

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH
— 11th Year of Open Access —

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-2 (April 2020)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite
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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Kamala Das's Writing Style: An Emphasis on Dramatic Framework and Skillful Use of Imagery

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Article History: Submitted-06/04/2020, Revised-06/05/2020, Accepted-09/05/2020, Published-10/05/2020.

Abstract:

Kamala Das is a well-known Indian English poetess. In fact, her works need no introduction. Her confession poetry is a milestone for not only the other Indian female poets but for her female readers also. She has not only unbosomed herself but revealed the pathetic condition of several other 'freak' women of traditional households. She deals in her poetry with intimate, personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo in an Indian traditional society. But we do not find any wild outburst in her poetic works. Here is a ruthless self-analysis with a tone of utter sincerity. She expresses all her emotions, experiences (physical as well as psychological), wishes and desires in a manner and style that perfectly suits to her subject matter.

Keywords: Diction, Figures of speech, Dramatic Framework and skillful use of Imagery.

What a poet says is important but more important is the way he says or in other words the style of his/her expression. Style is the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse—that a writer or a speaker uses to express himself. The characteristic style of a writer may be analyzed in terms of its diction, or characteristic choice of words and phrases; its sentence structure and syntax; the density and types of its figurative language to express the intensity of emotions and experiences; the patterns of its rhythm and of its component sounds for effective and long lasting impression; and its rhetorical aims and devices. The doctrine of decorum required that the level of style in a work be appropriate to the speaker, the occasion, and the dignity of its literary genre. (M.H.Abrams)

Kamala Das received no formal education, no pompous university degree but is still a conscientious artist who is mainly guided by her impulse and instinct in both her matter and the manner in which it is conveyed. Her primary concern was to convey to her readers the intensity of her feeling, her frustration and her disillusionment. And this concern determined

her style or the way of expression. She went her own way. After reading the following lines of hers

I have stretched my two dimensional
Nudity of sheets of weeklies, monthlies
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice, I have
Put my private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech. (Loud Posters,)

E. V. Ramkrishnan said, "A poet who expresses herself in this way has nothing to learn either at the level of craftsmanship or in terms of ideas from others. (Tilak 26)

Her poetry overflowed from bursting experience. And main concern was to achieve, to use T.S. Eliot's term, "Objective Correlative" that may present the exact psychological equivalent or verbal equivalent for her emotional states. And this she achieved by means of dramatic framework of her poems and the skillful (but spontaneous) use of images. An image empowers a poet to express his abstract thoughts or mystical longings in a concrete form. A skillful use of image helps a poet, at once, in evoking a picture, a concrete idea or shape, about his/her feeling. About the use of imagery, the noted poet Housman once remarked – "Here is poetic gold; take it! Here is radiant beauty; be moved" (Dwivedi 65). 'Image making' or 'Image Developing' is an exercise that involves the ingenious use of metaphors and similes, contrasts and disparity, and may be equated to 'picture-making' or concretization of emotions.

All her poetry is nothing but the picturization of her personal life. The emotional emptiness and sterility of her married life, the intensity of her misery as a wife is brought out through a dramatic situation in 'The Freaks', where the beloved and lover are alone together. Their behavior is unnatural. They try to make love but their mind keep wandering off from love. There might be some physical desire but no emotional connectivity at all. The lover is generally attractive but here he is repulsive to the woman who

...talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern where stalactites of

Uneven teeth gloom, his sight

... ..

... Can't this man with

Nimble finger-tips unleash

Nothing more live than the

Skin's lazy hungers?

The heart is imaged as "empty-cistern." (The Freaks)

In 'The Sunshine Cat' the poetess has voiced her own inner frustration, by using the story of the woman persona as an objective-correlative. It is certainly a psychic striptease. She uses the image of 'sunshine', a thin streak of light, as an imaginative equivalent to all her pains and sufferings in this man domineered world. life and in fact the act of living itself has been a propitiation to her and domestic life a cell, full of physical comfort but one which curtails all her freedom to grow and achieve fulfillment, which effaces the poet's self.

In 'The Invitation' the desire to merge into the great blue sea is identical to her search of the right man who could nourish the demands of the soul as well. The sea stands here both as image and metaphor of her quest.

In the poem 'Dance of the Eunuch' she finds an objective correlative in the dance of eunuchs to represent the theme of suppressed desires within. The dance of eunuchs with their wide skirts going round and round

... .. Cymbals

Richly clashing and anklets jingling, jingling

Jingling.(The Dance of Eunuchs)

Is contrasted with their vacant ecstasy which metaphorically suggest a gulf between the external, empty passion and the sexual draught and putridness inside. The dance of eunuch is the dance of sterile and thus suggests nothing but a hollowness inside and therefore, symbolize the unfulfilled, unmet and unquenchable love of the woman in the poet. The details of her body are quite piteous and the pathos in the expression is best expressed by the metaphor of "half-burnt log from funeral pyres".

