

AGONY AND FRUSTRATION IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

* Dr. Bhosale B. S.

The poetry of Kamala Das has the unique place in Indian poetry in English particularly written by women poets. She has developed the feminine poetic sensibility. There is an expression of her personal and public experiences in her poetry. The ideas, which she has expressed in her poems and in her autobiography, **My Story**, appear to be similar. She has written a great deal of inward-looking or 'confessional poetry'. Her poetry is confessional because therein she has revealed her secret thoughts and feelings. Whatever she has disclosed about herself does not carry any sense of guilt or shame. Disclosure makes her feel easy. In her autobiography, **My Story**, she says, "I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets" (Das, Kamala, 1988: Preface). She doesn't like to hide anything. She would like to disclose all her secrets. She feels happy by confessing her secret thoughts and feelings.

The opening poem of the first volume of poetry, **Summer in Calcutta (1965)**, is **The Dance of the Eunuchs** which sets the tone and temper of all the poems of this volume. "'The Dance of the Eunuchs' is a poem that successfully delineates the contrast between the superficial joy and the inner depravity. The eunuchs become the objective correlative of suppressed desires" (Datta, Vandana: 1995-96:20). Actually she would like to present her inner feelings of frustration through the dance of the eunuchs. "'The Dance of Eunuchs' objectifies through an external, familiar situation the poet's strangled desire within ... judgment of the sterile, unfulfilled, eunuch-like desires of the woman within the poet" (Kohli, Devindra, 1968:4). It was the summer season in which Kamala Das was looking at the dance of the eunuchs in Calcutta. The eunuch is incapable of performing the sexual act, therefore, of producing a child. She symbolically uses the eunuch because the eunuch has been regarded as a symbol of unproductiveness. In this poem the eunuch is a metaphor of barrenness and of futility of love. She would like to express the feelings of frustration in love. She wants to give the outlet to her feeling of the futility of all her sexual

experiences. She thinks that all her sexual experiences have failed to satisfy her emotional demands. Her sexual demands are not fulfilled. But in this frustrated, painful and agonized mood there is the vacant ecstasy, like that in the eunuchs. "Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy." (Sarang, Vilas, 1989: 78) There is the restless turmoil experienced by the poetess. She has expressed the pain through the sterility. The dance is not a dance but a continuous convulsion. She shows the sympathy with the eunuchs. There is the emotional participation in their agony. She thinks that she is in the vacant ecstasy because of the sterility of her life for love. "The eunuchs stand for infertility and unfulfilled desire. They present the 'vacant ecstasy' of the narrator" (Raveendran, N. V, 2001:23). Her desires of sex are not fulfilled but there is the only emptiness. "Self-identification becomes a primary goal in Kamala's first book" (Nabar, Vrinda, 1994:22). The gist of the first book of her poetry is self-revealing reality. She realizes the fact that her marriage with this man had failed but they have been living together from a very long time. They have not really been able to achieve conjugal happiness. There is no emotional or spiritual bond between them. That is why she becomes frustrated in love and sex with her husband and says: "... The heart, An empty cistern, waiting Through long hours, fills itself With coiling snakes of silence." (Das, Kamala, 1973: 11)

Kamala Das here compares her heart to an empty tank waiting to be filled. This tank is fitted in toilet and lavatories. But here she says that the tank i.e. her heart would be filled not with water but with "coiling snakes of silence." "The poet wonders whether the lover is capable of anything more than 'skin's lazy hungers'. When soul-love is frustrated, lust becomes a subterfuge for the man of sexual passivity. The poet brings in silence as an influence that transforms loneliness into obsession with sex" (Nair, K. R. Ramachandran, 1993:9). She has her frustrated and disillusioned empty heart. She thinks that her husband

* Lecturer in English, Smt. Sushiladevi Deshmukh Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Latur (M. S.)

is only a creature of lust. There are only animal passions in his mind and nothing emotional and spiritual. There are no feelings and emotions in her sexual partner for the gratification of her animal desire for sex. **The Freaks** paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive and the woman is burning with desire but she becomes helpless. She can't find the real love except sex and lust in her husband. Actually she is hungry for the real love, but she is deprived of this. As a result, she is tired of her life. "Kamala Das' love-relationship is a complex phenomenon which involves tensions of different kinds. The basic tension is caused by her failure to get love in abundance which for her is synonymous with spiritual fulfilment." (Amga, H.L., 2000:169) The fact that she is able to make this fine discrimination between love and lust in male-dominated society, it makes her realize that she is a freak. Basically, she has the experience of lust but she has no experience of love from her husband. She states that in Indian culture there is the male-dominated society and she has the inferior place in this society. She would like to break away from this type of relationship with her husband who depended only on sex and lust and not on real love. She is in search of meaningful relationship with her lover (husband) in which there should be love and not lust. Lust is associated with body and love with mind and heart. She is not satisfied with love-making because her mind remains untouched. "The man is presented with scorn and the poet's sexual union with him affords no satisfaction; rather it gives pain" (Rahman, Anisur, 1981:9).

