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Inertia of Places: Life and Works of Kamala Das

Madhu Verma, Assistant Professor, University Institute of Technology, Bhopal INDIA Corresponding

Article received: 12/01/2022, Article Accepted: 06/02/2022, Article Published: 08/02/2022, DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.47311/IJOES.2022.4204>

Abstract:

Kamala Das in her works decisively set up herself as a longing female searching for love submersed with unwanted physical relationships but as also having the infinite yearning for a separate individuality in a world that hardly ever understands her. At the same time she suggests that the ultimate succor is in spirituality and accepting the God as an ideal lover. The present paper deals with charting of Das's progression from a little child to a married women and mother, from her ancestral house in Nalapat to the Metro towns, from physicality to spirituality - rally towards quenching a never-ending thirst for inner and eternal satisfaction. While her life continuous, she rejects the pretense and repudiates to accept the limitations of her physical self and realizes the concrete surroundings be it sea shores, cemetery, circus or forests - thus inertia of places.

Keywords: Inertia, Confessional, Individuality, Physicality, Unorthodox, Female, Poet, Indian, places

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das a.k.a. Madhavikutty (her maiden name) was born and raised in Malabar where she received her education, for the most part, at home In the Southern Malabar in Kerala, her grandmother, Nayar father and Nalapat mother used to live joyfully beside the fathomless sea at Nalapat House- her ancestral home. When she turned Fifteen, Kamala was married to Mr. Das, an official in the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay. Her husband had neither comforting words nor time to spare for her and his contact with his wife was usually brutal and vicious. He also often showed off to have enjoyed intimacy of low caste women, while as a traditional wife, she was anticipated to look to his needs and comforts. This

impelled her to open into vengeance towards him by offering herself to any resourceful man who came across her and 'dwarfed' her forever as she makes clear in her poem.

DISCUSSION

Indo-Anglian poets had swayed from the themes from colonial past to more discreet ones when Kamala Das's first collection of poems 'Summer in Calcutta' came out and made her shine high and large over the poetic sphere of modern India. It had fifty poems mainly written in the heat of Kamala Das's Calcutta experiences. Kamala Das has lived long in such metropolitan cities as Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. She has written a lot about them in 'My Story'. Kamala Das speaks some of the situations from which these poems gradually emerged. "It was from Calcutta that I lost my faith in the essential goodness of human beings". She confesses that she feared Calcutta and longed to escape from it. It is an Indian poet's creative reaction to the torture of the Indian summer.

The lines 'I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one' are from An Introduction by Kamala Das. In these lines the poetess celebrates her rich Indian culture and heritage. She says that she is 'very brown' which shows that she is a native Indian from Malabar.

The poem A Hot Noon in Malabar, is taken from the collection of poems titled 'Summer in Calcutta' (1965). It deals with Kamala Das's happy childhood spent in her grandmother's house in Malabar. It is full of pathos which shows Kamala Das's loss of happy and peaceful days of childhood which she spent in the loving and caring company of her grandmother. The poetess longs for the hot noon in Malabar which was full of life as compared to her torturing experience of noon in a big city where she settled after her marriage.

The poem, 'My Grandmother's House', shows Kamala Das's intense love and attachment to it. She suffers from an acute sense of alienation after having left this place

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after her marriage .The poet now lives in a big city after her marriage, a remote place from her grandmother's house, the only place where she received love from her grandmother. The death of the grandmother is even mourned by the house to which she was emotionally attached.

Punishment in Kindergarten is a little autobiographical poem written when Kamala Das recalls one of her childhood experiences- a picnic. All the children were playing and making merry yet she alone kept away. Their teacher scolded her, saying:

Why don't you join the others, what A peculiar child you are!

She became sad and weeps at the words of the teacher and laughter made by children. This was indeed an aching incident for a little child of kindergarten. After many years, an adult, she has only a faint memory of the teacher and smiling faces of the children and claims to have schooled an 'adult peace' and joy in her present state and no more be troubled with sour kindergarten experience.

Even as a child, Kamala Das experienced the bitterness of sexism: Her parents considered her a burden and compelled her to become a premature wife and mother. She was married to a relative when she was only a school girl. She complains about it in her poem Of Calcutta:

I was sent away, to protect a family's Honor, to save a few cowards, to defend Some...

Abstractions, sent to another city to be A relative's wife...

Moreover, the transformation of a wife into the contemptible canine status of a house wife has artistically been portrayed in this poem: There is a total fusion of place, thought, expression, rhythm and meaning in her verses and the words create a symbiosis.

Here in my husband's house, I am a trained circus dog
Jumping my routine hoops each day...

The title of the poem The Old Playhouse constitutes its central image and the speaker finally discovers that love-making has made her mind an old playhouse with all its lights put out. It is like a deserted old playhouse having no life of its own, non-functional and static due to the disastrous physical-cum-mental strains. She has also lost all her value as a woman in this life of confinement and suffocation. The poet's mind is in a state of inertia and

filled with impassable darkness like the deserted old playhouse.

The Sea Shore opens with the imagery of the cremation ground and the still burning funeral pyre. This probably suggests the death of love between the poet and the husband. However, a little flame of hope burns in her:

.... How often I wish, while you rest
In my arms that I could give you time, that this great, All
enveloping a thing I offer you, calling
It meekly, love, can take us to worlds where life is
Evergreen...

The Sea Shore also deals with the non-fulfillment of the cherished love.

