



## Thematic Concerns of Kamala Das Poetry: The old Playhouse and other Poems

K. SURYA CHANDRA RAO  
Senior Lecturer in English  
Govt. Degree College (Men),  
Srikakulam (India)

### Abstract:

*Kamala Das (1934-2009) is one of the members of the poetic trinity of Indo-Anglian poets, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Her poetry is characterized by extreme sincerity and integrity; she speaks out of her love-longings, frustrations and disillusionments with a disarming frankness. She writes, it seems, for therapeutic purposes. It is a kind of psychological striptease that she enacts in her poetry. As she herself has put it "I must let my mind striptease, I must extrude autobiography. Her own self is at the very centre of the three anthologies of poetry that she has published upto date, as also at that of her prose-works. Of her prose-works, 'My Story', her autobiography, is most important of it throws considerable light on her poetry. It shows that in a male dominated world, she tried to assert her individuality, to maintain her feminine identity, and from this revolt arose all her troubles of psychological traumas and frustrations. A bird's eye-view of her poetry would serve to clarify the point.*

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Kamala Das (1934-2009) is primarily a poet of feminine longings. Her poetry reflects her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male-dominated society, and in them she appears as a champion of woman's cause'. She raises her forceful voice against the male tyranny in her poetry. Her poetical collections in English are: Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendents (1967), and The Old Playhouse and other poems (1973). The present paper deals with theme of the poetry of Kamala Das particularly *The Old Playhouse and other poems*.

The anthology contains thirty-three poems in all, of which twenty have been taken from the two previous volumes. Thus there are only thirteen new poems which reveal new facets, and a further artistic maturity. The love-theme is still there, but an entirely new dimension and a new intensity are added to its treatment. Further, the poems of the volume reveal the poet's pre-occupation with death and decay not noticeable in the earlier volumes.

The title piece is the poet's protest against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female. The woman is expected to play certain conventional roles, and her own wishes and aspirations are not taken into account. The intensity of the protest, conveyed in conversational idiom and rhythm, make it symbolic of the protest of all womanhood against the male ego:

You called me wife,  
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins, 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.

A different kind of protest – this time against the religious fanaticism – is voiced in “The Inheritance”. The lyric is bitter, ironical, but not cynical. It deals with the hatred and intolerance that goes in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism. What man has inherited is not love but hatred; ‘this ancient / virus that we nurtured in the soul .....

“The Blood” is another admirable poem in this collection. It evokes the poet’s love of her old house and of her grandmother who is now dead. It is autobiographical, marked by a wistful nostalgia, a wistful yearning for the happy past.

This long poem also shows the poet’s pre-occupation with thoughts of death and decay. The serious tone suggests vague premonitions of some impending calamity, and the house is personalized and comes to life;

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 house  
And have raised on walls  
Strange totems of burial.  
At night, in stillness.  
From every town I live in  
I hear the rattle of its death  
The noise of rafters creaking  
And the window’s whine.  
I have let you down  
Old house, I seek forgiveness.

However, in ‘Nani’ the tone is comic and we find the poetess laughing in the ‘court of death’. The suicide of the pregnant maidservant is spoken of as a ‘comic dance’, but the flippant tone is merely a mask for the underlying seriousness. ‘Gino’ is one of the finest poems in this collection. The terror of sex, its attraction and revulsion, are powerfully expressed:

You will perish from his kiss, he said, as one must  
Surely die, when bitten by a Krait who fills  
The bloodstream with its accursed essence. I was quiet  
For once, my tongue had failed in my mouth

It encloses a tempest of feelings and the poem is a pack of references coming out in succession. For such poems Kamala Das chooses the medium of free verse. Her vanquished personality is reflected in its images. The ‘Krait’, ‘obscene hands’, ‘ward boys’, ‘dark X-ray rooms’, ‘aeroplanes bursting red in the sky’ and ‘half – caste children’ are powerful symbolic images.

The cumulative burden of domesticity, dull routine, sickness, and the anticipation of death are sensitively portrayed in the final passage:

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long 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. I shall be the grandmother  
Willing away her belongings, those scraps and trinkets  
More lasting than her bones. Perhaps some womb in that

Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,  
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent.

The poet is conscious of her own ageing and the decaying of her body. Indeed, such thoughts keep recurring in the poems of this collection.

