

# Human Relations in the Writings of Kamala Das

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English is an all-India language for all the educated people who often come from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. India has become one of the largest English book-producing countries after the United States and the United Kingdom and the largest number of books is published in English.

Indian English poets have contributed a lot in the history of the English literature by their style of expression. In English, Nissim Ezekiel, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das and many others have glorified the tradition of Indian English literature. Toru Dutt's poems are essentially romantic in treatment of themes and lyrics. Rabindranath Tagore's poetry expresses nature and life around him. He exposed himself to the world of English Romantic Poets and Indian devotional poets. His poem Gitanjali won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Sarojini Naidu started writing verse at an early age, her poems are intensely emotional and deeply influenced by the British romantic poets and she is solidly rooted in the Indian

tradition and culture. Nissim Ezekiel is a modern poet in the true sense of the word and is deeply influenced. Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt and few other pioneers of this genre, were struggling to come out of the influence of English. But, the group of poets, who are dominating the scene since last two decades, do not suffer from any English influence. For Daruwalla,

“Writing a poem is like a clot going out of blood”<sup>1</sup>

Kamala Das poems are intensely personal and highly subjective. Kamala Das was born at Punnayvarkulam in Malabar in 1934. Kamala Das, a popular, a contemporary Indian poet. She started writing poetry at the very young age through the influence of her great Nallapa Narayana Menon, a prominent writer. She was noted for her many Malayalam short stories as well as many poems written in English. She wrote on love, betrayal, aestheticism for an independence of mind etc. She is considered as one of the outstanding Indian poets writing in English, although her popularity in Kerala

is based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography. Much of her writing in Malayalam came under the penname Madhavikutty. Kamala Das is probably the first Hindu Woman to openly and honestly talk about sexual desires of Indian woman, which gives her an identity of her generation. Her father had a fancy for English language and sent her to a prestigious missionary school. She spent her childhood in Calcutta where her father employed. Though, she did not like the English environment, she emotionally responded to English language.

Her early marriage with Madhava Das, her three children and their shifting from Kerala to Bombay proved a major turn which affected her life. She is a bilingual poet like many other Indian poets. She writes in Malayalam, her mother tongue. She was given the poetry award of The Asian Pen Anthology in 1964 and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for her story "Thanupu" in Malayalam. Kamala Das impresses by very much being herself in her poems, with her distinct feminine tone. The poem unwittingly reminds the critic about the "confessional poetry" of America. Confessional poetry is a new branch of modern poetry. These confessional poems are intensely personal, highly subjective. There is no 'persona' in the poem. 'I' in the poem is the poet and nobody else. The

aesthetic distance, to borrow Eliot's phrase, "between the man who suffers and the mind which creates, " is sacrificed for the sake of authenticity. The themes are nakedly embarrassing and focus too exclusively upon the pain, anguish and ugliness of life at the expense of its pleasure and beauty. In a biographical note written in 1969, Kamala Das falters:

"Born in 1934. Education nothing to speak of. Married to Madhava Das', with three sons. I write short stories in Malayalam. Health poor. I can't think of anything else to say about myself."2

Ten years is a long way and she has emerged more a confident poet along with her confessional label which has become brighter.

"Really what keeps us apart?

At the end of years is unshared

Childhood. You cannot, for instance.

(Love poem for a wife) Ramanujan

Childhood is a fascinating experience for one and all, more so for a poet, as his/her experience as a child is responsible for the later developments in life. Experiences at this stage are raw, emotional, and inarticulate often expressed through gestures and sounds. But, the same experience takes larger meanings after a few years, when they are viewed objectively. Ruminating over the past

events, putting the clock back, imagining with intensity and expressing them through a language which is provocative and beautiful; suggestive and intriguing; this nostalgia for childhood is one of the characteristic qualities of confessional poetry. The profile of the baby as 'pure', happy and carefree child without tensions or problems is pervasively found in their poems. This strain of nostalgia, Critics feel, is inevitable as they look at the future as uncertain which does not augur much hope, the present is full of tensions and contradictions which seems unresolved; as such the poets are tempted, sometimes forced to look back on their past for recapturing happier moments.

So, her first book of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* was a breath of fresh air in Indian English Poetry. It is one of her most well-known works. She writes in her usual frank open-mindedness about married life or man. Regarding the actual process of writing process she expresses:

"When you write poetry, you are free of country, religion, relatives everything. No nationality, no family."<sup>3</sup>

Kamala Das early marriage with a man much older to her creates an aversion. She searches for love only in her dreams as:

"Why do I so often dream?  
Of a house, where each silent  
Corridor leads me to warm

Yellow rooms-

.....

