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Feminism in the Treatment of Kamala Das' Poetic Imagery

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Kamala Das (Kamala Surya) – who was born on March 31, 1934 in Malabar, Kerala and died on May 31, 2009 in Pune – started writing at an early age, yet her major works appeared in the post independent era when the most Indian English writers, in their poetic output had deviated their attention from the common themes of national, mythical and colonial interests to the more straightforward expression of their personal experiences. Writing is a means of creating a place in the world; and the use of personal voice and self revelation becomes a source of self assertion for the women writers. This is a natural consequence of the cry for gender justice all over the world. The influence of the feminist movement of the West is reflected in many writings, especially poetry, which is the most subjective of all the genres. Modern Indian women writers, influenced by feminist trends, clamour for equal dignity, status and treatment on all fronts. It is through imagery that the poets attempt to concretize their experience or a state of mind and convey it suggestively to our imagination. Kamala Das, the most confessional poet, gives voice to feminine desires, hopes and fears through images in her peculiar way. This paper would attempt to unfold how she expresses her revolt against the restraints on women in a patriarchal society. Her poetry has created a new kind of space in Indian English Poetic tradition, especially from the point of view of her use of words and images. Kamala Das' treatment of mythical and nature imagery is different from that of other Indian women poets writing in English. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems.

• **INTRODUCTION**

The dictionary meaning of the term 'Imagery' is an language that produces pictures in the minds of readers. In a literary text it is an authour's use of vivid and descriptive language to express objects, feelings, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra sensory experience. An image is conveyed by figurative language like metaphor or simile; it may be visual- auditory or figurative-kinesthetic. While writing poetry it becomes increasingly necessary to seek out solid examples of descriptive language that appeals to one or more of our senses. It is the usage of imagery that helps an artist to portray a situation or a scene graphically so as to make it intelligible to the readers. C.D. Lewis has observed about the poetic image; "Epithet, a metaphor, a simile may

create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or a passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the reality.” (C.D. Lewis, 1955, p 4) Broadly speaking, imagery tends to be graphic, visual or expressive in effects; and it is used to convey some similarity, analogy or congruity. It is very useful towards concretization of emotions; and very effective in avoiding direct statements in poetry. According to Ezra Pound, It’s better to present an image than to produce voluminous works. (Source; Internet)

Kamala Das has created more than one image of lasting worth to make herself immortal. An objective reading of her works reveals that her poems are studded with a powerful feminist imagery, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood and woman’s relationship to their bodies and the roles they are offered in a traditional Indian society. The poetic imagery of Kamala Das is not loaded with philosophical meanings, as is the case with that of Toru Dutt; nor does it achieve metaphoric dimensions unlike that of Sarojini Naidu; yet she shapes her imagery in the feminist mode. Since her main concern in poetry is to secure an identity for herself by expressing her rebellion against patriarchy, the images in her poetry manifest vividly the woman as a victimized gender. This research paper would unfold how the images in her poetry project the woman persona’s i.e rebellion against the conventional restraints of the society.

II

Winner of the PEN International Award for poetry and Kerala Sahitya Award for her literary contribution, Kamala Das has emerged as one of the most significant voices in Indian English literature in the post- independent era. She started writing at an early age but her major works appeared in post 60’s when English poetry by Indian writers had moved on from colonial, nationalist and general moral themes to writing about personal experiences.

Brought up in the warmth of matrilineal society of Kerala, Kamala Das was uprooted when her father moved to Kolkata. Being victim to patriarchal prejudices even from her childhood, she has had an unhappy life. While she was just in school, she was suddenly married off to a young cousin for whom she had little affection; being pre-occupied with his career he, too gave little attention to his young wife. She faced the pains of loneliness even in her childhood. Marriage did not give her any solace from this kind of loneliness. Instead of getting happiness in marriage she got in it a heap of tension and despair. Left by herself, angry and confused, Kamala Das turned to others for love.

