

(Re)defining Womanhood: Decoding ‘Quest for Love’ in the Verse of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Womanhood explores the multifaceted notion that encompasses the biological, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of being a woman. The exploration of womanhood in Kamala Das’ verse employs an authentic tone by fixating an ‘I’ which lends her poems an intrapersonal connect. This research seeks to redefine the quest for love by the woman in the poetic world of Kamala Das. Rather than applying a theoretical abstraction to the selected poems, the study focuses on the textual intricacies wherein her diction, symbolism and narrative voice is considered to understand the nuances of womanhood and its association with love, sexual desires and longing. The initial section of the paper deals with the constrained portrayal of woman wherein their desires within the framework of marriage remain unfulfilled due to patriarchy. Wherein, the latter part builds upon the escape from the unfulfilled desires and the extra-marital affairs, which then delineates towards how a woman should be. In these verses, Kamala Das’ woman strives for an ideal companion and lover. They talk about the process where the speaker seeks emotional fulfilment and a sense of self through a deeply personal and intimate relationship with the male soul. Through this study, the researcher seeks to reimagine Das’ women and their womanhood not as a fixed role but as an emotionally rich experience where there is ample space for female desires.

Keywords: Womanhood, Quest for Love, Female Desire, Patriarchy, Identity, Marriage

Introduction

Kamala Das is considered as an epitome of Indian feminism, as her works capture the element of the expected pleasure and the ongoing sufferings of women in postcolonial India. The expression of adulterous love, longing, eroticism, desire, identity, nostalgia and freedom attributes towards the novelty of her literature.

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These themes found justice under her pen. To understand Das' literary expressions, one needs to keep her work and biography parallel to each other. During an interview with Shobha Warriar (The Rediff Interview), Das admits that her biography "My Story" has fictional parts, but they were not mere fantasies. Shobha is not so astonished to know that Das did not acquire her personal table for writing, to which Das compares herself to the middle-class women:

I was talking about myself, of course. There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing. That was my work area.

Work areas normally would remind you of the grinding stone, or the mixer or something, but in my case, it was the typewriter and plenty of paper. Then I would sit there for hours and hours while the house was asleep because nights became my domain. I could find freedom only at night when I could ignore my family and become an independent person. I felt like myself only in the quiet hours of the night. (Warriar)

These peculiarities of a woman's life in post-colonial era brought unfiltered honesty in Das' verse while exploring and redefining womanhood and love. Though, Aman Dwivedi condemns Das for employing universality which remains "self-imposed not natural"; he claims that the feeling of oneness is derived through imposition of emotion through her poetry. (303) In Das' eye, womanhood comes with responsibilities which should not silence and suppress the emotions of the women. She believes in acknowledging the female suffering which otherwise would remain confined in their private spheres. Eunice D'Souza brings in the poem "The Maggots" wherein he mentions how Das addressed the pain of lost love felt by powerful goddess Radha, which would serve as a validation for similar feelings in ordinary women. Such are the complexities Ms. Das employs in her poetry which would be analyzed to understand her definition of 'Womanhood' and the 'Quest for Love'. According to Merriam Webster (n.d.), womanhood is the condition of being a woman or the womankind. So, to be versed with the concept, womanhood one must acquire the knowledge about the phrase woman. Women in biological terms have two X chromosomes and an ability to conceive till menopause. This definition gets extended when the society adds certain norms and values as a guideline to differentiate the roles between gender. Kamala Das opposed these 'norms' developed by the society and protested by creating a woman in her poems who acts

as an iconoclast. Besides being a protest poet, her poems contain unapologetic, autobiographical, and confessional elements which links her up with Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Duras.

Kamala Das' woman craved for love. This 'quest for love' in accordance to Ancient Indian context lies across the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas. The 'Ardhanariswara Love' acts as an absorbing theme in Kalidasa's Kumarasambhavam and Shakuntalam. While Sringara rasa is considered as a qualifying and chief rasa for a mahakavya. The Satakas (anthologies) which contain unconnected shlokas acts as another example of the passionate hunger of love. S.K. De in his work A history of Kavya Literature mentions Indian women poets as women-poets occupied with the theme of love, where the verse is descriptive and it most often contains an erotic implication. (416) This preoccupation with the theme of love may occur due to latent motherhood which has greater capacity for love than man. C.G. Jung in his seminal work Contributions to Analytical Psychology notes that "woman's psychology is founded on the principle of eros, the great binder and deliverer, while age old wisdom has ascribed logos to man as his guiding principle." This implies that women poets have been trying to get at the true nature and meaning of love whereas, men focus on logic, structure and rationality.