'The Stone Age' is another admirable poem in which the tension results from the fact that love is offered by another man, and not by the husband. The husband is seen as an "old fat spider" who weaves "webs of bewilderment" around the woman and builds the dead, stony walls of domesticity, smugness, passivity, and turns her into "a bird of stone, a granite dove". He is the perpetual irritant, an un-welcome intruder into the privacy of her mind. "Other men haunt her mind, and "sink/Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood". When the husband leaves, she drives along the sea and climbs the forty noisy steps to knock at another's door". At this point, the act of defiance having taken place, the deed done, freedom asserted, and the dull cocoon of domesticity assaulted, the lines suddenly become alive with the energy of questioning and the theme of winning and losing, of reckoning asserts itself:

..... Ask me, everybody, ask me  
What he sees in me, asks me why he is called a lion,  
A libertine, asks me the flavor of his  
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake  
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like  
A great tree, felled, he stumps against my breasts  
And sleeps. Ask me why life is bliss and love is  
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price .....

"The Prisoner" is another fine poem in which the poetess compares herself to the convict who studies his Prison's geography with distrust and hope. In this poems the use of the word 'trapping' is very significant, for it suggests "the trappings of lust from which she must free herself to know true love" as well as "the soul's cry against its mortal dress," What Mrs Das suggests here is the fact that there is no real freedom from imprisonment of this world or of lust.

An entirely new note is struck in "After the illness". Commenting on this fine lyric Davendra Kohli writes, "Concern with disease, illness, decay, and death is at the centre of "After the illness". But what emerges from her reflections on the brevity of love is the mysterious force that keeps the lover filled with the thoughts of her survival. Apparently inspired by Kamala Das's recovery from a serious illness, the poem is concerned with the theme of survival: not merely of "the weary body settling in to accustomed grooves", but of her lover's love in spite of the fact that in her.

..... There was  
Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger, the blood had  
Sickened too much to lust, and the skin, without health's  
Anointments, was numb and unyearning.

Filled with the thought of what was perhaps a miraculous survival, she finds herself wondering as to what sustained his love for her: "What lusted then/For him, was it perhaps the deeply hidden soul?" Kamala Das does not attempt to resolve the dilemma. To say this is not simply to point out the element of realism in her portrayal of her moods, but to underlie her approach to experience which makes such a realism, if that is the right word for the borderline between sexual love and spiritual love, possible. Kamala Das seems to suggest that perhaps the two are inseparable, but that she finds it difficult to experience this wholeness, this sense of completeness without a shadow of doubt and uncertainty.

In a number of poems published in the earlier volumes, and now included in the present one, the poetess seeks to provide a mythical framework to her quest of love outside marriage. She seeks an objective co-relative, for her own love-longing, and finds them in the age-old Hindu myths of Radha-Krishna and Mira Bai. While searching for and celebrating love outside marriage, she identifies herself, as in “Radha Krishna” and “Vrindavan”, with Radha, or with Mira Bai who relinquished the ties of marriage in search of Lord Krishna, the true and eternal lover who is also the epitome of the fullest consciousness that a human being can contemplate:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind,  
And the flute, luring her  
From home and her husband  
Who later asks her of the long scratch on the brown  
Aureola of her breast, and she shyly replies,  
Hiding flushed cheeks,  
It was so dark outside, I tripped and fell over  
The brambles in the wood.

“Vrindavan” is here symbolic of a psychological state, of the woman’s eternal quest for true love, and the security and fulfillment that such love brings.

‘The Millionaires at Marine Drive’ marks a light shift in her attitude towards men and their love. It voices a general dissatisfaction with the male character as a whole, and not merely with the husband with whom she has no emotional contact at all. The figure of the old grandmother appears again, a relative who alone provides her with some tenderness and warmth.

Love is Kamala Das’ central theme and her chief pre-occupation. But love has many facets, the poetess studies it from many angles and the treatment of the theme is characterized by increasing depth and intensity.

The theme of Kamala Das poetry is physical love; her medium free verse. Her writing is intensely lyrical—sometimes soft and musical, sometimes with a bitter edge to it. Its unpretentious brilliance is revealed in strong yet subtle imagery, and the natural and autobiographical tone heightens its poignancy.

Her poetry may be a serious break from the erstwhile female Indian poets, but is still a celebration of the universal experience of self, love-despair, anguish, failure and disgust against the traditional mode of gender manifestation apprehended through a feminine Indian awareness. Kamala Das’ achievements and deterministic role relationships extend well beyond her verses of poetry. She is the motivating energy and guiding star for most of the contemporary female poets of India irrespective of class, creed, caste and geographical position.

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