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

Krishna had loved Radha that evening on the river bank. for the last time, a sensual one- time act by a lover to his beloved before parting forever.

The Looking Glass is one of the eminent poems by Kamala Das which shows that women should not pander to self-discovery but should not feel hesitate for expressing her sexual requirements in physical terms. A women must be suggestive also about how to get the maximum possible pleasure out of the sexual act following the lover even to the bathroom.

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 jerky way he Urinates. All the fond details
that make
Him male and your only man...

In Ghanshyam, poet affirms that Ghanshyam (Lord Krishna) is her ideal lover who occupies her heart and all her lovers are the shadows of her real lover, God. She is also in intense love with Nature which is another name of God Krishna:

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

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The poet also rejects lust in one of her poems called The Prisoner, as mortal and insignificant. A fine comparison has been done between prisoner and the woman involved in the sexual act.

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 poem also has spiritual meaning that soul is trapped in the physical boundaries. After sometime, the soul longs to leave the physical boundary and become free.

Kamala Das realizes the difference between perishable and the imperishable. Trapped in the bitter relationship with an insensitive male, the poet escapes from the material world to divinely spiritual world and finds the ultimate solace. In one of her most controlled poems Request, she writes:

What life was worth on this earth. What love was worth in the end.

Often her language is a sophisticated form of everyday speech lifted to the point where the facile distinction between poetry and prose eliminates. There is poetry and simplicity in lines such as:

I know the rats are running now Across the darkened halls
They do not fear the dead

I know the white ants have reached my home And have raised on walls

Strange totems of burial...

The tone of every day speech combined with the hidden lyricism of poetry is discernible even in poems of longer lines:

Today I shall weave white flowers into my baby - son's hair

For the guests are coming up the stairs Talking of war, bloodshed and despair

The poet is conscious of the inadequacy of words, their waning power. She suspects that her words have lost vigor after prolonged and arduous use. Kamala Das also makes use of metaphor in her verse in a noticeable manner. The short poetic piece, Annette, offers us the following lines:

Annette,

At the dresser.

Pale fingers over mirror - fields Reaping

That wheat brown hair.

In her poetry rhythm establishes the concord between meaning and feeling. The regulated pauses and falls contrived instinctively by the poet demarcate the several shades in the structure of meaning and feeling.

I looked once at the house. And then again and again

For I thought I saw the windows close

Like the closing of the eyes

I thought I heard the pillars groan And the dark rooms heave a sigh...

Kamala Das does not use any exotic imagery or symbols. She has drawn them from everyday circumstances and their flavour is purely Indian. In her poetry, imagery reinforces the sentiment and several of her images are expressive of her inner turbulence. It appears in Summer of Calcutta:

... I am a trained circus dog Jumping my routine hoops each day.

In The Moon the unchanging moon is identified as the circus dog:

... It is a trained circus dog That shall never miss its hoop.

In the another section the poet visualizes the stages of her woman-body's gradual decay, first as a 'fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue', then a patient on the hospital bed, and finally a grandmother with one foot in the grave:

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue

The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must Roll across the road. I shall be the patient

On the hospital bed, lying in drugged slumber And dreaming of home...

The hospital imagery that follows reinforces this contrast:

.....And

Of ward-boys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors To the X-ray room's dark interior

However, she really missed the love which she had originally aimed at in performing the sexual act, beginning with her husband. It seemed to her that only her father had given her the love for which she had always hungered:

With a cheap toy's indifference I enter other's Lives, and Make of every trap of lust A temporary home...

Nani begins with a direct, plain statement that, nevertheless, haunts the reader:

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Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself In the privy one day....

In The Music Party the first four liners composed of associative words at once hit at the cold attitude of the lover.

Music in front.

A pale Girl in pink, beside the Harmonium. Behind Me, your stillness ...

In 'The Music Party' there is also a contrast between the temptations of the senses and the undying instinct of the self to withdraw inwards. The sound of music in front represents sense of reality and the desire to be sucked in by the whisper of the lover from behind represents the urge towards spiritual fulfillment. The lover's whisper is the divine intimation. The poet is, however, frustrated by her incapacity to look back.

Kamala Das's Padmavati - the Harlot & Other Stories, first published in 1992, is a trespass into the rooms and mohallas and hospital wards from where one might stare unabashedly at these lives, or more specifically, watch their unraveling.

Delhi 1984 deals the terrorist violence unleashed on the innocent Sikhs in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Smoke in Colombo is the denunciation of the genocide of Tamils commuted by the dominant non-Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit presents death-like atmosphere, patient waiting for execution and half-grown nightmares.

In Cat in the Gutter the poet describes how lust makes her feel like only "a high-bred kitten rolling for fun in the gutter".

In another poem Vrindavan, she expresses her opinion boldly:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind and the flute luring her from home and her husband...

CONCLUSION

Kamala Das concerns herself with the various facets of love in gradual progress of her life her writings witness a gradual change as well her poetry. Her love poetry can be divided into three various phases where the first phase - her fascination is with physical love, later phase her

penchant is towards the emotional and true love where she requests security in relationship and in final part she is aloft towards the timeless and infinite love. The poetic journey of Kamala Das is from childhood to adulthood, physicality to frustration, from physical to ideal love, from materialism to spiritualism and from human to divine. Similarly there are places where Kamala moves in reality or her fancy and establishes each spot has a story to tell while she moves around. Kamala Das is bound by inertia of the places in all her verses.

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