Kamala Das accepts her dependence on men for mental satisfaction. She has always craved for mental satisfaction i.e. real love. But she fails to get the mental satisfaction from other men also. "She believes that the society is hostile to women and that they are humiliated in all possible ways. A man is free to go in search of love and her own husband whom she loved, did not love in return." (Surendran, K. V., 2000:139) In her agony and frustrated condition she delineates that not a single man is lovable to her. Everywhere men humiliate her. She loves her husband but it is futile because she doesn't get it in return. All are selfish in the sense of imparting love to her. She has not received love from her licit or illicit relationship. She feels totally lonely and nervous, as she writes: "Her husband shut her In every morning; locked her in a room of books With a streak of sunshine lying

near the door, like A yellow cat, to keep her company...

..., and in the evening when He returned to take her out, she was a cold and Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men." (Parthasarathy, R., 1976:25)

She feels that her husband was so cruel to her. Every morning he used to lock her in a room containing books. At the time of evening he used to unlock her. She has no company except the rays of sunshine in the room. She says that the rays of sunshine look like the yellow-coloured cat, and that is the company of the poetess. But the season changes, winter comes and there is the loss of the rays of sunshine because of the clouds in the sky. Because of the despondency and loneliness, the poetess feels herself as cold and half-dead. Always he gives her ill-treatment that is why there is the loss of her capacity for enjoying the sexual intercourse. Kamala Das feels loneliness and becomes helpless, hence she says, "As I wrote more and more, in the circles I was compelled to move in, I became lonelier and lonelier. I felt that my loneliness was like a red brand on my face. In company when there were dinners at any friend's house, I sat still as a statue, feeling the cruel vibrations all around me. Then my husband realized my plight and stopped taking me out anywhere. I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself where I wrote stories and poems and became safe and anonymous. There were books all round me, but no friend to give me well-meaning advice, no relative telling me of my discrediting my family-name, by my unconventional ways of thinking. ..." (Das, Kamala, 1988: 176) In her loneliness and frustration no one was there to console her. She becomes lonely because she doesn't get love from her husband and from other men also. "At this moment, when she needed the love and consolation of her husband, he treated her with cruelty. He used to lock her up.... before he went out for his official duty" (Dwivedi, A. N., 2000:100). In her frustrated and sad condition she recalls the house belonged to her grandmother in the poem **My Grandmother's House**, where she got love. Hence she describes the house in Malabar as:

"There is a house now far away where once I received love... That woman died, The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved Among books I was then too young To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon." (Parthasarathy, R., 1976:23) Kamala Das had passed the hilarious days of her childhood in that house where grandmother used to

live and imparted her love and affection. She reminisces the both, house and her grandmother but grandmother is no more now. Once at a time she used to live there happily under the shelter of the love of her grandmother who is now dead. This memory makes her sad and frustrated. Kamala Das provided us the detailed information regarding the experiences in her autobiography **My Story**, in which she writes, “After the sudden death of my grand-uncle and that of my dear grandmother the old Nalapat House was locked up and its servants disbanded. The windows were shut, gently as the eyes of the dead are shut. My parents took my great grandmother to the house called Sarvodaya where she occupied noiselessly the eastern bed room on the ground floor, shaded by the tall mango trees through the leaves of which was visible the old beloved house. The rats ran across its darkened halls and the white ants raised on its outer walls strange to tems of burial” (Das, Kamala, 1988: 139-140). “How often I think of going There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or Just listen to the frozen air Or in wild despair, pic-k an armful of Darkness to bring it here to lie Behind my bedroom door like a brooding Dog.” (Parthasarathy, R., 1976:23-24) She would like to visit the house because “her grandmother’s house is the symbol of inseparable source of security and protection which she missed in her married life” (Kurup, P. K.J., 1991:127). She strives for security in her married life. That is why there is the nostalgic memory of her childhood and her grandmother. For the renewal of such love she wants to go there because she pines for such love. “But one will not miss the dominant tone of despair and suffering” (Surendran, K. V., 2000:137). In that house there is the change after the death of her grandmother. Old memories provide her consolation, but she is depressed for the demise of her grandmother and dilapidation of the house. Now there is the only darkness. What she feels now is the loss of love of her grandmother hence she says: “...you cannot believe, darling,/Can you, that I lived in such a house and/Was proud, and loved... I who have lost /My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to/ Receive love, at least in small change?” (Parthasarathy, R., 1976:24)