They love..... And once awake, I  
See the bed from which my love  
Has fled, the empty room, the  
Naked walls, count on fingers  
My very few friends.... "4

She writes about her married life or man-woman relationship in many of her poems. She frequently complains about man's callousness and woman's suffering on that count. In *Das' eyes*, the sufferings of the woman are very old. She frames the pains with ancient Hindu myths. As discussed about Radha and Krishna, on their last night, Krishna asks Radha if she is disturbed by his kisses. Radha says, "No, not at all, but thought, what is it to the corpse if the maggots nip?". Radha's pain is silent and Das expresses that the ordinary woman will have the similar feelings:

"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?"<sup>5</sup>

In the emotional approach of Kamala Das, historical connotations do not find a place.

Mythical imagery like “Radha” suits her theme. She universalises her theme when she says:

“Vrindavan lies on in every woman’s mind,

And the flute, herring her

From home and her husband

Who later asks her of the long scratch?”

Kamala Das struggles to identify herself with Radha. She is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman’s ambivalence, giving expressions to it more nakedly and as a thing in itself than any other Indian poet. Writing about her work, Linda Hess remarked:

“There is major weakness in Mrs Das’s book. These can be characterized as a general carelessness in composition, a looseness typified by the alarming number of ellipses, three lazy dots thrown in at the end of middle of a line and seeming to say, this matter could be elaborated much further, but I lack either the wit or the energy to do it”<sup>6</sup>

Das presents her grandmother as an ideal who gave her the tenderness and warmth. She yearns for her grandmother as:

“Eighteen years have passed since grandmother’s death:

I wonder why the ache still persists...”<sup>7</sup>

There is an air of unconventionality about Das’ writing and confronted by the frank manner in which she articulates the theme of sex and love. In fact, the celebration of

the body is one of the main features of Das’ poetry as we can feel in the following lines:

“I swam about and floated

And dived into the cold and green

I lay speckled green and gold

In all the hours of the sun.”

(“Suicide” soul ...87)

Childhood, however fascinating, is quite short-lived. The child is anxious to grow up and identify itself with the grownups. This anxiety sometimes makes the process hasty. When the child is exposed to various experiences, it becomes a precocious child. At the adolescent stage, the struggle to come out of their fast clinging innocent image, at the same time, failing to merge with the older group, leads to frustration. Love towards their parents and others take a new turn. The tender love of the child changes into emotional love of a different dimension. Life seems to be more colourful to their youthful eyes and their physique starts craving for new experience. The word “love” brings different connotations. Love as a theme has not escaped poets. The passionate love is the powerful theme of all good/great poetries. A woman plays a major role in the game of love. She is more emotional and sentimental about love than her counterpart. She forgets her identity and completely merges with her lover. She gets

a jolt of her life when her tender world, which existed in her imagination, gets shattered. Failure in love as a theme is more powerful in the poems of confessional poets, than its consummation. In fact, the whole volume of Kamala Das's poetry revolves round this theme, either directly or indirectly. Her shocking confession is about this theme has started equally the critics and the laymen. It was more shocking because it comes from a traditional, Indian woman. She started seeking love and sexual experience when she was an adolescent. Devendra Kohli comments:

“Almost, all the critics of Kamala Das have been quick notice that part of the strength of poetry emanates from her powerful personality. But, while the vigour of her personality seems to operate rather transparently, and on the surface as it were, it does not detract from the complexity of the woman's ambivalence which is the core of her recurrent theme of the certitude and the precariousness of sexual love”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout her poetry she shows a longing for an emotionally stable life, which can be achieved only through true love and expressed in the following lines:

“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. “ (“suicide”)  
Kamala Das is the first Hindu woman to write honestly about sexual feelings and love, yet the only significant love affair of her life, the inspiration of the poetry for which she was shortlisted. She gives the mutual respect to love. “The Anamalai poems” shows the circumstances of the woman in the society. It remains as a record of the poet's obsessive celebration of the self. In the poem the hills are described as occupying a space outside time with neither “clocks” nor “cocks” to crow in the morning. There is a clear indiction of the landscape which ends in the poem as  
The mountain  
seems deaf-mute, but, the flesh of her spirit is but its flesh,  
and, her silence, despite the tumult in her blood,  
its destined hush  
(only the soul knows 47)

