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Kamla Das's Poetry: Journey from Body to Soul

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Kamla Das is regarded as one of the most prominent writers of Feminine sensibility. As a singer of feminine sensibility she started writing poetry on the themes of love and lust. This theme persists from one poem to another due to the candid and frank depiction of her own bitter sex experiences. She craves for union with man for the fulfillment of love but she is disillusioned and frustrated when it degenerates into sheer lustfulness and bodily pleasure. Her poetry deals with unfulfilled love and celebration of sex. In this regard K.R.S. Iyenger remarks:

“Under the Indian sun, although sensuality lures irresistibly, yet it Fails to satisfy, feeling and introspection but sound the depths of The oceanic sense of frustration, and the calm of fulfillment eludes For ever. Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself again and Again.” (1)

The absurdities of a male's body and 'Skins lazy hungers' are depicted nicely in the following lines of Freaks,

“ He talks, turning a sun – stained
Check to me, his mouth a dark
Cavern, where stalacitites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love.” (2)

About this poem Devendra Kohli remarked :

“ It is the woman's impatience and frustration with the man as well As the moment with the man because of his sexual passivity and Slackness and with the moment because it marks her feminine in Tegrity. And if she does the masculine role, if she flaunts a grand Flamboyant lust.' It is to redeem her feminine face. “The Freaks” Thus coming from a woman poet as it does release an important Facet of woman's psychology of love in her refusal to be pinned Down to a passive man.”(3)

In the opinion of Kamla Das Physical love is of no value only the peace of soul is eternal and everlasting but mainly men are after the bodily beauty of women and they satisfy only their sexual hunger. In her view spiritual love between wife and husband is weightier than carnal love. Kamla Das states in “In Love” –

“ While I walk
The verandah sleepless, a
Million questions awake in
Me, and all about him and
This skin communicated
Things that I dare not yet in
His presence call our love.”(4)

The title is subtly ironic because the poet is not in love with the man who uses her body. She is disgusted with him. The man is repulsive : as he does not love her and callously ignores her emotional fulfillment in love. He indulges only in the sex – act. “The Skin communicated thing.” How abominable he is –

“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.”(5)

The poem, “A Relationship” reveals that a lustful man who meets her casually or purposefully anywhere in the city tries to betray her. This male betrayal is most dangerous for the Indian social culture.

“..... so that when at last we
Met, to believe that once I knew not his
Form, his quiet touch, or the blind kindness
Of his lips was hard indeed, Betray me ?
Yes, he can, but never physically :
Only with words that curl their limbs at
Touch of air and die with metallic sighs.” (6)

In spite of this betrayal the woman finds peace and happiness in the arms of her lover –

“My body’s wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death no where else but here in
My betrayer’s arms (7)

Devendra Kohli judging the essence of this poem comments –

“A Relationship” also explicitly identifies love with physical Desire : it is another apotheosis of “the blind kindness” of the sexual Desire which is beauty and beauty making power.” (8)

In “The Looking Glass” there is a true and realistic description of tragedy in the life of a modern woman. All social norms of the ancient times are forgotten and understood as useless and so they have disappeared and their place has been taken by new fashion in the modern cities. These new fashions intoxicate the sensuous hunger in male and female and in the madness of physical momentary joy and pleasure all have now forgotten the pious marriage relation between husband and wife. In the poet’s view the woman should recognize that it is a male – dominated world and so it is her business to satisfy the male ego by admiring his masculinity and her own feminine weakness. She should not therefore, hesitate to stand naked with him before a mirror, because this world enables her to see that he is much stronger and she is soft, young and lovely and so a proper object for his lust, her feminine softness and loveliness would both excite his passion and gratify his vanity as the superior male. The woman should feel his ego by admiring the details that make him male.

“ Admit your
Admiration, Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under

Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerkey way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.”(9)

She should therefore gratify his lust : she should give herself to him completely

“ Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.”(10)

The tragedy lies in the fact that the woman has to play such conventional role, but this results in frustration and disillusionment in her.

In this poem “The Old Play House” the poet draws minute naked details of pre – sexual activities. In many of her poems she without any fear of social criticism or social shame describes what a man does with a woman and how the woman sometimes voluntarily or involuntarily bears sweet or bitter taste and scent of a man. So a spiritual relation never grows between a man and woman. Even a marriage relationship is not a guarantee for pure love between man and woman.

