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## Body and Beyond: A Feminist Reading of Kamala Das' *Love Poems*

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Kamala Das' obsessive search for true love got merged into her search for meaning and certitude in life. She frequently portrays the complex relationship between lust and love. In Das' poetry two aspects of love can be seen--- the real fulfilling love and the purely carnal or commercial love. She boldly confesses the futility and meaninglessness of physical love. Her own traumatic experiences in love and sex are described in her poetry. By ideal love she means the kind of relation that exists between legendary Radha and Krishna. She yearns for such a love which does not impede her impulse to freedom.

In the narcissistic phase, the lovers do not outgrow their egos which stand as hurdles preventing their merger. They are chained in self-admiration. But it is not a permanent phase as it undergoes mutations seeking total freedom. It is in the second phase of ideal love that the lovers transgress the boundaries of their egos or narrow selves to merge with each other, as such merger ensures total freedom.

Das' uncanny honesty extends to her exploration of womanhood and love. In a patriarchal world, where women are marginalized, she dared to speak frankly of her intense inner feelings and sexual matters which was unusual in an Indian context. While there is so much in her poetry which seems to draw from earlier Indian traditions, there are also various shades of physical love described in the confessional mode. This mode of expression suits her as she ventilates her personal experiences and humiliations and also the intensity of her experience. In conformity with the confessional tradition, she talks in poetic terms about her unpleasant sexual experiences. Inevitably her poems become autobiographical and this lends a kind of authenticity to her poems. In *My Story*, she says: "a poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality" (124).

Das' poems and prose writings reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman in a male-dominated society. She raises her vigorous voice against the male tyrannies and comes out as an ardent spokesperson for women's liberation. She writes poetry wielding it as a weapon to fight against an orthodox, conservative society. She has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and freedom. The tone of resentment and indignation in some of her poems certainly show her sense of justice against the ill-found social order. This also stresses the desirability and the need for the recognition of the claims and the rights of the Indian women in general. Thus Das may be rightly described as a forceful and vehement feminist.

Most of Das' poems articulate her strong desire to be liberated from the clutches of the male-dominated society. The woman persona in her poetry asserts an indomitable will and a spirit of revenge and gives a clarion call to the weaker sex to rise in revolt against all kinds of tyranny and repression being perpetrated on it. Das, the poet, is never

tired of speaking aloud for womankind as a whole and several of her poems and her autobiography, *My Story* can be seen as a voice of protest.

Silence and subordination has been shared experiences for colonial people in general and women in particular. It should be a matter of shame to all patriotic Indians that while we refer to our land as 'Mother India'- mothers, sisters, girls and all others falling in the same generic category are mere subordinates. We seem to believe in two creeds of humanity- the masculine and the non-masculine. The woman is seen as the 'other', the 'lesser', the 'subaltern' and the 'weaker' in contrast to the male who is in everyway 'superior'. In *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks:

India is a mother-by-hire.... The ideological construct 'India' is too deeply informed by the goddess-infested reverse sexism of the Hindu majority. As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother(dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave),she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self-representation permits. (96)

Das has a sensibility that is fiercely feminine and she is able to articulate wounded experiences undergone in this insensitive male-dominated world. In *A Widow's Lament* she sings:

This has always been  
Someone else's world not mine  
My man my sons forming the axis  
While I, wife and mother  
Climbed the glass panes of their eyes (125)

Male superiority can be viewed along with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, where the term 'politics' shall refer to "power-structured relationships arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23). Sex is the symbol of political power. A disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the relationships between the sexes, is that of dominance and subordination what goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged in our social order, is the birth right priority whereby males rule females. (25)

Das has the ability to delve deep into her consciousness and to create female images which are at once her own and of other women. She does not project a single personal experience in her writing that is also not a collective experience. As she uses her personal voice to speak on behalf of others, it results in the identification of her person with the persona in her writing. She frequently makes confession in her poems. She confesses a number of things, exclusively related to her own self- self as a woman with her strong feminine sensibilities, self as a person with powerful proclivities and antipathies, caprices and whim whams. She does not feel shy in exhibiting her frailties and virtues as a woman and her superior self as a mother and as an indifferent wife; her delicate and precarious position as a daughter and grand-daughter; her weakness as a enlightened companion to an enlightened husband and so on and so forth.