During an interview with college students on March 11, 1999, Das described about the love, she said:

Love is a wonderful experience... When a woman falls in love she can be compared to a river in spate. There is a sudden rush of love in her and her whole being is flooded with love. It is not easy to restrain her at that season. Without that season life is incomplete. A woman's body, mind and soul would be integrated only when she falls in love. It is undoubtedly the sweetest season in life. (n.p.)

Kamala Das' ideal feeling of love which she mentions as "the sweetest season in life" and her 'woman' through whom she speaks in her poetry unites to redefine what Das calls as the definition of womanhood.

Discussion

Kamala Das' women is a seeker. She denies the universally accepted statement that mere sex is love, rather she propounds that love is an experience. As the Holy Bible

in *Songs of Songs* says that love is as powerful as death itself. Kamala presumes that the journey through love acts as a transformative one, wherein consciousness develops a higher stature, which would end up as self-realization. Such particularized development stands non-viable within the constitution of marriage. The institution of marriage perpetuates mankind. All societies and faiths believe that marriage is the bed-rock on which society is built. A woman enters wed-lock with dreams where she imagines new vistas for her. But inevitably they meet with disappointment. Some consider marriage as an escape from the restrictions of parental bonds but they land up and find oneself confined in marital bonds. Women of post Independent India, unlike their predecessors do not wish to confine themselves to the four walls of the house. They long to express themselves outside the domestic realms. The post-colonial women poets, especially Das brings up the concept of love and sex wherein they oscillate between two attitudes, namely the attitude of the patriarchal society and that of the authentic self-rebelling against patriarchy.

In Das' poetry time after time husband considers his wife as an object for physical satisfaction; and the woman in the poem is tired of the fact that her husband loves her for his physical needs rather than an emotional bond where both feel loved. According to Das, for a woman love represents *sadhana* (spiritual discipline), wherein for a man it is just an 'animal passion.' In "Substitute" the woman speaker state:

*Yes, I was thinking, lying beside him
That I loved, and was much loved.
It is a physical thing, he said suddenly,
End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free.*

In the same poem, the woman is tired of the soulless sex and pseudo- respectability of pretence. After a bout of body love she reflects the agony as "Our bodies after love-making/Turned away, rejecting." Kamala Das believes that gaiety of lust is a kind of pretence. Lust at best would only give you pleasure and not happiness. She spends sleepless nights decoding this riddle of love. Innumerable questions arise in her mind about "this skin communicating things/that I dare not yet in his/presence call our love." The poet (woman in her poems) hopes to leave all these burdens which she compares to 'the cocoon' that her husband had built around her.

Man is the bread-winner of the family and this position swells his ego while woman's services go unrecognized. Woman is hampered by her social position in developing her personality. Therefore, the bread she eats which is earned by the sweat of man is said to be "the magic loaf" which retards her growth and makes her a 'dwarf' (The Old Playhouse). This loaf retrogrades a person physically and mentally. Man feeds his woman. But he forgets the fact that a person does not live by bread alone. He totally ignores the soul of the woman who is his life-partner. He is not bothered about the development of her personality whereas, woman wants tenderness, togetherness, understanding, and one-ness beyond lust.

The cold disregard of her husband turns her into "a bird of stone." ("The Stone Age"). His touch and strokes have no warmth in them. He denies her ability to dream. With loud talk, he bruises her pre-morning sleep and "sticks a finger into my dreaming eye." ("The Stone Age"). Woman is very often a plaything in the hands of man as she depicts in "Toys."

Women who are trapped in loveless relationship in marriage, try to seek release through extramarital relationships. Each affair, though started with freshness, intensity and exhilaration, ends up in despair. Very soon the lover proves to be just another husband. Though the woman speaker in Kamala's poems has gone to several men, not one of them had real love for her. They let her

*"Slide from the pegs of sanity into a
bed made soft with her tears."*

She becomes half dead, no longer useful to men. Because she is denied a heart-to-heart correspondence and tenderness, the poet fills up her empty heart with coiling snakes of silence to bite at the first opportunity. Kamala describes in her poems her relationship with other men:

*"I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt at
Times, a grand flamboyant lust" ("The Old Playhouse").*

Anger and pathos, both subdued, are mixed in these lines. The bitter experiences in love made her a cynic. In "The Stone Age" she goes out in her husband's absence to other men who sink like white suns in the swell of her Dravidian blood. Later, the

poet tries to defend the act by asking a few philosophical questions for which she has no answer "Ask me why life is short and love is Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price." (CPI 96).

