

TABOOS AND ETHICS: JOURNEY OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

In the mid Twentieth Century, India saw an emergence of a prominent cultural and social awakening demanding the recognition of the feminist prerogatives. Kamala Das played a pivotal role in showcasing the concerns of Indian women (which, of course, are different from women in the west) through her writings. One can say that she bluntly put forth her feminist concerns to a socio-cultural milieu which was deeply shocked at that time for her candour and openness. Some people mistook her frank demeanour for lasciviousness which upset her a lot. In the characteristically unrelenting Indian scenario Das, through her writings revolts, by way of introspectively pondering over the unfortunate state of existence in which Indian women conduct themselves. There is a confessional strain in her writing, which is highly subjective. Her love for writing began at a very young age. At the age of six, Das created a rudimentary magazine of poems where she would write poems about dolls that had lost their heads and were doomed to remain headless for eternity. At the age of fifteen Das was married off to a bank Officer who was much older than her. She did not get the love she longed for, instead, she faced exploitation and humiliation. She longed for a blissful and compatible life with her husband. For her physical love was a way of gaining spiritual love. She found solace in her writings; sometimes writing about the battered self, her quest for freedom of expression and self-identity. It was actually a journey of self-exploration. All she wanted in her life was love and peace. When she could not change the stance of society towards women including her she made up her mind to change her religion because living in a veil was nothing new to her.

Keywords: *Alienation, Ethics, Morality, Self-exploration, Taboo,*

I.INTRODUCTION

In this paper an attempt will be made to study the dilemma between taboos and morals in the works of Kamala Das. Morality is a very broad and relative term which defies a general definition. By morality I mean the social and familial values, traditions and norms and an individuals obligation to conform to them. At the outset I want to make it clear that the study is not confined within the strict ethical theories. An attempt will also be made to trace the journey and growth of Kamala Das as a woman writer surrounded by patriarchal society. The present paper would focus on her autobiography *My Story* and some poems from her major collections of poetry. While most of the critical works on Das have focused on her as a feminist and a confessional writer. Through this study I want to shift the focus on Das' personality-that is her innermost feelings and frustrations. Das believed only pain and suffering could create good poetry and she held a strong belief that Sri Lanka and Kashmir would produce great poetry after the trauma they were passing through. While reviewers of Das' early poetry praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Scholars such as Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar find powerful feminist imagery in Das' poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship to their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are

offered in traditional Indian society. Much criticism analyzes Das as a “confessional” poet, writing in the tradition to Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov. Some scholars, such as Vimala Rao, Iqbar Kaur, and Vrinda Naur, find Das’ poetry, autobiography and essays frustratingly inconsistent, self-indulgent, and equivocal, although they, too, praise her compelling images and original voice. They suggest that Das is both overexposed and overrated. Other scholars, such as P. P. Raveendran, connect the emphasis on the self in Das’ work to larger historical and cultural contexts and complicated, shifting postcolonial identities. [1]

The present paper tries to shift the attention of researchers towards this aspect of Kamala Das’ writings which had been hitherto neglected mostly. Her life has been, no less, than a roller coaster ride for her; quoting controversy every now and then. Most of the researchers have seen Das in the light of her works but not many works have been conducted on her psyche and personality which in turn got reflected in her works. The present paper is a humble attempt to look at her life and works in this light and try to bring out her philosophy of life. The present paper has been divided into 5 Sections:

1. Section is the Introduction in which the nature of the study undertaken has been explained. A purview of previous work on the said author has also been incorporated alongwith the purpose and contribution of the present paper.
2. Section is named My Story. In this section Das’ autobiographical book by the same name is studied. This book clearly throws some light upon her life and works.
3. Section is Poetry in which some of the poems from her major collections of poetry are studied.
4. Section is named Islam which looks at Das’ life and works post her conversion into Islam.
5. Section is the Conclusion which sums up the crux of this study alongwith the possible applications and extensions. Advantages as well as limitations of the present study have also been elucidated.