The emotional and sexual trauma Das experienced became the subject matter of her poems. In the initial stages she submits herself to sexual desires and carnal pleasures. In "Composition" she writes: "now here is a girl with vast/ sexual hungers/ a bitch after my own heart" (23). Marriage becomes a matter of disappointment to her, for in the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence. This failure to get love within the framework of marriage leads her to seek it outside wedlock. In "My Grandmother's House" she tells: "I who have lost/ my way beg now at strangers door to / receive love, at least in small change" (13). The main feature of her poetry is a constant attention to the urges of female sexual life, expressed in a language which is quite unusual. She speaks about the modern material fast life where love is only a physical craving. She seeks love with never ending passion. She is aware that this desire for each other cannot be called love but lust. In "Love" she speaks: "this skin-communicated/ thing that I dare not yet in/ his presence call our love" (12).

Das craves the total freedom that language can give to express herself fully in all her paradoxical and complex ramifications. Her revolt as a woman against the traditional concept of womanhood is well seen in her writings. She wrote about her own experience of frustration in love and drudgery in married life. She expresses in her love poems a dual relationship: a strong sense of belonging to one and uniting with another. She reveals the quest of a woman for love in general terms. This love is more physical. She explored love and its multiple aspects. It was actually an obsession with her to go around in search of ideal love. The situation is like what Iyengar said in *Indian Writing in English*: "under the Indian sun, although sensual lures irresistibly, yet it fails to satisfy; feeling and introspection but sounds the depths of oceanic frustration and the calm fulfillment eludes forever. Love is crucifixion in sex, and sex defiles itself again" (677)

Das' poems focus on the real fulfilling love and carnal love. The woman's voice that emerges from the two kinds of love amply clarifies that mere carnality is never sought after, nor it is fulfilling. Men may enjoy it but women may not; and in such a situation the woman merely feels being used at all. Das is shocked and humiliated, her womanhood is crushed by the hasty aggressiveness of the male. In "An Introduction" she writes:

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 wombs crushed me. I shrank  
Pitifully. (63)

Das seems to have accepted and absorbed experiences of different kinds of human relationships into her own psyche and further attempts to project them as her own. To quote Helene Cixous:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons,

by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into this text- as into the world and into history by her own movement. (The Laugh of the Medusa, 256)

Das speaks about the freedom of women, significance of having voice to her actions and emotions in a patriarchal society. In *Sexual Politics*, Millet speaks about the superior status of female. Perhaps patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity (58). Das is riddled with emotions at the plight of the Indian women in a patriarchal society. In India where rape, dowry death, female infanticide and various other forms of exploitations are everyday happening, and her female consciousness cries out vociferously seeking action.

Das, who was not only speaking but also trying to break the shackles of the age-old-tradition of treating women as sheer commodities. In a society which did not allow women to mention sex even among themselves, here was Das giving in her poems an uninhibited expression to the full range of female experience. She was talking of love, lust, sex; of body and its hungers—something which was bound to shock her society. Writing for her became the best way of attacking hypocritical society. She wanted liberation from the stifling social reality which doomed women's liberation from the past, i.e. liberation from the age-old tradition of silence on women's part. She aimed at dismantling the past ruthlessly, to build up a new world based on justice and equality between the two sexes and not on sexual politics—a world in which the space possible to men are possible to women too, a world in which it was the individual potential of men and women and not their sex that would determine their possibilities. The kind of revolt against the power-imbalance that she was trying to voice in her writings, during the times when feminism had not yet made sufficient inroads in the consciousness-raising among men and women, was bound to shock the Indian society.

The subject in Das' poems is always "woman" and female experiences whether it is the trauma of an unhappy marriage, or humiliation of a desireless surrender in sex, or disgust on the male domination. This should not be taken as a single woman's experience in which case it becomes a stray incident of individual misfortune. In fact, she clearly hints at the archetypal nature of her experience, that she says in "An Introduction": "I am every woman who seeks love" (63). In many of her poems we find the woman trying different ways to get out of the emotional snares, and institutional traps by dismantling the rigid features of patriarchal hegemony. She fondly recalled the days of innocence bliss and untained happiness that she spent in her childhood home at Nalapat where her grandmother was the presiding deity. The figure of the great grandmother symbolizes maternity love and selfless affection. Here again, Das is touching upon another important trope in feminist writing- the mother-daughter relationship. Her longing to return to the caring shelter of her grandmother echoes the sentiments expressed by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, "to return to one's mother, to reposses her and be repossessed by her" (48) This infact, is an attempt to relocate a new centre in the physical bonding of mother and daughter, changing the lines of filiation from father to mother. Family system is a social organization which is built on the harmonial existence of the members of the family. Each member of the family is a strong individual who functions as an important

part of the family. Family is the ultimate galvanizing unit of society. Mother is the centre of the family around which the family functions.

