

Female Masculinity In The Poems of Kamala Das

Dr. Tarit Agrawal

Asst. Prof.

Department of English

Kashi Naresh Govt. P.G. College

Gyanpur, Bhadohi

Abstract

An eminent poet among the Indian Writers in English, Kamala Das is well known for various reasons one of which is that her poems are all impregnated with feminine sensibility. What is distinctive about Kamala Das's poetry of marriage and sex is the boldness and the daring which she exhibits in her treatment of these themes. She even admits, without the least hesitation or reluctance, the many sexual relationships into which she entered with other men because of her dissatisfaction with her husband and the sordid kind of conjugal life that she had to lead. And she does so in poem after poem. Since her life has been an empty one so far as real love or affection is concerned, she has given expression to this feeling of emptiness and desolation frankly, openly, freely, and candidly, going to the extent of using such terms as "womb", "pubis", "pubic hair" and "menstrual blood" in her poems. A close observation of her poems confirms that it is, in fact, a kind of female masculinity which goes a step higher than her feminine sensibility.

Keywords: Feminine Sensibility, Female Masculinity, Womb, Menstrual Blood.

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A poet of great feminine sensibility, Kamala Das is always acclaimed for uninhibited expressions of her bitter sexual experiences. Her poems mark and illustrate exquisitely and hyper-emotionally her sense of frustration, indignation and final surrender against a society which is, according to her, altogether man made. Well, how contradictory this seems to be and how stereotypical this sort of feminine sensibility looks like! On the one hand, we call her ‘a poet of great feminine sensibility and on the other, we talk of her surrender against man made society. While some of the poems of Kamala Das uncover her ultimate sense of exasperation against the men she came into contact with, some demonstrate her surrender against them. Now, it needs to be discussed in detail. What exactly do we mean when we pronounce the term feminine sensibility? Let us first of all try to define sensibility. ‘Sensibility’ can be described as a juxtaposition of our experience and our responsiveness towards it. It is basically the result which comes from the blend of our day to day experience and our response or reaction towards it. Now, the term ‘feminine’ refers to behavioral patterns traced in the female sex.

From the above distinction, it becomes clear as to what this feminine sensibility is and that Kamala Das gives expression to her feminine sensibility in most of her poems. But the question still remains as to whether this sense of surrender also comes under the

criterion of feminine sensibility. And at the same time, we need to concentrate deeply on the fact that Kamala Das raises her finger against this man made society, against this social creature called Man. Is this stout indignation or, in a way, this revolt on the part of Kamala Das against men in general a kind of feminine sensibility? No, not at all. This is what comes under masculinity. Her bold, unashamed expressions of man-woman relationship in her poems often shame even the male readers, and in such a situation, we can go to the extent of saying that this is what can be called a kind of hyper masculinity or an over exaggerated masculinity.

At this juncture, it is necessary to go into the depth of some of her poems. Published in *The Descendants*, *The Looking Glass* is one of the most famous and characteristic poems of Kamala Das. In the said poem, the poet delineates very boldly the copulation act scene. During the course of the poem, it surely seems to us as if we were watching a blue film. Even the ugly and detestable scene of urination has also been portrayed. Kamala Das also talks of the monthly period of a woman. Though it is an accepted fact that the basic intention of the poet is to describe the duties of a woman for satisfying her lover's sexual desire and to demonstrate how miserable the condition of a woman becomes and how lonely she feels when she is left by her male lover after his sexual desires are fully satisfied, yet it is also an accepted fact that to cross the limitations of what is called poetic license is not at all justified and legitimized. This is not what is called feminine sensibility. This is what is called a kind of super masculinity, super masculinity because of the simple reason that even the persons belonging to the male sex can not go so far as to portray the scenes of urination and describe the monthly period of a woman. The simple question arises in our minds as to whether it would be possible to call such a poem a poem or literature. No, this is not a poem or literature which depicts this kind of obscene scene that a woman should stand quite naked before a mirror with her male lover as the present poem does. At the same time, this simple question also

arises in our minds as to whether it would be possible for a male teacher with girls' students and for a lady teacher with male students to teach or explain this poem in the class room. The simple answer to this question is no and not at all. In order to have a clearer comprehension, it is necessary to quote some of the lines of the poem though perhaps, to quote such obscene lines from this poem would surely be a humiliation and a disgrace for the readers:

*...Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your
Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. 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.¹*

¹ Kamala Das's *The Looking Glass* lines 3-17

Briefly speaking, the said poem deals with this inhuman note that women will have to fulfill the following conditions if they intend to get the physical love of men:

1. Women must know the needs of men, not as the social human being but as the womankind.
2. Women are supposed to stand fully naked before a mirror accompanied by their naked male lovers so that the male lovers may see that they are stronger than the women who are softer than them.
3. They must gift them everything pertaining to their sex including the scent of their long hair, the fragrance of the musk of sweat between their breasts, the flow of their menstrual blood and all the private inner organs of their bodies from where sex oozes out.
4. They must realize that they are the only men who can satisfy their sexual urge.
5. They must notice with attention the way the naked male lovers go to bathroom and their jerky urination.