Kamla Das realizes that a lustful life has merely a momentary charm and nothing more. Moreover a lustful life is as untrue as a dream. Momentary physical joy does not lead anyone towards the peace of soul. This view is well expressed in Kamla Das’ poem “Three PM”,

“Our private hours were rationed
Then. But sat, watching, wondering
In what tortuous lanes of dream he walked, this
Innocent, so bewildered by his lust.”(11)

In “Conflagration” she describes the woman devoid of real happiness in life in this wide world. Happiness does not lie in sexual activities but by plunging herself in her duties a woman might easily attain happiness or the peace of soul :

“Woman, in this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man ? It’s time again to come alive,
The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame.”(12)

So the poet rejects lust in many of her poems. Among them, “The Maggots”, “The Prisoner” and “The Convicts” draw our attention. In “The Maggots”, Kamla Das tells us about the complete non-utility of lust. In her view detestful lust has no value at all. She is well aware of the mortality of body and therefore rejects detestful lust,

“That night in her husband’s arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, what is wrong ?
Do you mind my kisses, love ? and she said
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if the Maggots nip ?”(13)

About this poem Ansure Rahman rightly comments –

“The poet identifies herself with Radha but unlike Radha, she feels A sense of boredom and loss with another male partner. She is Reduced to the condition of a corpse. The male nibbler of the soul Is compared to a maggot which nips at the cold dead body Of Radha. It may be noticed here

that the poet imparts religious Symbolism to the poem through the execution of mytho-poetic Images.”(14)

These lines in “The Prisoner” prove the complete non-utility of lust which men falsely call as their love for women. But this is quite untrue. A very good comparison is drawn by the poet between a convict and a woman who indulged in sex-act. Both are the prisoners. The convict who is in prison studies the boundaries of the Jail for escape and the woman indulged in lustful activity studies the trappings of her lover’s body to find an escape from it. It means woman in the poem finds herself in the prison of lust and desires an escape from it, -

“As the convict studies
His prison’s geography
I study the trappings
Of your body. Dear love
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare.”(15)

The poem also echoes a spiritual meaning that the soul is trapped in this world. After having lived here for a time, the soul yearns to leave this world and become free.

The “Freaks” also deals with the nothingness in men’s lust in which the lustful lover is portrayed as detestful. His cheek is sun-stained and his mouth is a dark cavern, where stalactites of uneven teeth gleam. She asks –

“..... Can’t this man with
Nimble finger – tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers ? (16)

Throughout her multifarious relationships she was in quest for her spiritual lover, the eternal companion of her soul, the divine myth Krishna and we can witness this quest in the poems based on Radha-Krishna imagery namely: A Man is a Season, Radha, Radha-Krishna, A Phantom Lotus, Ghanshyam, Vrindavan and Krishna. These poems are representative of her faith in the spiritual evolution of man

In “ A man is a Season “ she realizes that the relationship with men is as temporary as a season but our eternal relationship is with God .God can only be an ideal lover ,

“A man is a season
You are eternity.” (17)

All her lovers are the shadows of her real lover that is God. So she discovers God in Nature. She is always in intense love with Nature which is another name of God Krishna .All those things which form Nature are symbolic of God .So either you love the things of Nature or the Nature in totality or God Krishna ,all are the same and this type of love which originates between the being and the God , is the only true love that is wished by every wise being .All the saints and Rishies in Vedic times found the existence of God in Nature and in every thing that represent Nature .The poet sings in “Radha –Krishna”,

“This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless

Souls to return some day
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality ." (18)

What the poet feels when she realized the God is depicted by her marvelously in her poem "Radha". Her own personal experience of sexual life with her husband did not give internal happiness and satisfaction to her .So the love between wife and husband as it should be is turned towards the love for Krishna .Having been disappointed in the world of sexual life Kamala Das realized the difference between the love of a husband and wife and the love for God. The background of her earlier life led to Kamala Das to compose Krishna poems .She realizes that her husband can never offer an ideal love and she never felt an ecstasy in the arms of her lover. So she turns to Krishna and in her autobiography accepts Krishna as her ideal lover and companion .In this regards M.Rao rightly says,

"Krishna has a therapeutic role to play in the poet's life .Her thoughts about Him give her relief from the asphyxiating male chauvinism." (19)

As such by ideal love she means the kind of relationship that exists between the legendary Radha and Krishna .Dissipation of individual self and total identification is possible only with her mythical lover. This is illustrated by the poem "Radha" where she sentimentally depicts the ecstasy Radha experiences in Krishna's embrace :

"Everything in me
Is Melting, even the hardness at the core
O, Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You" (20)

When the poet realizes God she shows us some characteristics of God. In her poem "A Phantom Lotus" Mrs Das says that the great almighty God is like a phantom of lotus flower. Truth and love in this world are virtually the God. The poetess has a complete faith in a bodyless God which is not seen in any temple or mosque or any place of worship.