There is an apparent paradox in women's life. Men need her, love her, worship her and write about her but they do so in relation to their own selves. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf speaks:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband .(41)

In Das' poems the human body, in its various shapes and shades, is a prominent symbol. The body's expressions are linked up with the poet's exploration of love and lust. Her obsessive search for true love has often ended in despair because the flow of true love is always hindered by the intervention of the body. She seems to think that the soul represents true love and body represents lust. However she has been an admirer of physical beauty when it is kept free from vulgarity. She is aware of the beauty and ugliness of the human body and treats it as a symbol of disgust when lust fills it. The body is subjected to lust, disease, pain and finally death. Physical love is just one aspect of love, love involves emotional attachment, a spiritual union that transcends the carnal.

Love, in Das' poems, is distinctly severed from lust. Love is rooted in the soul and is an ennobling experience while lust is associated with body and is an abominable and obnoxious experience. In her search for love, Das does not deny the body. She yearns for a love that at once satisfies the body and caters to the need of the soul. Her obsession with the body is functional in lending a feminine flavour to her style, consistent with the objectives of feminist poetics; Das' sustained endeavour is to transcend the body. Das is a poet of love. She upholds the sanctity of marital relationship. But she is disheartened when marital love degenerates into lust, when marital relationship turns into one of domination and subordination. Her poems are the fierce expression of her emotions caused by frustration when love turns into its opposite solely because of male insensitivity and self-centredness. Frustration is bound to burst out, in the poem "The Bangles":

..... At night,  
In sleep, the woman lashes  
At pillow with bangled arms; in  
Vain. She begs bad dreams to fade.  
The man switches on the light and  
Looks into her face with his  
Grey, pitiless eyes..(35)

The expression 'bangled arms' is a symbolic representation of a married woman. Her action of striking the pillows is a gesture of immense frustration. Man's reaction is one of

cruel indifference. Subhas C.Saha brilliantly explains the action of the woman, in his Modern Indo-Anglian Love Poetry:

Bangles symbolize the marriage of happiness and life; they indicate the acceptance of the charms of life. But when the beloved regards love as the purest source of highest happiness and finds herself deprived of that source, she strengthens her frustration by breaking into pieces the symbol of acceptance, the jingling colourful bangles. Life is no longer pillowed upon happiness; for it has lost the support on which it could sustain itself (20)

In the poems of Das, frustration in love results in death-wish. But, to trace the death-wish to neurotic expressions of a personal psyche is to ignore, as Annette Kolodny says in *Modern Literary Theory*: “the possibility that the worlds they [victims of patriarchy] inhabit may in fact be real, or true, and for them the only worlds available, and further, to deny the possibility that their apparently ‘odd’ or unusual responses, may in fact be justifiable or even necessary” (152). If lust produces frustration in the woman subjected to it, it produces cruelty in the man who practices it. Lust kills the body as well as the soul. For Das ideal love is a fulfilling experience attained through sex, but beyond its constrictive dimensions. It is a tension that envelops the body, the mind and the soul. When love is limited to physical pleasure it becomes lust and the lovers are deprived of the ultimate bliss which is a part of every happy man-woman relationship. In Das’ poems there is an untiring search for a perfect man and each encounter with that man, may be her husband or a lover, is an experiment in discovering the meaning of true love. Her poems present an oriental dialectics of body and soul. She aims at a sexual as well as a spiritual fulfillment in love. Her quest for such a love is fostered by a sense of alienation that lies deep in her consciousness.

The continuous encounter with physical decay forces Das to look beyond death into a state of spirituality. She believes that by confessing, by peeling off her layers, she reaches closer to the soul. Bodily love cannot satisfy this yearning. “Anamalai Poems” attain special significance from this point of view, it is here that Das fully articulates her faith in a love beyond flesh:

There is a love greater than all you know  
that awaits you where the road finally ends  
its patience proverbial; not for it  
the random caress or the lust  
that ends in languor. (111)

It embraces truth; it takes you across death to another womb that convulses to welcome your restructured perfection. Das’ whole oeuvre thus becomes a declaration of the greatness of love that even while being expressed through the body also transcends the body.