A woman writer alone can give a true voice to the problems faced by her in a male dominated society. Men may try their hands at writing about women’s problems, but it is the woman—who is close to the body (the source of writing) – who could write freely on it. Gynocritics assert the existence of a distinctive women’s language, which French feminist, Helene Cixous, coined as *écriture feminie*. They generate texts from the brain which maybe considered the metaphorical womb. Kamala Das’s personality is the aggregate of her physical features and amorous feelings.

Writing from the perspective of body as a source of imagery, Kamala Das's writing is intimate, confessional and innovative, at least in the poetic expressions, not in form or style. It is the unfulfilled dreams of the poet, which in turn shape the erotic themes of her poems. Her poems show a strong sense of consciousness towards female psyche; she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman and through writing about the self, the forbidden areas and ignored emotions, she not only gives voice to the voiceless, but also shows the way to the other women writers of India. She articulates her love- longings, frustrations, disillusionments and other feminist concerns with the help of suggestive images. The major themes of her poetry are: her quest for ideal love and her failure to find it; a strong desire for freedom from traditional social and marital bondage; her emotional relationship with her grandmother and her nostalgia for the old beloved house. It is her choice of imagery that evokes a picture and an idea about her feminine feelings. A few of these images are body, the sun, the sea, the wind, the grandmother and the house, so on and so forth, and of course, the Krishna myth.

The dominant image running through her poetry is that of human anatomy, which is viewed by her in two aspects; male body and female body. Male body is delineated with contempt; it is viewed as a symbol of destruction, corruption and a destroyer of female chastity. She calls her man's cheeks as 'sun stained'; his mouth as a dark cavern; his uneven teeth are 'statulactites (The Freaks)' his limbs are like pale and carnivorous plants', the male body is regarded as an agent of oppression and bondage when she calls it 'trapping' which she studies as a convict studies his prison's geography and from whose snares she wants to escape. The absence of true love intensifies the agony of the woman persona and she feels that the husband wife relationship without simple love is like a 'prison house' the yearning for love draws a close parallel with the escape from the prison house.

*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.*

(' The Prisoner' --- The Best of Kamala Das p. 55)

Most of her poems, with love and sex as themes, are characterized by an emotional intensity of a wife caused by a deep sense of her confinement in a marital bond. The traditional gender roles are reinforced and the hegemony of men over women is highlighted with a series of images that express contempt for male body. Her sense of bitterness in loveless love act with her man who is

forced upon her in an early age; and at the male domination is highlighted when she expresses her disgust for his physical features;

*Ask me, everybody, ask me what he sees in me,
Ask me why he is called a lion,
a libertine,
ask me the flavor of his mouth , ask me
why his hand sways like a hooded snake
before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
a great tree , felled, slumps against my breasts and sleeps.*

(‘The Stone Age’ *The Best of Kamala Das*, p 97-8)

The image like ‘hooded snake’, ‘great tree felling and slumping’ clearly indicate how a woman persona reacts to the love making of her husband who is thrust upon her by the society. The resentment against the customary arranged marriage is expressed in “The Maggots” in which the act of kissing is compared to ‘the nipping of maggots to the corpse’. In an interview to Iqbal Kour (*The Tribune, Jan 19,1992*) Kamala Das, in response to a question says that the arranged marriage without the consent of a woman is just ‘a rape taking place with the blessing of parents’

Kamala Das is most familiar with the female body—her own and accepts its individuality and nudity wholeheartedly; and hides nothing, nor even the ugly and the forbidden areas:

*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.*

(*The Lorking Glass*)

Of course, she loves her body intensely but at the same time considers it an unwelcome burden due to recurrent illness, and the physical decay brought about by the ravages of constant lust. She say in ‘Gino’.

This body that I wear without joy, this body

Burdened with lenience, slender toy owned

By man of substance shall wither, battling with his impersonal lust.