II. MY STORY

Das created a permanent place for herself in contemporary Indian literary World. She was one of the most aggressively individualistic writers in India. When she took to writing, there was no native women’s tradition or model to emulate and there were certain prescribed norms for a women’s writing. Though the world she created in her writings is thoroughly Indian yet it did disturb the Indian society because here was a woman who had started giving vent to her innermost feelings, her desires, her dreams and her ambitions. Given the conventionality of Indian women, her honesty and truthfulness was an embarrassment to them but was her rare achievement. Under the name Madhavi Kutty, Das has published many books in the Malayalam language. *Ente Katha* was serialised in 1972 in the now defunct *Malayalanadu* weekly, a literary magazine published by S. K. Nair. The novel not only created a literary sensation but even invited the wrath of Das’ close relatives who wanted to stop its publication. V. B. C. Nair, the Editor of *Malayalanadu* recalls,

“Despite pressure from her influential relatives to stop the publication of the work, Kamala remained bold and it proved a roaring hit boosting the circulation of the weekly by 50,000 copies within a fortnight”. [2]

Das had written *My Story* in English a couple of years back before it was rendered into Malayalam. At the time when she was penning down the memoir in English, S. K. Nair suggested her to translate it for his weekly. The novel was first published as a book by Current Books in February 1973. The English version was published in the year 1977 by Sterling Publishers, with many changes made to the manuscript which she wrote in 1970. The book has been published by Harper Collins India since 2009. A Hindi translation titled *Meri Kahaani* has also

been published by Hind Pocket Books. *My Story* remains one of the most popular and controversial autobiographies by an Indian author Poet and litterateur. Das and Madhava were romantically incompatible. *My Story* describes his homosexual liaisons and her extramarital affairs. K. Satchidanandan says,

"I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's inner life in all its sad solitude, its desperate longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colours and its turbulent poetry".[3]

Das was born into an aristocratic Nair Hindu family in Malabar (now Kerala), India, on March 31, 1934. Her maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were Rajas, a caste of Hindu nobility. Her love of poetry began at an early age because of the influence of her maternal great-uncle, Narayan Menon, a prominent writer, and her mother, Balamani Amma, a well-known Malayali poet. Das was also deeply affected by the poetry of the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nairs. Das's father, a successful managing director for a British automobile firm, was descended from peasant stock and favoured Gandhian principles of austerity. The combination of "royal" and "peasant" identities, along with the atmosphere of colonialism and its pervasive racism, produced feelings of inadequacy and alienation for Das. She faced the pains of loneliness and alienation even in her childhood. Neither her parents nor the society in which she grew helped her to free herself from these feelings. As a result she had an unhappy and dissatisfied childhood. She was a victim of patriarchal prejudice and discrimination as most girls in India are and that is why in her autobiographical book *My Story*, her

"father was an autocrat". [4]

and her mother "vague and indifferent".[5]

Her parents considered her "a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to a relative when she was only a school girl. [6]

She complains about her parents:

"They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us-I felt myself to be an intruder in any room rather than mine-every morning I told myself that I must raise myself from the desolation of my life and escape, escape into another life and into another country".[7]

Educated in Calcutta and Malabar, Das began writing at age six and had her first poem published by P.E.N. India when she was fourteen. She did not receive a university education. She was married in 1949 to Madhava Das, an employee of the Reserve Bank of India who later worked for the United Nations. Marriage did not provide her any solace or comfort from the feeling of loneliness. In her married life she had to face only lust and sex. She had no say in her marriage, no freedom in selecting an ideal lover for her life. She didn't like the way in which her parents fixed her marriage without even consulting her once. This accelerated her sense of helplessness and alienation which prompted Das to become a rebel and lose faith in all her relations. She looked upon all her relations with contempt and disgust. The merely carnal approach of his husband led her to disillusionment with the bonds of marriage and ever increasing male-domination. Her battered self attempted to explore an identity and freedom. Her longing for true love gave her neither the peace of mind nor the emotional fulfillment. She was left complaining about the absence of love within and without the contract of marriage.