She makes use of arresting images and these images work on several layers of response which enriches the textures of her poems, makes her feelings and expression more appealing and touching at the same time. Notice the perfect use of images in the following lines:

That was the only kind of love
This hacking at each other's part
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot
Sun.(Convicts)

The lines are lavishly suggestive and tell us immediately about her partner's lustful nature and the violent sexual involvement of both in the hot noon. However, on the part of the poetess, there is a sense of guilt over such an involvement as is conveyed by the metaphor 'convicts'. The pains, suffering and humiliation of loveless copulation with her husband is conveyed in

... How well I can see him
After a murder, conscientiously
Tidy up the scene, wash
The bloodstain under
Faucet, bury the knife...
And, what am I in sex who shuttles
Obsessively from his
Stabs to recovery
In her small silent room?(The Doubt)

What else can be the exact psychological equivalent to her pains. It stings into the reader's mind as the experience has stung her. The image is both concrete and sensuous. Sometimes we wonder whether we are not in the midst of Keats's poetry.

“The Looking Glass” which is matchless in its display of imagery, presents the charms of body and the powers of physical appeal that this charm holds:

Notice the perfection
Of the limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the sky walk across the bathroom floor
... .. the jerky way he
Urinates
Gift him all makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweet between breast
The warm stock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.(The Looking Glass)

Along with the charm of the body, such physical details enable the poetess to image lustful relationship in all their ugliness, barrenness and spiritual sterility.

Mrs. Das makes a powerful use of ‘window-image’ in her poem in ‘My Grandmother’s House’. It suggests, with sufficient emphasis, the languishing desire of the poet for a sentient peep into her past and resurrect her dream and desire. The house was once as a symbol of security and safety for her, which is unable to meet in her husband’s house. With the dereliction of the old house the windows have become blind. Only the retreat to the old house will melt the ice and the windows will again be restored to old life. Here the ‘windows’ are said to be ‘blind’ and ‘air’ is qualified as “frozen”. Her heart is itself like a dark window where fresh air doesn’t blow. “The old house for her is a place of symbolic retreat to a world of innocence, purity and simplicity, an Edenic world where love and happiness are still possible.”(Tilak 39)

In order to sanctify quest of Kamala’s woman ‘persona’ for emotional fulfillment outside marriage she makes use of the symbols of the mythical personages, Radha-Krishna and Mirabai. Krishna is a mythical lover, Radha and Mirabai are the eternal seekers of ‘love’. They not only bear testimony to her ‘Indianness’, which is also borne out by her use of the typically Indian flora and fauna, scene and sights, for her purposes. Despite of all the frankness of expression and modernity, her poetry is deeply rooted in the Indian soil and in

Indian cultural tradition. Her confession is the "revolt" against the role a woman is traditionally expected to play in the Indian society.

Kamala's poetry contains a strong note of subjectivism. Though she presents some dramatic situation and dramatic personages but again and again she focuses our attention on herself; time and again, she resorts to 'I' and 'My' and 'Mine'. What can be a stronger proof of 'subjectivism' than this?

But

I must pose,

I must pretend,

I must act the role

Of happy woman,

Happy life.(The Suicide)

It's only

To save my face, I flaunt at

Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.(The Freaks)

Kamala's verse fills emotions through the medium of free verse (as in the confessional poetry in general). She was aware about the limitation or the restrictions of the 'rhymed verse, so she chooses 'verse-libre' to be able to articulate her 'open-heart' for the benefit of her readers. The vigorous sweepy expression of her verse, didn't need the artificial gaudy technique of the school of pope nor she require the languid air and the love-lost language of the Romantics. She, therefore, resorts to 'verse-libre' or free verse which allowed her enough freedom of expression, without letting the emotions slip-off or their intensity slide off. 'The Suicide', 'The Dance of Eunuchs', 'Compositions', infact, majority of her poems- all employ 'verse-libre' in their texture, and here is being presented only one instance out of innumerable ones:

It was hot, before, the eunuch came

To dance, wide skirts going round and round,

Cymbals

Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,

Jingling,(The Dance of Eunuchs)

Love

I no longer need.

With tenderness I am most content.

I have learnt that friendship

Cannot endure,

The blood ties do not satisfy.(The Old Playhouse)

The verse as employed here offers immense opportunity for freedom of speech; it is also allied with elasticity and tenderness of expression. It doesn't require us to search 'best words in the best order' (Coleridge). Simplicity and spontaneity are its hallmarks.