Primarily Das’ poems are sensual but later she discovers that after all the pleasure body offers are of cloying and ephemeral in nature. A love which flourishes and thrives

on body is bound to wither with it and the search for true love in a world of philanderers is a futile exercise, so she turns to the mythical world of Krishna and Vrindavan to seek ever lasting love. She imagines herself as Radha and finds comfort in the arms of an imaginary Krishna. It is this framework for love fulfillment that supports her from the charges of obscenity and promiscuity, otherwise her poems are replete with shocking unorthodox details of love, marriage and sex. In her works the element of bhakti is almost absent. Her relation with Krishna is purely human. In *My Story*, she records her yearning thus: "I was looking for an ideal lover, I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha" (47). Thus the poet lives simultaneously in two worlds, the actual world where love usually is a synonym for lust, in Das' words "skin-communicated love" and the mythical world of Vrindavan. Utterly disgusted with the mundane lust, she turns to the transcendental love of Radha and Krishna. She does not present Krishna as a God, he is rather her friend/lover/husband. She admires and adores Krishna and her interest in the mythic lover grows stronger. In *Sex: Mindless Surrender or Humming Fiesta*, she says:

but illogical that I am from birth onwards. I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child I used to regard him as my only friend. When I became an adult, I thought of him as my lover... now in middle age, having no more desire unfulfilled I think of Krishna as my friend, like me grown wiser with years, a house-holder and a patriarch. And illogically again, I believe that in death I might come face to face with him. (19)

The gloss of divinity that enfolds the Radha-Krishna myth is shed in Das' poems. As Fritz Blackwell, in *Krishna Motifs in the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das* puts it : "...her [Kamala Das] concerns is literary and existential, not religious; she is using a religious concept for a literary motif and metaphor" (4). In fact, the bliss of the mythical relation is contrasted to the frustration of a mundane loveless relation and the eternal lover is contrasted to the earthly lover. In the poem "A Man is a Season" she contrasts between the two lovers: "A man is a season, / you are eternity". (66). The fact that, the several relationships of the poetic persona with earthly lovers are mere stepping-stones to the eternal union is made clear by Das in *My Story*. "Physical integrity must carry with it a certain pride that is a burden to the soul. Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change" (146). She is pricked up by an inner urge to rise above the mere earthly and give vent to her mystical longing on purity and nobility. She has undoubtedly a soul within her body and she can't ignore its call completely. Being fed up with the physical and the carnal love, the poet takes resort to the Radha-Krishna model of love. In "Radha-Krishna" she muses:

This becomes from this hour  
Our river and this old Kadamba  
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless  
Soul to return someday  
To hang like bats from it's pure  
Physicality. (36)



In the poem “Radha”, Das poignantly describes the union of the finite and the infinite: Dissolution of the individual self and the total identification is possible only with her mythical lover. This is illustrated by the poem “Radha” where she somewhat sentimentally depicts the ecstasy Radha experiences in Krishna’s embrace.

The long waiting  
Had made their bond so chaste,  
And all the doubting  
And the reasoning  
So that in the first true embrace.  
She was girl  
And virgin crying  
Everything in me  
Is melting, even the hardness at core  
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting,  
Nothing remains but  
You. (23)

The repetition of the word ‘melting’ suggests the gradual dissolving of the finite into the infinite, the ‘atman’ uniting with the ‘Brahman’. As a result of this merger, the finite ‘me’ loses her individual existence and becomes a part of the infinite ‘You’. She enjoys a blissful co-existence with the infinite. The joy of such a union cannot be hindered by the advances of the earthly lover who only touches the body, the soul of the persona being safely couched with the eternal lover. Radha is contemptuous of her husband who only wants the warmth of her body. The poem “Maggots” embodies Radha’s experience with her husband which is analogous to the predicaments of the poet. Radha does not experience rapture in the arms of her husband, but remains as a corpse and an indifferent wife.

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna  
Loved her for the last time and left...  
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? (22)

Thus Krishna has a therapeutic role to play in the poet’s life. Her thoughts about him give her relief from the asphyxiating male chauvinism.

The identification of truth with love constitutes Das’ imperishable faith. Everything else is perishable, illusionary and therefore not hers to give, yet her charity is in search of a recipient for Krishna no longer has a body to offer. The purpose of the idol is only to provide an object to love. It is not the idol itself nor the material with which it is made that is important, but the adoration offered to it, for this is only another way of knowing the Lord. Every form of human love then, is an embodiment of the Divine,

though the experience very often does not realize this, and attributes feelings to the objects of desire.

Das glorifies a love that transcends the dimensions of the body and looks beyond the chilling flesh. But the barriers of the body cannot be disregarded, it needs to be conquered with great pains. Her search for such a transcendental love has often been misread and misinterpreted. The glory of her quest lies in the fact that it is unfinished, she breaks new grounds. She presents the Radha-Krishna myth in an innovative manner. She makes a hectic search for true love in her poetry, and her personal predicament gets reflected in it. Further she can experience absolute liberty from the rigid social code and the constraints of super ego in the presence of Krishna. The haunting image of Krishna becomes inseparable. Her love goes beyond lust, passion, desire and sex to a greater spiritual level a transformation from a transient world to eternity.

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