III. POETRY

Woman in Kamala Das' writings always struggle to achieve a peaceful destination where she can sit and can heave a sigh of relief after undergoing myriad kinds of adventures (physical, sexual and spiritual) and soul searching efforts. But her endeavours seem failing as the hostile World, in which she lives, does not come up to her expectations because her ambitions are too high and her efforts are too humble. Consequently, the female voice in Das' poetry apparently dangles between two worlds- one of sanity which is overshadowed by her social surroundings and well established traditions guiding human deportment, particularly of women how to behave and move in the society and two, her psychological phenomenon which is prevailed upon by her emotional upheavals. Psychic manifestations, emanating from Das' long voyage from childhood experiences in her grandmother's house to her life partner's loveless attitude towards her emotions reveal woman's helplessness in male-dominated society which forces her to feel psychologically ambivalent. Das' woman is seen making earnest efforts searching for real love which could cool down her young lustful anxieties in young age and spiritual alignment with god (Lord Krishna) and (Ya Allah) in her last phase of life. In Das' poetry, moral inhibitions and social restraints force her to seek rebellious pursuits by breaking man made laws of the society.

Das has authored many autobiographical works and novels, several well-received collections of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories, and essays on a broad spectrum of subjects. Since the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), Das has been considered an important voice of her generation who exemplifies a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona, unusual imagery and candour rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists. Das' poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, women's roles in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalized people. Das' work in English has been widely anthologized in India, Australia, and the West, and she has received many awards and honours. Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, Das tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage. In poems such as "The Dance of the Eunuchs" and "The Freaks," Das draws upon the exotic to discuss her sexuality and her quest for fulfillment. In "An Introduction," Das makes public traditionally private experiences, suggesting that women's personal feelings of longing and loss are part of the collective experience of womanhood. In the collection *The Descendants* (1967), the poem "The Maggots" frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths, while the poem "The Looking-Glass" suggests that the very things society labels taboo are the things that women are supposed to give. In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), poems such as "Substitute," "Gino," and "The Suicide" examine physical love's failure to provide fulfillment, escape from the self, and exorcism of the past, whereas poems such as "The Inheritance" address the integrity of the artistic self in the face of religious fanaticism. In *Tonight, This Savage Rite: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy* (1979), Das 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, reworks the classical Tamil *akam* ("interior") poems that contrast the grandeur and permanence of nature with the transience of human history. Poems such as "Delhi 1984" and "Smoke in Colombo" evoke the massacre of the Sikhs and the civil war in Sri Lanka. It seems that given the predicament of women's position in the society she always found herself sympathizing with victims. She was compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She complains about it in her poem "Of Calcutta":

I was sent away, to protect a family's
 Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some
 Abstraction, sent to another city to be
 A relative's wife. [8]

In the same poem she presents the image of a doll to portray a woman's miserable condition:

Yet another nodding
 Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to
 Warm his bed at night. [9]

The indifference of man to woman's miseries is depicted in her poem "The Stone Age." To quote from it:

You turn me into a bird of stone,
 a granite dove,
 you build round me a shabby drawing room
 and strike my face absentmindedly while you read. [10]

When Kamala Das understood that love and matrimony are poles apart, she searched for a lover.

"Though the love affair gives her excitement in the beginning it is accompanied by disillusionment. Her lover is incapable of giving her a blissful experience". [11]

Thus her frustration is expressed through her poem "The Freak":

. . . Can this man with
 Nimble finger-tips unleash
 Nothing more alive than the
 Skin's lazy hungers? . . . [12]

The woman's spirit of rebellion against male domination and ego is found in the poem "The Conflagration." As Dr. N. Sharda Iyer writes,

"There is a degree to extricate from this "Soul Killing" subjugation:

"Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
 Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive.
 A world extend a Pot beyond his six foot frame." [13]

"The Old Play House" also voices her protest against the male domination and the resultant humiliation:

. . . Cowering
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
 Questions I mumbled incoherent replies . . . [14]

The plight of a married woman, chained to her husband's house is depicted in the opening lines of the poem "The Old Play House":

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
 In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
 Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
 Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
 Pathways of the sky. . . [15]

Kamala Das hates traditional sex roles assigned to women by the patriarchy. In the poem "Introduction" one finds resentment and refusal:

. . . Then I wore a shirt
and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of
this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife,
they cried. Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreller
with servants. [16]