"-----Loving this one, 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. "(21)

Kamala Das compares God with a tree and says,

"I at peace. I liken God to a tree which has as its parts the leaves , the bark, the fruits and the flowers each unlike the other in appearance and in texture but in each lying dissolved the essence of the tree, the whatness of it." (22)

In the poem "Ghanshyam" the poet compares God with a koel who has built her nest in the arbour of poet's heart. Until now the poet's life was like a calm, lonely and solitary jungle which was made moving in excitement of love by the sweet music of koel that is God. This koel fills her heart with delight and pain as it fills the heart of lovers when they are separated from each other. The koel leads her to the route of pure love. The poetess repents because she has missed the chance to be one with God though He is near her. The poet says,

“Ghanshyam,

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.

But at each turn when I near you

Like a spectral flame you vanish. (23)

About these lines Ansure Rahman remarked ,

“ The “ koel” building a nest in the arbor of heart and her sleeping life
being caressed with music are beautiful analogues stressing the sense of
suffering and redemption through the tradition- bound images.”(24)

Just like Meera all day and night sang in the praise of God and forgot her own existence.
Mrs Das was enchanted towards God Krishna and in the lines of the same poem depicts
herself in His love – net.

“ Shyam O Ghanshyam

You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows

Of my mind

And towards you my thoughts today

Must race like enchanted fish.” (25)

This is the highest peak that love experience arrives at. According to the Vedic tradition it
is the point where the lover and the beloved merge into one infinite identity.

“The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with
God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many
shapes shall U surrender to His desire. I shall be fondled by Him. Shall be
betrayed by him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world,
condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. Then
for me there shall be no return journey “(26)

When a person is enchanted with Krishna and His flute, gradually a time comes
when he realizes God and surrenders himself completely to Him. This goal of realizing
the God is taught by Rishis and Saints in ancient times to their disciples. They told them
that a man should pass most of his lifetime in reaching towards the goal of realizing the
God Almighty. But now the times have changed and this changed times created changed
attitudes and responsibilities of men and women and so man cannot devote all his lifetime
in the process of realizing God. Many other responsibilities of man draw his attention at
the foremost priority level and so only in old age he gets free time, devoid of all worldly
responsibilities to attain God. This is the case with every social man and woman, so is the
case with Mrs. Das who, in the later part of her age, fully surrendered herself to God
Krishna and every other mortal and temporary attraction left her mind and her soul is
totally imbued in the worship of Krishna. At this stage she realized that her soul (Atma)
is melting down in the universal soul (Parmatma), Lord Krishna. Mrs Das describes this
life – situation in her poem “Krishna” in the following lines,

“Your body is my prison Krishna

I cannot see beyond it,

Your darkness blinds me

Your love words shut out the wise world’s din.” (27)

To Conclude the poetic journey of Kamla Das is a journey from body to soul
from materialism to spiritualism. We witness a gradual change in her poetry on every
step of life. Being a victim of a young man’s carnal hunger she depicted her bitter sex

experiences minutely, vividly and candidly in her poetry and mentioned the futility and uselessness of sex and lust, devoid of love in life. Therefore she turns to Krishna and in Him finds her permanent mate. The haunting image of Kishna becomes inseparable. He appears to her in “myriad shapes” and resides in her consciousness. It is against this background that one can appreciate the significance of her Krishna poems. “Ghanshyam” depicts vividly the transformation that was wrought in her by her relentless search for love. What she seeks is a total merger in her lover. But since it is not feasible in the actual world, she searches for Ghanshyam, the ideal lover. The detachment from the world of reality and the venturing in the world of imagination, the eternal longing for true love, is the theme of “Ghanshyam”. The persona longs for Krishna, the “eternal lover”, like the mythical ‘chataka’ bird that waits for ever for the celestial water to quench its thirst.

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