She has come from a cultured family where she was showered with love but now in her married life her husband rejects the basic urgency of love. That is why she wanders in search of love. She doesn’t

get the satisfaction in her married life. She is mentally tortured that is why she feels insecure in the male-dominated society. It is the pathetic condition of her married life. She feels that there is no use of wandering in search of love; all are same, only kind and not lovable. There is no end to her sorrowful life. She would like to escape from what Keats calls ‘fever and fret’ of her personal life. **The Wild Bougainvilleae** carries the expression of her desire to escape. In this poem, Kamala Das records her personal experience of past. She is in the frustrated and agonized mood in her married life. She delineates that she had fallen in love with a man and had been separated but she had not been able to forget him. Now she is in Calcutta. In that urban environment and in her unhappy married life, she feels sad. She likes their charming faces- “saw faces I liked for their charm” (Das, Kamala, 1973:30). She thinks that this world is good and is packed with things, which tends to lead us astray. She walks through the streets, seeing the boats sailing in the river. She observes the boats rotting, garbage rotting and the dead fish rotting. She takes the smell of dying things and of dead things. The poet is extremely shocked to learn that her role as a wife is only reduced to provide sexual satiety to her husband and the role as such is deeply detested by the poet probably the one sidedness of the love of the poet for her husband is akin to that of the harlot. The outer world is filled with good and bad things. As far as the bad things are concerned, she feels sadder in her frustrated condition.

In her nervousness, she visits the cemetery where she sees the tombs and tombstones, which are on the verge of crumbling. But by the side of the older tombs, she sees the marigolds blooming and wild red bougainvillea climbing up their minarets. This loss of love is the real cause of her suffering and agonized mood. The depression is largely produced by the imagery of decay and death but her hunger for the man is subsided like bougainvillea. The poet presents the flowers to the person whom she loved. Presenting the flowers to the lover symbolizes a kind of reconciliation with her lover and the reconciliation brings her pleasure and sound sleep. “I sent him some roses and slept.” (Das, Kamala, 1973:31)

The reconciliation removes the frustration and agony of the poet. Kamala Das says that in addition to the unfulfilment of the desire of real love, there in the dusty and hot city she feels disgusted. As a result

of it she thinks about the city in which she lives now and about Malabar in which she spent her childhood in happy home. In the poem **The Hot Noon in Malabar** she delineates her hilarious life. Actually it is the pathos and tenderness “Tinged with pathos, the poem moves between memory and desire, between nostalgia and estrangement. It is certainly full of moving pathos and tenderness” (Dwivedi, A. N., 2000:97). The loveless married life develops in her nostalgia about her past life passed in Malabar. Hence she delineates some experiences of her past life when she used to live in Malabar. Kamala Das recalls some of the experiences of her Malabar home. Then she says that there were some persons who had come from the hills with parrots in a cage and with fortune-cards. All those fortune-tellers were stained because of the long time in which they had been using the same cards again and again. She recalls that the brown-complexioned girls who belonged to the class of basket-makers. Actually those girls also were palm-readers or fortune-tellers. There were bangle-sellers who used of walk miles and miles for the sake of selling their bangles. All those people moved from house to house to earn their livelihood. Then she says:

“Yes, this is/A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love.”/ (Parthasarathy, R., 1976:24)

She says that the strangers used to come there and remained silent for some time and when they spoke their voices resembled wild like heard in a jungle. Here Kamala Das declares that the noon in Malabar was not only for the visit of wild men but also for the wild thoughts and for wild desire for love-making. But nothing is there in the city life; only torture is there in her life. “...To/Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet/Stirring up the dust, this hot noon,

at my/Home in Malabar, and I so far away...” (Parthasarathy, R., 1976:24) Actually there is the note of lament as she is living far away from her Malabar home. She doesn't like to live there in the city with unfulfilled love. “The poet in such an atmosphere yearns for the spontaneity, which was present in that early life as a childhood in Malabar. She is sick of the routine when everything is mechanical. She believes that the only way out of the suffering is to travel down memory lane that is to her life as a child in Malabar” (Surendran, K. V., 2000:298-299). She doesn't like the routine city-bred life. She thinks that there is the only way to release from this life that is to go to Malabar home. Because there is the only boredom out side the Malabar home. As a result “She pines to return to her home in Malabar. With all its peculiarities, like beggars, bangle - seller and strangers coming to her, house at noon, Malabar attracts her forever, and remaining away from it 'is torture' “ (Das, Bijay Kumar 1992:52). She thinks that her life outside from Malabar is very torturous. But she can't go there; as the male dominated society does not allow her to act on her own will. She has no other way than to compromise with the existing state of affair. But now she tries to redeem herself with the optimistic tone and tries to see the future life positively. In this way Kamala Das delineates experiences of agony and frustration. There is the openness and the honesty in her poetry. As a confessional mode of her writing, she doesn't hesitate to hide anything from the readers. She confesses candidly the experiences of her life about the agony, frustration and hunger for real love in the lusty male dominated society. In her subjective poetry, she lets us to peep into her anguished mood, her suffering and tortured psyche to get the reality of her life.

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