In the words of K. Satchidanandan,

"The woman can not change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men. But the voices of the tradition would force her back into sarees, the saree becoming here a sign of convention. She is pushed back into her expected gender roles: wife, cook, embroiderer quarreller with servants: the gender role also becomes a class role".[17]

There is a tussle going on inside her mind between what the society labels as taboos and morals. Her rebellious self wants to break down the man made rules and regulations, do's and don'ts that have been prescribed for women. Behaving like a man is her way of revolting against the shackles of social constructs. She indulges in self-awareness, self-exploration and self-introspection in order to define herself. It is the male society, which compels her to choose her roles according to their convenience. She is forced to act either as a slave or as an idol. The husband transforms the wife into the contemptible canine status of a housewife. To quote from the poem "Of Calcutta":

Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog
Jumping my routine hoops each day. [18]

Das' married life was a complete failure and it ended in deep frustration and mental agony.

"For her ideal love is the fulfilment of the levels of body and mind. It is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfilment from the husband leads her to search for it elsewhere. Each relationship only intensifies her disappointment faced with the sense of absolute frustration and loneliness"[19] Though she seeks the perfection of masculine being in every lover, it ends in failure because of the impossibility of realizing this ideal in human form. The experience of frustration sets the psyche in the attitude of rebellion.

I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman
Happy wife [20]

Kamala Das' aim as a poet is to underline the predicament of contemporary women beset by the crisis of divided selves. She wants to bring harmony out of this existence. Her poems are remarkable because they reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, acute sense of isolation, fragmentation and loss of identity. Modern Indian woman's ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. She seems to have the combination in herself—wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. While her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love, she is also proud of her being the seducer, the collector especially of those men who pose as lady killers. [21]

What strikes the most in her poetry is the use of Indian English without concern for correctness and precision.

“It appeared unpremeditated, a direct expression of feeling as it shifted erratically through unpredictable emotion, creating its own forms through its cadence and repetition of phrases, symbols and refrains. Her effort was to find an appropriate style for what is rather the poetry of a mind thinking about feeling than the expression of emotion”. [22] Srinivasa Iyengar writes further on her style:

“While giving the impression of writing in haste, she reveals a mastery of phrase and a control over rhythm—the words often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly alive. Her characteristic trick is to split phrases and meanings—even the infinitive—between two lines and this is surely symbolic of the fissured, or fractured, sensibility she wishes to communicate”. [23]

IV. ISLAM

Through her writings, Kamala Das tried her best to uplift the position of woman and thus resist the dominance of man. She felt that the influence of patriarchy is found in all religions as well as their scriptures. As the religious leaders were all men, the scriptures written by them were male-oriented and as a result, women were given inferior position in families as well as societies. . In “Lines Addressed to a Devadasi” the image of the “silent Devadasi”, a courtesan dedicated to god, becomes the epitome of female sacrificed at the altar of religion. Men use her, defile her and finally discard her in the name of religion. The religious leaders made their gods advise women, through the scriptures, to obey men. The women, in the roles of wives have to obey their husbands and be subservient to them. Thus this venomous ideology of male dominance is injected into even women’s veins through the scriptures and they are destined to be inferior till they die. In the Western society where religion’s hold is loose, women enjoy more freedom and equality than the Eastern society. Man has more muscular power than woman but at the same time woman has many qualities which man does not have. They should live in a harmony as other beings do around us. This legacy of patriarchy has to be questioned. Women have every right to get out of their kitchens and houses and live equals to men. It is against this injustice in families and societies that poets like Kamala Das fight against.

In 1999 she converted to Islam and took a new name Kamala Surayya. It was an action, she said, she had been contemplating for many years. The woman who wrote about Krishna transferred her attention to Allah and making him the Prophet after naming him Mohammed. To quote Kamala Das:

“Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is the Purdah. Second is the security that Islam provides to women. In fact, both these reasons are complementary. Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women a sense of security. Only Islam gives protection to women. I have been lonely all through my life. At nights, I used to sleep by embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is my company. Islam is the only religion in the world that gives love and protection to women. Therefore, I have converted”. [24]

She had spent decades looking for the truth of existence and she has made the discovery that in fact the truth lies in the existence of Almighty God, as depicted by Islam. She expresses her feelings about her lengthy search for the discovery of this truth in her poetry collection “The Suraiyya Resonance.” It contains a collection of her poetry which had been originally published in Malayalam under the title “Ya Allah” (2001). Almost all her poems in this collection are variations on a theme: her euphoria at reaching and embracing the teachings of Islam.