(The Best of Kamala Das p. 57)

The image of body is a symbol for the poet herself, in particular and for the marginalized sex, in general. As a symbol it is both a destroyer and a preserver, both a source of life and a source of death for her. The most piercing revelation of the feminine sensibility of Kamala Das is expressed in the image of womb in her poem "Afterwards" 'Son of her womb' looks ugly in loneliness and is advised to walk the world's bleary eye like a grit. She says;

The earth we nearly killed is yours

Now. The flowers bloom again,

But a savage red; it takes

Time to forget blood or the quick gasps

Of the dying. And the sudden pain.

But the sun came again and rain.

("Afterward" The Best of Kamala Das p. 6)

The poet identifies herself with the calm and quiet existence of the earth: the primordial image of motherhood. In the context of sexual union of the poet persona with her man there emerge new shades of meaning of blooming flowers. The blood and the quick gasps are attendants upon the love act. Almost everywhere in her poetry, womb image is associated with darkness and it stands for mother. In 'Jaisurya' a poem dealing with the process of labour pain and the birth of a son, she says:

For a while I too was earth.

In me the seed was silent,

Waiting as a baby does,

From the womb's quite expulsion.

.....

They raised him

*to me then,
proud Jaisurya,
my son, separated from darkness
that was mine
and in me.*

The second dominant image in Kamala Das's poems is that of the sun. It is not treated as a symbol of life or energy as it generally stands for, nor is it associated with myth. From Kamal Das's perspective the sun image stands for the malevolence on female body . it's burning mouth' resembles the mouth of man persona (In Love') It scorches the very marrow of bones (Sepia') In fact, the whole volume of Summer in Calcutta is replete with the images of sun in different contexts. The image is used as a symbol of lust and heat of passion in ' Convicts' as a destroyer of dreams, love and peace in ' The Testin of the Sirens' In spite of the fiery aspects of the sun, white colour is attributed to it, which ironically suggests peace in contrast to the restless spirit of the poet. The whiteness also absorbs symbolically the opposing feelings of sensuous delight and personal sorrow. The sun image in Kamala Das describes the different emotional situations she is at different occasions. Sometimes it is associated with pain and suffering and sometimes with loneliness, as in 'Punishment in Kindergarten' In 'Afterwards' the image is used to mean prosperity, hope and delivery from pain. The sunshine Cat ' presents a lonely deserted and victimized woman who finds a friend in the company of the sun. The male body and the burning sun are analogous in the poetic world of Kamal Das; both are imbued with the force of destruction. They annihilate the poet's self and the necessary human sapling and freshness in her woman's body. A relative image of the sun is fire which too is considered as an element of destruction, as in 'Forest Fire' and 'Wood Ash'

The third significant image in Kamala Das's poems is that of the sea; and because of recurrence it achieves symbolic status. If the sun image dominates summer in Calcutta, the sea image figures recurrently in The Descendents Kamal Das's second volume. It is as if tht journey from the torturing heat of the sun to the soothing effect of the sea, from fire to water. Sea imagery, as Davindra Kohli puts it,... Is part of Kamal Das's elemental symbolism, and is related both to her moods of anguish and release' (p 32) The famous poem ' Compositon' creates a beautiful picture of the sea as the wind's ceaseless whisper in a shell' She remembers her childhood when she lying beside her grandmother would hear the surf breaking on the shore'. The sea was only two miles away from the red house that has stood for innocence. It provides her a sense of uninvovement, when at present she is best with involvements, both of love and hate and of course, of life itself;

All I want now

*is to take a long walk
into the sea
and lie there, resting
completely uninvolved*

(The Best of Kamala Das p. 83-4)

In 'Suicide' the poet expresses her yearnings to release her soul from the prison of her body and both from the fever and fret of the world and throw them into the 'vortex of the sea' Kamala Das, in this poem, speaks out her mind and releases the burden of tensions before the sea, her friend;

*How easy your duties are.
How simple.
Only roar a hungry roar,
Leap forward,
And retreat.
You swing and you swing,
O sea, you play a child's game.
But,
I must pose.
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.
I must keep the right distance,
Between me and the love.
And I must keep the right distance,
Between me and the high.
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, just dead

Roaring a hungry roar, leaping forward and retreating are the visual-auditory images, portraying the audible movements of the sea. At the same time these images symbolize the love act. She identifies herself with the sea, which like a mother, is life giver and nourisher. Both the sea and the poet are generous, sentimental and so big floks. The se's duties are simple, in contrast to the poet's complicated ones, as she has to act the false of a happy woman or a contented wife.