For Kamala Das, ideal love is fulfilment on the levels of body and mind. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfilment from the husband leads her to search for it in extra-marital relationships with other men. Each relationship, however, succeeds only in intensifying her frustration and loneliness, and the poet turns to poetry as the exclusive medium for its cathartic release. In the words of Ishwar Nath Agrawal:

Kamala Das writes almost exclusively of love, sex and loneliness in the tone of an insistent confession. I suppose the value of the confessional is that by exposing those dark areas which are normally concealed, it might touch some of the deepest points, in the reader's own subconscious and so uncover what is worth uncovering. But the confession may also be part of an elaborate private therapy, a literary drug used to make the poet feel better.

The fact that man is incapable of grasping the significance of love is mentioned in "The Seashore." The woman driving past the cremation ground becomes conscious of the inevitability of death and she remembers her lover's words:"... giYe me time, more time and I/shall learn to love" (SIC 40). But life is short and the woman is sorry that she cannot give him as much time as he wants. She realizes that the man is wedded to politics and is utterly incapable of loving her.

While love is only "a physical thing" (Substitute) for the man, it is 'great' and an 'all enveloping thing' ("The Seashore") for the woman. "The Seashore" deals with the urgency for loving because human life is short. Love is a basic need with the woman in the poetry of Kamala Das. "An Introduction" describes how the woman speaker was neglected and rejected by her husband. She speaks unashamedly of the need for love when she grew up into a woman.

*I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. (Only the Soul 96)*

She feels betrayed and is plunged in grief and disappointment. When her young heart hungers for love, her homosexual husband prefers the young man to her. Her husband did not beat her as the working-class people do. But the sophisticated mental cruelty is worse than physical torture.

*..... He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. (Only the Soul 96)*

The feeling that the speaker is not wanted, that she is inadequate to his needs is a humiliation which dries up her body and soul. She is ashamed of her womanliness and tries to hide it in man's dress. But society wants to gather her into the herd:

*..... Dress in sarees, be girl, Be wife, they said be embroiderer,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers (Only the Soul 96)*

But Kamala Das refuses to fit into any scheme. The bitter irony and anguish of a woman who finds herself tied down to a meaningless routine of household chores can be noticed in many of her poems. In the "Siesta" Kamala asks herself whether she would have the courage and the sense to break the ties. A wife does not mean a life-partner to the husband, a sustaining influence on him, but she is a cog in the wheel of society. She must adhere to rules and get into the rut of a domestic. Society is not bothered about the pain of the individual. It is only concerned with appearances.

Kamala Das tells us how the dead weight of outworn values can retard the emotional and intellectual growth of an individual. "The night girls with sham obtrusive breasts" walking on streets and "bearing their sickly smiles at men" (SIC 16) portray the sterile and wasted existence of an ill-adjusted individual. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar talks about Kamala Das's "Fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive largely manmade world."

Conclusion

A frank delineation of hypocrisy as experienced in matrimony was a subject which was earlier considered taboo for the Indian woman writer. But with extraordinary courage, Kamala Das highlights this murky facet of women's life in India. There is a realistic and honest representation of man-woman relationship in her poems. Her poetry reflects the responses, reactions, problems and perplexities of the contemporary Indian woman. Kamala Das seems to feel the pulse of the ordinary Indian women when she writes about the intricate workings of their internal nature, their emotional involvements, longings, aspirations, fears and frustrations.

Kamala Das's vision is particularized by the viewpoint of a woman. According to her a woman must be loved for her own sake and not for man's selfish needs. Man's whole mental make-up should be broken and re-scheduled if he is to love a woman for her own sake. Kamala Das believes in the instinctual attraction of the sexes. She is a deeply sexual being and is proud of her sexuality. But there is a deeper desire for a sacred love that transcends the flesh. The denial of her throb for this sacred love and the sad realization that man cares only for carnal pleasures, vex the poet.

Kamala Das's women are unlike traditional heroines such as Sita, Savithri and Sheelavati who are epitomes of virtue. Virtues like chastity, submissiveness, obedience and readiness to sacrifice one's own self for her husband dominate these traditional heroines. But Kamala's women are far from them. The concept of womanhood constructed by the 'woman' in Das' poetry seem to question the double standards of their husbands and of the society. They expose the hollowness and physicality of men which suppress the individuality, freedom and creativeness of women, thus dwarfing them. They seem to hold the view that love is not merely erotic desire alone, but the central element of integration in the development of a person. Kamala believes that only a positive concentration on love in all its phases by men can save women. Only the miraculous quality of love can eradicate insensate forces such as lust, hatred, violence and selfishness thereby creating harmony between man and woman. Kamala's poems truly reflect the soul of modern Indian womanhood. M.K. Naik is right in saying that the writings of Kamala Das have "a bold, ruthless honesty which throws to wind the conventional attitudes of society to reveal the quintessential woman within."

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