Whereas her choice of language is concerned she writes both in Malayalam and English. When she was asked why she chose to write in English, she replied that English being the most familiar to her, she used it to express herself. Her choice of English was by no means a deliberate one. Her well-known poem, 'An Introduction', which is often regarded as her poetic manifesto, throws substantial light on her use of English.

It is half-English, half-

Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,

It is as human as I am human, don't

You see?

Further she says:

... it voices my joys, my longings, my

Hopes, and it is useful to me as cowing

Is to cows or roaring to the lions, it

Is human speech, the speech of mind that is
Here and not thee, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech.(An Introduction)

She realizes the prodigious possibilities of English having various shades and nuances of feelings, its vast storehouse of emotional analogues and other equivalents. She calls it as useful and natural to her as cawing to the cows or roaring to the lions. She transmogrifies her “joys” and “longing” and “hopes” into the sensitive and pliable mould of English. Her felicity in the use of words and phrases suggests that she feels quite at home in English.

Poetry, she takes, as an arrangement of the best words in the best possible order. The collection of words in her poems is rich and varied. She is fully aware of the immense possibilities of the words. She doesn't consciously work upon them to create spectacular effects. They emerge from somewhere deep within. She achieves an easy commerce between the idea and the words.

But this doesn't mean that she writes carelessly and shabbily. She is poet in the confessional mode, and hence, her diction is colloquial, that of the confidential chat of sensible friend; her vocabulary being drawn largely from the language of everyday use. Her diction has nothing to do with the philosophical musings or religious chants. It is nothing but a sole medium to unbosom her heart and to give an outlet to her soul. Diction is not mere a tool for her but a poetic medium pure and simple.

She uses words imaginatively, so that they are adequate to express her emotions. The words come to her and becomes one with her emotions. She is successful in enacting a verbal drama through her use of emotionally charged words. As we see the use of the word 'withdrew' in 'My Grandmother's House', it is so active and vivid that a vacant and abandoned house comes to life and seems to be a partner in the grief of the poet. Similarly, in the following passage from 'A Hot Noon in Malabar':

This
Is a noon with a mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent once, who rarely speak
At all, so that when they speak, their voices

Run wild, like jingle voices,(A Hot Noon in Malabar)

The phrase “jungle voices”, amply conveys the poet’s emotions, enacts a real drama and is quite successful in imparting the poem its peculiar tone. Every epithet tells and glows with emotions.

There is natural lyricism and rhythm in her diction, and no philosophical or mystical abstractions.

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.(An Introduction)

What else could be a better poetic tool than repetition, for one who is highly sensitive and extremely emotional and who has been leading a life of tension and restlessness.

It will be all right when I lean
To paint my mouth like a clown’s
It will be all right if I put up my hair,
Stand near my husband to make a proud pair.
It will be all right if I join clubs
And flirts a little over telephone.
It will be all right, it will be all right
I am the type that endures.(Substitute)

She not only delights in creating musing but also produces harsh and grating sounds.

“You dribbled spittle in to my mouth.”(The Old Playhouse)
“I was taught to break saccharine in to your tea
To offer at the right moments the vitamins.”(The Old Playhouse)

We notice the frequent use of 'b', 'd' and 't' sounds in her words.

Now, we come to the point that 'confessional poetry' is often anti-structural, anti-elegant and anti-establishment and that kamala Das is also so in her poetry. For example-

In him ... the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me ... the ocean's tireless
Waiting
... .. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
If in this world, he is tightly packed like the
Swords of its sheat. (An Introduction)

Both her approach to love and her account of it are anti-elegant and anti-stylish. And then, here is an illustration of the anti-establishment in Mrs. Das's verse:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-birds flying from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. I shall some day take
Wings, fly around as often petals,
Do when free in air...(I Shall Some Day)

This 'cocoon' stands for 'establishment' of all sorts- for the bond of marriage, family, and society from which she wishes to fly away.

There are weaknesses in Mrs. Das, such as general carelessness in composition, a looseness typified by the number of ellipses; three lazy dotes thrown in at the middle and end of a line, the too much repetition of both words and lines containing same meaning. Too often there is scarcely a trace of grit or resilience to shape and control the emotions. Sometimes the intensity of emotions makes words irrelevant. But to find her poetry only faulty would be like to "rub on the wrong shoe"(Vimla Rao). Actually, silence and not words are the strength of love-experience. She doesn't believe like Yeats that the "words alone are certain good."

Repetition and lack of control creates the desirable impression of haste and uncontrollable energy in Kamala Das's poetry. Being preoccupied with the intensity of sexual love, she doesn't allow prominence to words, which are merely an abstraction for her. Throughout in her poetry, she shows the inadequacy of the language to cope with weight and range of her emotional experience. Infact, when she loses control the work ceases to be poetry, and becomes more like automatic writing.

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