The mumbling words of physical love and divine love is woven with Radha and Krishna as well as fear of loneliness, insecurity and the longing for the true love is expressed as well. It is the essence of vedas through the cute that forms the Hindu philosophy. Whereas in Geeta the Arjuna to Krishna shows the philosophical love. Das search for genuine love which would mean impenetrable security now

makes her for the soul quest with the divine in a deeper level. Das concludes that every form of an human love is an embodiment of the divine. Das's ideas speak the soul's necessity to go through the cycle of rebirths and of that personal love for god where the soul loves to rest. Her poetic diction is lyrical and musical. Simplicity is her language. Das poetic usage of the word melting heightens radha's suffering in love as

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting  
nothing remains but you (soul 136)

It expresses a maturity in the thoughts but a resignation and compromise with the sorrow of the world and the life. Das expresses the marital relationships in our country as

"A man is given a girl and asked to beget children through her. What is needed is the understanding of the hearts. Society is happy with perfect couples masquerading perfect partners. It doesn't if they violently fight violently at night. I hate the superficiality that exists in society. Also she advises

Husbands and wives  
here is my advice to you,  
obey each other's crazy commands,  
ignore the same.

Turn your home into a merry dog-house.

Kamala das explores the theme of ageing & isolation through the narration in the

poem of her mother while driving from her parent's home to cochin, she notices her mother sitting beside with a pale face, like the winter moon. This reminds her painfully that her mother is old. She feels that familiar pain and childhood fear of the thought of losing her mother and of being lonely just as she had been when she was young because she was different from other children and expressed in the following lines as

"As a late winter's moon and felt  
that old

Familiar ache, my childhood's fear,  
But all I said was see you soon,  
Amma..."

Unlike most of the other Indian English poets, Kamala received no academic education or training in poetry writing. Her writings do not exhibit any particular influence but are original in their content and style. She believes that

"True literature can originate only  
from tragedies and sorrows of life"

And says that her bitter experiences in marriage and struggle to maintain a family life. Kamala Das also invokes Krishna in her explorations of the tensions between physical love and spiritual transcendence. The Anamalai Poems (1985) a series of short poems written after Das was defeated in the 1984 Parliamentary elections. Also under the name MadhaviKutty, Das has published many books in the Malayalam

language. She was short-listed for the Nobel-Prize in literature in 1984, along with Dorris Lessling, Yourcener and Nadine Gordimer. She has been honoured with a number of prestigious awards for her contributions towards the improvement of human life. Also she was the poetry editor of the illustrated weekly of India, which was once the best-known English magazine in India. Her writing shows simplicity and an enduring mood of passionate love. She takes the reader to the world of physical caresses and emotional attachments.

The search for ideal love is continued throughout her poetry. Her concept of love takes a new turn very often. In the poem “love” she says:

“Until I found you,  
I wrote verse, drew pictures,  
And, went out with friends  
For walks...  
Now that I love you,  
Curled like an old mongrel  
My life lies, content,  
In you....

(From Summer in Calcutta)

She was sick of love which was just skin-deep. With her strong aversion to “lust”.

Kamala Das originated a vigorous and poignant feminine confessional poetry in which a common theme is the exploration of the man-woman relationship. Kamala

Das poetry is predominantly confessional. Kamala Das has an edge over the other Indian women. She belongs to the matriarchal society of Kerala where the women were much liberated. Their domination is accepted and it is the mother who is the head of the family and the daughter who inherits the property. Her husband, Madhava Das has played a passive role, as far as her creativity is concerned. He has allowed her to voice her despair in love and other things.

But, the critics of Kamala Das often feel that she is pretending a double game and dub her emotions as mere exhibitionism. The vibration of despair is more shocking than surprising. They feel so because it is unusual in the Indian content for a woman to confess such things aloud, without any inhibitions. Her sincerity and straight forwardness, expressed artistically in many of her poems, speak for themselves. It appears that her poems lack an intellectual penetration or abstraction, perhaps this seeming superflousness adds to their charm.

I am enclosing this on an optimistic note with a hope that many more women will join this crusade of liberating themselves. Their protest is a beautiful and musical protest. They march on wielding their mighty pen. Hope they reach their goal before they loose their complete

feminism.. Now, the woman writers have moved away from traditional portrayals and female characters from 1980 onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. The writers depict both the diversity of the woman and the diversity within each woman rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal.

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