Now, what is this? This is all absurd and nonsense. This is not art. This is not poetry. This is not literature at all. To ask a woman to admire the jerky manner, in which a man urinates, is ugly literature.

It seems after going through these details that this is not the confession of a woman, not the miserable plight of a woman, and not the plea of a woman, this is a kind of aggression, a kind of enmity, and a kind of futile and vulgar discussion against man in general, and this perhaps can be done only by a person who is, sorry to say, mentally unhealthy. Talking about the same, K.R.S. Iyengar rightly says:

“Love is crucified in sex and sex defiles itself”²

“The Freaks” in ‘Summer in Calcutta’ is one such poem where the same seems to have been repeated. The poem categorically describes the bed relationship of a husband and a wife. As a matter of fact, both the husband and the wife in the poem are eager to enjoy the consummation of sexual love. However, there is no trace of any love between them though their bodies are inclined towards the satisfaction of their guilty sexual passion. The woman feels disgusted with the repulsive body of her husband. She does not really want to enjoy sex with him. But she has to submit herself to his sexual passion because she is socially bound to him in marriage. She believes that sex without love is immoral and guilty. Disappointed, her heart is shrouded in the snake-like dreadful silence. The man is freakish because he is in the sex game freakishly passive. Now, this kind of description surely gives the confirmation of the subdued position of women in a male dominated society. But it is shocking to observe that just after this, Kamala Das describes that woman’s sexual passion is also aroused! The reason is that she does not want to be called frigid. Therefore, in order to save the awkward situation, she displays her lust in a grand lively manner. Though the husband is sexually passionate yet he remains passive in the sex game. He behaves abnormally and therefore he is a freak. And because he is a freak, his wife has to be a freak as well. As the husband plays the role of a woman by remaining passive, the woman has to play the role of a man by becoming active. Since her passions are aroused, she thrusts herself against him.

Now the question that arises in our minds is simply why being frigid and a seeker of true love, Kamala Das passionately exults in writing things sexual. Even the more burning question here is whether this is what is called feminine sensibility. Even an

² *Indian Writing in English* (pub. 1962, New Delhi: Sterling, 1989, p.677.)

undergraduate with an average intellectual scale of mind can say with full confidence that this is not feminine sensibility. This is what is called female masculinity. For a better comprehension, it is necessary to quote a few lines from the poem:

I am a freak, It's only

To save my face, I flaunts, at

Times, a grand, flamboyant lust...³

The above lines clearly describe that as the husband remains passive, an awkward situation arises. First, the woman does not want to be called frigid. Secondly, her sexual passion is aroused and she wants the satisfaction of sexual desire. Because of these reasons, she displays from time to time a lively, grand sexual passion. Now if we analyze the present situation closely, we find it contradictory. The question is why the woman becomes active in the sexual game. She becomes active in the sexual game because of the reason that she does not want to be called frigid or because of the reason that her sexual passions are aroused. Well, the answer will be crystal clear to all and sundry and it needs not be detailed. One more point to be focused here is that whenever Kamala Das talks in terms of the male sex, she always uses the term 'lust', and whenever she talks in terms of women, she always uses the terms which are mild and polite. Well, all this is not expected from a person having feminine sensibility. This is purely and purely female masculinity.

Now we can take the example of Kamala Das's famous poem entitled "The Sunshine Cat." The woman persona of the poem complains that the men-folk ill-treated

³ Kamala Das's *The Freaks* lines 18-20

her. Well, it must be added here that this is not something new for the poems of Kamala Das. We find the same thing in all her poems. Rather it seems to have become the central theme of all her poems. How laughingly irritating it seems to be informed over and over again that men-folk are all driven by lust, that they have no sense of love or true love, that they all ill-treat women-folk, and how perfectly satisfactory it seems to listen and feel that women-folk are all an embodiment of true love, that they always search for it and finally get failure for the reasons best known. Well it would not be better to go into that. Back to “The Sunshine Cat”, the woman persona of the poem loved a man but that man did not sufficiently respond to her love because he was coward and selfish. Her husband was no better than her lover. Not only that he did not love her, he did not even use her. Instead, he spied her ruthlessly. As a consequence, the woman remained sexually hungry. Naturally then, love-lorn and sexually hungry as she was, she turned to the other men folk in the hope of the fulfillment of love and sex. But the men folk turned out to be cynics who did not believe in the goodness of human beings. She clung to these cynics’ chests where the new hairs were growing like the great winged moths. She hid her face in those parts of their bodies which smelled and therefore were repulsive. She also hid her face in their young lusts. To quote a few lines in this connection:

*They did this to her, the men who knew here, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her but was a ruthless watcher, and the band,
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget*

*To forget, oh to forget...*⁴

They told her that they were not inclined to love her but they could be kind to her by offering her sex pleasure. But the woman was overwhelmed by despair because though her lust was satisfied yet her love remained unfulfilled. In the meanwhile, her husband, who was a ruthless watcher and who had come to know of his wife's extra-marital relations, shut her in the room every morning when he went to his office. He locked her in the room of books. The woman was left all alone. She could not now move outside even if she wished to move. Thus she was separated from the outside world internally and externally. She now, locked up in the room, had the company of a streak of sunshine at the door, which lay there like a yellow cat. One day the husband, while leaving for the office, noticed that her wife was reduced to a skeleton. When he returned from the office to take his wife out of the room, he found her a cold and half-dead woman, of no use now to the men folk. To quote a few lines in this regard:

...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, but soon,

Winter came and one day while locking her in, he

Noticed that the cat⁵ of sunshine was only a

Line, a half thin line, and in the evening when

He returned to take her out, she was a cold and

⁴ Kamala Das's *The Sunshine Cat* lines 1-8

*Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men.*⁵

Now by the above description, only one question should be put up before the readers and the question is whether or not it is proper from any angle whatsoever for a married woman to establish extra-marital relationships with different men. It is an admitted fact that the husband in the concerned poem does not love his wife but does this mean that the woman should go to other men and form sexual relations? No, this does not mean so at all. At the time of examining any literary poem or anything, we need not look at only one perspective and come to one-sided conclusion. We must analyze both the sides of a coin. Analyzing both the sides of the coin, we surely come to the conclusion that if the husband's acts are unjustified, the wife's act to form extra-marital relations are even more unjustified, whether it was for the sake of love or lust. Such an act on the part of a woman can not be described as feminine sensibility. This should or must be considered female masculinity.

Now it can be said without the fear of contradiction that Kamala Das expects that the miserable condition of the women will arouse sympathy among the women folk and the women folk will rise in revolt against the lewd and selfish men folk. When in *An Introduction*, the poetess is almost raped by her husband on the honeymoon night, she rebels. She wears a shirt, her brother's trousers, gets her hair cut short and ignores her womanliness. To quote a few lines :

Then...I wore a shirt and my

Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

⁵ Ibid lines 14-22

*My womanliness.*⁶

And she goes to the extent of saying that:

...I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no

*Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.*⁷

When the man in *The Old Playhouse* clips the wings of his swallow wife and uses her sexually for the long summer, the woman rebels and decides to break the Narcissistic image of man. To quote a few lines in this connection:

...The strong man's technique is

Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,

For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted

By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last

An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors

*To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.*⁸

⁶ Kamala Das's *An Introduction* lines 33-35

⁷ Ibid lines 59-61

⁸ Kamala Das's *The Old Playhouse* lines 25-30

In the concluding portion of this discussion, it is necessary to keep in mind the essential fact that Kamala's love is like a tender fragrant flower which is blown away, even before it blooms, by the fiercely raging storm of sex. It strikes us as strange that in spite of being a poetess of tender love, she dwells in most of her poems on sex, even on copulation. It seems as if she exults in things ugly and obscene. Even Iyengar hopes that she will outgrow her obsession of sex. Her view of the men being Narcissus can not be accepted. There are men and men and women and women. A few men may be Narcissus-like. But there are also the nagging women who are lustful, selfish and cruel like Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The fault Kamala commits is that she universalizes her personal experience. She does not possess the capability of Shakespeare. She is guilty of taking sides. If she sees beyond the narrow ken of her personal experience, she will find petticoat government houses where the men folk cower and bend low before the stern virago women. If there is the need for the feminine sensibility, there is the need for the male sensibility as well. Moreover, Kamala Das can realize her inner being only through love. But love is a far cry from its realization because sex rages and culminates into copulation. Kamala claims that she longs for love. But though she longs for love, yet she does not dwell on it. She dwells rather on sex and copulation. She paints such filthy pictures of bed scenes which can be seen only in the blue films. Her poems can not be read out and explained in the class rooms. Her claims for love remain tall. She seems to be exulting in things sensual and sexual. She does not seem to be a frigid woman but a full blooded lusty woman. Even the title of the only novel she wrote is sensual – "*Alphabets of Lust*", which shows that she is herself a lusty woman. Any way, it should be eventually concluded that the way she writes things about men and women, it coherently emerges that her poems are all impregnated with female masculinity.

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