Dr. V. Alexander Raju is of opinion that the conversion was an inevitable metamorphosis. To quote him, "In the poems of Kamala Das, we find a rare body and its feelings and she seems incapable of thinking of eternal life as a bodiless existence. This peculiar stance may be the reason why she is drawn to Islamic religion with its different concept of life after life". [25]

Frustrated by love and loneliness, she longed for an eternal life with her body and soul after her life on the earth. She loved her body as much as she loved her soul. Since her bodily desires could not be satiated by her life here she wants to achieve it by a life after death. As Hinduisim could not promise her such a life, she converted to Islam. By conversion she reserved a life after life where she could attain the spiritual fulfilment in man-woman relationship which she missed, fortunately or unfortunately, in her earthly life. Her conversion caused much ire and furor among Hindu fanatics and they started threatening her through letters and phone calls. Most dejected she bade goodbye to her ancestral house and native place and sought refuge in his son's house in Mumbai. She died a Muslim on 31 May 2009 and was buried as per Muslim religious rites, at the Palayam Juma Masjid premises in Thiruvananthapur.

V.CONCLUSION

Das once said, "I always wanted love and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little" though some people might label Das a feminist for her candour in dealing with women's needs and desires. Das has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism. Das' views can be characterized as a response, a reaction that like her poetry is unfettered by society's notions of right and wrong; taboos and morals. Nonetheless, poet Eunice de Souza claims that Das has mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms. Das ventures into areas unclaimed by society and provides a point of reference for her contemporaries. Through out her life she explored with honesty and truthfulness issues relating to women. Her writings became a means through which Das vented out her repulsion against the injustices meted out to women and became the mouthpiece of thousands of victimized women in Indian scenario. Writing for her became the best way of purgation of her feelings by attacking the patriarchal society and its stereotypical notions and through her writings tried her best to compel patriarchy to listen to the female eloquent silence. She outrightly rejects gender discrimination based on cultural constructs of women which is most prevalent in India. She was disgusted with the social setup and aimed at dismantling it with a view creating a new world based on justice and equality between the two sexes and not on sexual politics. But in her world, women too have roles to play rather than be mute victims of male dominated world. To realize and accept the courage of being a woman and flouting the norms laid down by the conventional society, she wanted the women to rise against the power imbalance and shake the society out of its complacency so that women could hope for a new life fraught with possibilities and a better and safe future ahead. She openly revolted against the orthodox concepts of womanhood in the Indian society which is full of abominable shams and cants. She strongly recommended that the presence of love is necessary to make a healthy and long lasting relationship between man and woman.

Das came across as very candid, outspoken voice and gave unbridled expression to the frustrating sexual experiences of a woman which is more so because of a different psychological make-up of men from women. She also protested against the set-roles that a woman is supposed to perform as well as questioned the dominating interfering role of the society in the life of a woman. Das wants a dignified place of honour, a

respect for the naturalistic freedoms and choices of women like men. Her writings contribute for the strong reactions and justifications for the most needful awakening of woman as a living entity and being-in-the world. The present paper opens up new vistas of study on Das' writings and her psyche. More studies need to be conducted on her feelings of alienation in the society, her self exploration and her cry for self-identity. The graph of her life needs to be re-read visa-a-vie her writings. In her personal life Das always faced loneliness, exploitation and consequently frustrations and deep mental crisis's but it seems that her outpour in terms of her writings had a sort of cathartic effect upon her feelings. Her poetry reveals that she was always confronted with the dilemma of morality and immorality, whether to write about the inner urges of women or not. Writing became a weapon for her, in her revolt, against the patriarchal society. Even her conversion sometimes seems to be her revenge upon autocratic Nair family. Ironically at a later stage in life Das was not even satisfied with Islam as a religion and thought it a mistake to have converted to this religion.

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