
Quest For True Love in Kamala Das's Poetry

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Ah, why does love come to me like
pain
Again and again and again?

(*Summer in Calcutta* 64)

Postcolonial Indian English Poetry has been enriched by the marvellous talent of Kamala Das, and her writings imbibe the cause of feminism. Most of her portrayals are realistic with a focus on her sense of frustration and alienation. Born on March 31, 1934, in the Southern Malabar in Kerala, Das received most of her education at home and was married at the early age of 15. Her early marriage meant that she was denied the opportunity to invoke her feminine instincts. This suppression cast a negative image of men on her young mind. It is this suppression suffered by Das in a patriarchal society that constitutes the focal point of her quest for true love.

As one reads Das's poetry, one comes across the resonant themes of suppression and violence in an unmistakable manner. This *leitmotif* of suppression and violence eventually prompts us to believe that Das suffered a lot in her personal life. Her personal life becomes obvious in her writings:

As I wrote more and more, in the circle,
I was compelled to move in, I became
lonelier and lonelier. I felt that my loneliness
Was like a red brand on my face (My Story

87)

Clearly, to overcome the traumas of suffering and violence, she started devoting her time to writing work.

Das did not experience a happy union with her husband. Mark the excerpt for her unhappy relationship:

work,
by
time
the dark

My husband was immersed in his office-
and after work there was the dinner, followed
dinner, followed by sex. Where was there any
left for him to want to see the sea or

buffaloes of the slopes? (*Debonair* 41)

It is not the physical love that Das longs for. What she craves for is an emotional bonding with her man. But, to her surprise, she receives the carnal pleasures from him:

That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other's parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot
Sun. There was a burning in our
Venus and the cool mountain nights.
Nothing to lessen heat.

(*The*

Descendants 26)

By virtue of his male egotism, she experiences the constant frustration and fissure and, hence, is afraid to lose her 'will and reason' while living in an unhealthy condition. Sample the excerpt:

tea and
Cowering
loaf and
all your

... You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your
To offer at the right moment the vitamins.
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.

(*Only the Soul* 38)

Mrs. Das objects to this sort of male domination at the mental level. Since she is a frail woman, she fails to subdue her husband, and this fact makes her married life really boring and tiresome. She now desires to flee and live without any restrictions:

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I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of
course
Your tired lust. I shall someday take
Wings, fly around... (*Summer in Calcutta* 52)

Finding no solace with her husband, she turns her attention to other men. In fact, she confesses that she "... wrote the poems in the book *Summer in Calcutta* to make a man love me, to break down the resistance" (quoted from Dwivedi 21). The poems in this collection mostly deal with the theme of sexual love. For instance:

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest-fire that
Consumes, and, with each killing gains a
wilder
Brighter charm, all that comes my way.

(*Summer in Calcutta* 51)

Further, she writes in 'My Grandmother's House':

I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger's doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?

(*Summer in Calcutta* 15)

The poem "Glass" also decries and offers a document of sensuous portrayals of love:

I enter other's
Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home.

(*The*

Descendants 21)

The excerpts reveal an overpowering sense of modernism. To talk of love in such a frank and sensuous manner in India, especially when it comes from the pen of a woman, is almost unexpected, if not impossible. But Mrs. Das breaks these shackles of colonial women and successfully establishes a new identity and space for herself in this postcolonial era. What A. N. Dwivedi writes, legitimizes the fact: " It should, however, be remembered that Kamala Das wrote her poetry

against a more conservative and tabooed society. ... She has, therefore, more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity. More often than not she concentrates on sexual love, and her woman-persona rises as though in a mood of revolt”(Dwivedi 21).

Needless to say, this sense of eroticism forms a weaker aspect of her personality as she fails to procure proper love from other sources. The love which she gets is the physical love and this enables her to recast a new image of woman in India by willingly turning the 'donts' into 'dos'. Patriarchal rules are not meant for her. She is a prototype of postcolonial Indian woman and, hence, her style of living and thinking is unconventional. She is a constant believer in the value of freedom which an individual lacks. The poem 'The Sunshine Cat' projects the picture of the poetess' mental illness in the company of a cruel husband. Sample the excerpt:

	Her husband shut
her	
	In every morning; locked her in a room of
looks	
	With a streak of sunshine lying near the
door...	

...	

when	
	He returned to take her out, she was a cold
and	
	Half-dead woman, now of no use at all men.

(Summer in Calcutta 49)

Consequently, she becomes totally dejected and disintegrated:

my love is an empty gift, a gilded
empty container, good for show, nothing else.

(The Descendants 17)

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Ashish Nandy's argument that "colonial and anticolonial discourses generally tended to narrow concepts of sexuality and gender roles, sitting up a sharp dichotomy between an aggressive warrior masculinity and a submissive, passive feminism as the norms for male and female behaviour, a dichotomy which Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent movement sought to subvert' (*The Cambridge* 140) pinpoints the need of a changing identity of women in relation to men in postcolonial era.

And yet, Mrs. Das 'pretends' to "act the role of a happy woman/Happy wife" (*The Descendants* 2) and goes on to tell the reader about the restricted roles of women in our society:

What I am able to give
is only what your wife is qualified
to give.
We are all alike,
We women,
in our wrappings of hairless skin.

(*The*

Descendants 31)

Unable to lead this kind of life, she expresses her desire to commit suicide. In her poem, 'The Suicide', she articulates:

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. ...

(*The Descendants* 2)

Although Mrs. Das fails to get proper love in her life, she knows the art of love-making. In her poem, "The Looking Glass", she assumes the role of a teacher who offers reader the details of the secret of true love-making:

Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman, Stand nude before the glass with
him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you much more

Softer, younger, lovelier... Admit your
Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom
floor,
and again: Dropping towels,...
Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent
of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the
breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all
your
Endless, female hungers. Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy. (*The Descendants* 25)

Undoubtedly, Kamala Das holds a negative and dismissive image of man in her mind. Anisur Rahman reinforces this view when he comments that she “views the male body as an agent of corruption” and also “regards it as a symbol of corrosion, the destroyer of female chastity” (Rahman 38), and this image is the result of the constant suffering which she experiences throughout her life. Alienated from the self, she constantly battles against what seems an irrecoverable situation, wherein she feels both physically and mentally threatened. Being fed up with the temporary salutary effects of physical and carnal pleasure, she resorts to the pure love of ‘Radha-Krishna. She gives a contrasting image of this love thus:

This becomes from this hour
Our river and the old Kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality. ...

(*Summer in*

Calcutta 37)

The metamorphosis from carnal to spiritual can be viewed as Das's inner urge to rise above the merely earthly pleasures and to procure a pure bond of love. This Radha-Krishna

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syndrome is an open assertion of the pure relationship which she seeks desperately throughout her life.

To conclude, Mrs. Das always longed for true love in her life, but this kind of love was denied to her in her married life. She wanted more than mere physical love, and yearned for an ideal love of the Radha-Krishna archetype. The ideal of the relationship of Radha-Krishna marks the culmination of her chequered love-venture in life.

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