

## Poetry of Kamala Das: A Plea for Longing and Belonging

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### Abstract:

‘Longing’ and ‘Belonging’ semantically these words mean ‘desire to get’ and ‘to possess’ respectively but it is heart’s desire to get more and when it gets; it desires for more; being no limit of emotions and feelings. Fair sex who is though biologically weaker but is emotionally stronger and secretive and ‘longs’ for unconditional emotional attachment but she sacrifices this strength to retain her ‘belongings’

Kamala Das was perhaps the first Hindu woman who through openness and frankness in her poetry carved a permanent niche for herself in the sanctum of Literature. In her poetry she candidly and bluntly talked about women’s sexual longing. Love is her Forte in poems. Kamala’s poetry show that she is ‘every woman who seeks love’, ‘she is the beloved and the betrayed’. The poetic quotes of Kamala Das are her core heart’s true voice of identity as a woman.

**Key words** – Desire, Frustration, Frankness, Unselfish Love, Sexuality

*“Love, indeed thy strength is mighty  
Thus, alone, such strife to bear --  
Three 'gainst one, and never ceasing --  
Death, and Madness, and Despair!  
'Tis not my own strength has saved me;  
Health, and hope, and fortitude,  
But for love, had long since failed me;  
Heart and soul had sunk subdued.*

*Often, in my wild impatience,  
I have lost my trust in Heaven,  
And my soul has tossed and struggled,  
Like a vessel tempest-driven...”*

- Anne Bronte

Love - be used in terms of psychological yearning, biological requirement or social want encompasses a broad range of behavior including caring, listening, attending to, preferring to others and more. St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as 'to will the good of another'. Philosopher Gottfried Leibniz said that love is 'to be delighted by the happiness of another' and Biologist Jeremy Griffith defines love as 'unconditional selflessness.'

Throughout history, women have been regarded as the weaker of the sexes and afforded fewer rights and opportunities. A woman is supposed a wife; a mother but not an individual identity. It was only in the twentieth century when women are perceived as a sex with a persuasive voice who boldly raised her voice against her stereotyped area of subdued and suppressed existence in patriarchal system of civilization.

Kamala Suraiya Das, India's one of best-known English poets and short story writers, throughout her life continued to shock the straight-laced contemporary Indian Society. Suraiya, who abandoned Hinduism to convert to Islam, also launched a national political party has been shocking conservative Indian who has ventured into areas unclaimed by society and has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very candid woman. It all began with her autobiography, *My Story*, which told the story of her sexual life, her relationships with men and her views on the world but that did not deter her from kicking off another controversy through nude paintings of young females when Madhavi Kutty released her first nude painting in the 1980s, that shocked again she proclaimed: "I find the nude female body the most beautiful in the world. In December she wore *Hijaab* and bangles and announced that she has adopted Islam was also an astonishing deed. Like her life span the impact of her poetry has never been in doubt. She was a pioneer among Indian women poets writing in English who expressed a profound dissatisfaction with their situation as women. She said, "Poets are like snails without the shells, terribly vulnerable, so easy to crush. Of course it has given me a lot of pain, each poem. Each poem is really born out of pain which I would like to share. But then you don't find him anywhere. It is the looking that makes the poet goes on writing, search. If you find somewhere the search is over poetry is over." Her creative energies so memorably focused on the striking, but fragmented, there is enough concentrated energy and intensity of feeling to carry individual poems through to their conclusion. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish, and readers responded sympathetically to her guileless, guiltless frankness with regard to sexual matters. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girlie fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love.

*Hierarchy of Needs* is a theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in *Psychological Review*. Maslow used the terms "physiological", "safety", "belongingness" and "love", "esteem", "self-actualization", and "self-transcendence" to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through. The human mind and brain are complex and have parallel processes running at the same time, thus many different motivations from various levels of Maslow's hierarchy can occur at the same time. After fulfillment of

physiological and safety needs, the third level of human needs is interpersonal that involves feelings of belongingness. According to Maslow, humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance among their social groups, they need to love and be loved – both sexually and non-sexually. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary the other psychologists also emphasize and argue that belongingness is a fundamental human motivation and this desire is so universal that the need to belong is found across all cultures and different types of people. Many people become susceptible to loneliness, social anxiety, and clinical depression in the absence of this love or belonging element. This need for belonging may overcome the physiological and security needs, depending on the strength of the peer pressure. Both interpersonal rejection and acceptance are psychologically powerful events. Feeling disliked, excluded, unappreciated, or devalued can stir up negative emotions that include a lower self-esteem, aggressive actions and antisocial behavior in an individual.

