He used to shut her in a lonely room, where she wept on her plight. Her

sense of isolation, frustration and miseries are clearly depicted in this poem:

She loved, who loved her not enough,  
being selfish And coward, the husband Who  
neither loved nor Used her but was a ruthless  
watcher. (Summer in Calcutta:)

This poem shows the miseries of a forlorn woman, treated by man very badly. She feels herself all alone in the world. It is appropriate to say of Kamala Das's poems whosoever touches these poems touches a woman. The poetess as here voiced her own inner frustrations, by using the story of the woman persona as an objective co-relative. The modern woman's predicament is energetically voiced in this poem, but her challenge of the socio-moral laws, her flaunting for them is unpardonable. She is very honest in depicting the feelings of her heart. She is a reveal, who struggles for the cause of woman. In many poems, she describes woman's lust for love which is very passionate. In the poem "In Love" she says, " Now that I love you curled like an old mongrel/ My life lies, content/ In you..." (Summer in Calcutta). She confesses her experience of love with astonishing candidness: 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-body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. (Summer in Calcutta:59-60).

In our time, of course, the rights of women are being increasingly recognized and conceded, so much so that even their claim to have a large number of seats reserved for them in the Indian Parliament have been accepted. They are playing their role as teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, pilots, police, army, scientists, conductors, astronomers, judges,



administrators, politicians, social workers and every field of service. But, when Kamala Das started writing poetry, the Indian Women hardly had any voice to protest against male domination over them. They had hardly any voice in the running or the management of any public services or any public institutions.

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