The image of her ancestral house at Malaber house figure in many of Kamala Das's poems, with a sense of nostalgia for the lost childhood, peaceful past and tranquility of the rural surroundings. She took refuge in the house from emotional instability brought about by the indifferent attitude of her husband towards her. According to Davindra Kohli". Every returen to the house is a symbolic return to her 'matrilineal tradition'. The house , though cobwebbed and very old with its rafters shaking in the wind, gives a sense of security to the victimized poet;

There is a house now far away where once

I received love.....

How often I think of going

There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or

Just listen to the frozen air,

Or in wild despair, pick an armful of

Darkness to bring it here to lie

Behind my bedroom door like a brooding

Dog.....

Even the darkness at the house provides security to the poet in contrast to the artificial lights available at her husband's house in the city. The image of the 'brooding dog' presents a sense of safeguard against the 'thieving hands' of strangers andn scoffers. She begs for love at others doors, she has lost her way in search of an ideal lover. The image of the house is always

associated with the memory of the 'sweet frail great grandmother' and also with her grandmother.

Kamala Das experiences that love, in her life is a mechanical act of bodily union. She seems to be always in search of real identity and dignity of women. According to the poet love for a woman is much more than what it is for men; the difference in the experience of love for the two is well put by Kamala Das in 'An Introduction'

In him...the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me...the ocean's tireless

Waiting.

(The Best of Kamala Das p. 13)

Search for true love is the principal preoccupation of Kamala Das's poetry. Though her obsessive concern with physical love is quite prominent, yet she yearns for ideal love, which finally culminates in the Radha Krishna myth. There are several poems that deal with this divine image of love, and by using it as a symbol of the soul's quest and confluence with the divine, the poet reveals the fulfillment attained through uninhibited surrender. Sometimes a reference to Krishna myth is an attempt to escape from the pain she suffers in marital life, as she reveals in maggots in which she tries to transfer her experiences to Radha, who after the blissful love relation with Krishna, feels like being a corpse after her marriage. Kamala Das says;

I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who

Went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha

(My Story p. 153)

In parallel to her real life, there ran an imaginary life in which she thought Krishna as her husband and lover. The real life shattered her dreams that she had formed of her future husband;

My husband had wished to marry me only because of my social

Status and the possibility of financial gain....I wanted to be

given an identity that was lovable.

(My Story p. 84)

She says to Krishna:

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.

(The Best of Kamala Das p. 54)

In short, Kamala Das's devotion to Krishna has upheld her faith in true love, particularly at times of rejection in marital bond. It has provided her emotional stability which she had lost after her marriage. In An Apology to Goutama the poet draws a contrast between the ascetic and sensual, spiritual and physical, smile from Goutama and tears from her earthly lover. Yet, ironically it is the 'hurting arms' of her husband that hold her soul. There are a series of symbolical poems attributable to Krishna myth: Radha Krishna' Radha ' The Maggots' A Phantom Lotus' Sunset Blue Bird' ' The Blind Walk' and The Paper Moon'

III CONCLUSION

As a revolutionary writer Das always stands apart and has carved a niche of herself. She wants to live a life of flesh and blood and love a man who could also have same kind of passion for her as she has for him. This is not a crime and she argues on behalf of it strongly. She even changed her religion to find a sense of security. Her poetry has created a new kind of space in Indian English poetic tradition, especially from the point of view of her use of imagery, words and expressions. By writing through her body and about her body she has just challenged the conventional way of writing by Indian women writers. Kamala Das voices the voice of voiceless women by articulating the despair and longing of fellow women through a series of feminist imagery. The subject of her work comprises of woman and the revelation of female experiences, be it trauma of unhappy marriage, or the humiliation of a desire less surrender in sex, or disgust at the male domination.

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