Canvassing one feeling in the frame of words is the soul relief for any writer and Kamala Das is a woman gifted with extra ordinary ability to confess her hierarchy of need and sense of belongingness and frustration with supreme sensibility. She stood against the humiliation and exploitation of established traditions, customs and norms of society. Her poems reflect loneliness, frustration, rejection, helplessness and search for true love and sexual relationship, extra marital relations in search of love. Her poems show her failure in love and voice of the victimized women because love leads to self-realization and self-growth as it is only true love that satisfies romantic aspiration and emotional need.

She began to break taboos even with her early poetry, when in *The Looking Glass* she celebrated her sexuality and advised women to

*“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...Body which once under his touch had gleamed  
 Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute”*

But there is also the transmutation of her soul from a young, blunt, angry poetess to a philosopher when the poetess points out that the real difficulty for a woman lies in the fact that, when that man with whom she has had a most pleasurable experience of the sexual act, leaves her, never to come back, she would find it impossible to get a substitute for him. And, if she does not find a substitute, her life would become meaningless to her. Her eyes would keep searching for somebody like her departed lover, but she would not find anyone exactly like him. Her predicament would lead her into a state of total despair so that her body, which was at one time irresistibly alluring, would then lose its luster and charm and would become unexciting.

In *Summer in Calcutta (1965)*, Kamala Das surprises with her erratic and erotic linguistic turns of phrases, her unconventional images and symbols and her frank acceptance of the bitter truths of life. It communicates a state of mind under the duress of pain half-forgotten and thus communicates only an abstract sense of oneness and fragmentation caused by conditions of deliriousness. The poem which appears to be a descriptive one in fact results to be a

reminiscence of guilt. The poetess comparing the sun with a ripe orange seems to enjoy even the harshness of the heat.

*“I sip the  
 Fire, I drink and drink  
 Again, I am drunk  
 Yes, but on the gold  
 of suns, ...Dear, forgive  
 this moments lull in  
 wanting you, the blur  
 in memory.”*

Under the influence of the drink she forgets her worries and pains and indulges herself in fantasizing about her beloved. The poem celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over ‘the defeat of love.’ It is the feeling distinguishes Kamala Das’ reaction is her unconscious intimacy with this torture of yearning of belongingness. There is something of *The Sun Rising* of John Donne in it.

Kamala Das strongly complains that nobody is serious for the wishes, aspirations, individuality and even the frustrations of female and looks very determined to revolt against the conventional society’s definition of womanhood. In her poems, she brings out the emotional emptiness and sterility of married life and the intensity of misery of the wife who surrenders to her husband who is nauseating and with whom she has no emotional contact at all. According to her, marriage is the prison to women:

*“Who can  
 Help us who have lived so long  
 And have failed in love? The heart,  
 An empty cistern, waiting  
 Through long hours, fills itself  
 With coiling snakes of silence.”*

- The Freaks

Kamala Das believes love to be a fulfillment of soul relished through body – an experience of sex, beyond sex. Unfortunately, in each love relationship she finds her body accepted at the cost of her soul. As she herself opines, “My affairs have not been sexual. I am frigid by nature. Sex, I can get enough from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for.” She looks for a soul mate in her lover, the one who loves her body as well as her soul. “I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life” (*My Story*).

Her poetry reveals the dilemma and poignant situations faced by under the strain of longing for love, sex and resultant loneliness that even marriage does not give any solace from this kind of

loneliness. In married life also a woman becomes a subject to lust and sex. Instead of getting happiness in nuptial she gets in it a heap of tension and despair. Her longing for true love gives her neither the peace of mind nor the emotional fulfillment. When she wrote about ‘musk of sweat between the breast’, ‘menstrual blood’, ‘male/female body’, ‘female hungers’, ‘beat sorry breasts’, or ‘stand nude before the glass’, it was considered as ‘a far cry ... a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world.

It is felt that with her exclusive dealing with these problems, she at times seems to be too preoccupied with love and sex. However, if viewed with a different viewpoint, she does not advocate sexual affairs; she just portrays the feminine longings of the women of the society. Her protest against the prevalent systems of the society turns her into a ‘rebel’. Her offended feminine self goes on emotional wanderings attempting to explore an identity and freedom. Her poetry is concerned mostly with herself as a fiction of circumstances and sexual humiliations. Her voice is distinctly feminine intoning the organic mission of her female self’s longing for love because she quotes Jayadeva’s Gita Govindam. "I think of Radha and Krishna when I think of love. Life is all about various dimensions of love."As she once said in an interview to the Warrior, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little". It is not the attitude to look for love outside marital bond but it is a plain woman's longing for love from a man. To quote Devendra Kohli, “Her poetry is an analysis, an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman. Kamala das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman’s ambivalence, giving expression to it more nakedly than any other Indian woman poet has done.” The fundamental challenge that Das presents in her work goes to the focus of how identity should be constructed. In a truly postmodern sensibility, Das constructs identity in a multiplicity of ways, as evidenced in each poem and in a variety of manners. In this light, identity is not something quick or easy to identify, but rather layered in sediments that force one to delve and examine in order to construct.

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