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## **Feministic Ideas of Kamala Das and Her Quest for Love**

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**Abstract:** Kamala Das distinguishes herself as a person and a poet who wages a relentless war against the male-dominated society to achieve sexual and domestic freedom. She shares a common perception with radical feminists on the sexual and domestic life of a woman. Her ideas on the point have a striking resemblance with those of Kate Millet as projected in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), wherein she analyses the repressive role of the male and the submissive role of the female signifying the need of a change in the attitude. The place of Kamala Das is therefore rated very high among the feminist poets. K.R. Ramachandran Nair (1993) points out that she “is perhaps the most feminine among the Indian poets writing in English and her feminine sensibility is manifested not in her fulminations against the male world but in her rapture and excitement in receiving pure love.” (99)

**Keywords:** Feministic Ideas, Kamala Das, Quest for Love.

Kamala Das is a bilingual poet writing both in English and Malayalam. She is pre-eminently a poet but her place as a writer of prose is also quite secure. She inherited poetry as a family legacy. As a child she must have seen her mother composing poems. Nair (1993) rightly remarks that “Kamala Das was nurtured in an atmosphere of poetry. Poetry came to her effortlessly and in later life she had only to decide the medium of its expression.” (2) She started writing poems from an early age. As told by her in *My Story*, she wrote her first poem when she was merely six “about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. Each poem of mine made me cry.” (8)

The voice of despair and despondency found in her poetry seems to be inborn, which kept changing its hue in accordance with the mood, priorities, and the age of the poet. If in the childhood the lost head of the doll troubled her, in adolescence her ordinary looks, especially her dark complexion, discrimination being meted out in the school, and the indifferent attitude of her ‘mismatched’ parents were



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the cause of her agony. After marriage the attitude of her husband, which she did not find up to her expectations, became the main concern for her, so much so that she eventually turned rebellious and decided to lead a promiscuous life. Thereafter, with the passage of time and her declining physical capacities, she came to be overtaken by such serious thoughts as life and death, soul and God, mortality and immortality etc. She even found her various extramarital relations incapable of providing the kind of fulfilling relationship she was trying to seek so vigorously. She, therefore, turned to Lord Krishna hailing him as an ideal lover. But as per her personal traits she did not feel satisfied with this abstract love and eventually decided to return to her husband, her prime 'betrayed.' These changing moods of the poet invariably find eloquent expression in her poems and other writings. Thus, she distinguished herself as a poet of inadequacy, disappointment, and dejection. However, the rebellious instinct of the poet did not allow her to sit idle leading her to fight the ills of the male-dominated society in her own peculiar way. Though it brought her infamy, it could not deter her from going her own way. This turned her into a confessional poet and through her own example she was able to raise certain vital social issues like early marriage, mismatched marriage, unequal treatment of women etc. prevalent in the Indian society thereby giving her the status of a feminist poet.

Several Indo-Anglian women writers have made immense contribution to the feminist cause. To name a few among them, Kamla Markandaya has visualized various conflicts a woman has to face at different levels, which include both physical and emotional. Sarojini Dandekar refers to the conflict between tradition and modernity in contemporary India. Nayantara Sahgal has sought to project in her novels a woman who clamours for freedom from injustice meted out to her in her marital home and therefore wants to walk out of it. Similarly, woman in the novels of Shashi Deshpande also wishes to be free so as to be able to decide upon her own destiny thereby saving herself from the exploitation by the male-dominated society. Raji Narasimhan in her novel *Forever Free* portrays a married woman who aspires for self-fulfilment and moves from one man to another in search of the same but eventually fails in her endeavours. Similarly, in her another novel *The Sky Changes* she portrays a woman who having been separated from her husband becomes a writer and who uses her body to protect her interests saying confidently "my body is not my jail. It is my boat. I will row to freedom in my boat." (47) Arundhati Roy



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in her *The God of Small Things* also asserts that with the growing awareness of her potential now the woman has come to use her body as a weapon to achieve her goal.

Kamala Das also belongs to the same tradition. In her poetry various feminist aspects particularly those pertaining to love and sex find adequate expression. She has been able to produce a poignant confessional poetry, a mode which she shares with several other poets world over such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, M.L. Rosenthal, Sylvia Plath, Gauri Deshpande, Suniti Namjoshi, and Chitra Narendran etc. The dominant theme of her poetry is undoubtedly love, sex, and frustration. Written in a confessional tone, the poetry of Kamala Das is so personalized that very often it seems to lose its relevance for a common reader. But while tracing the feminine sensibility in the poetry of Kamala Das, one must appreciate its individuality, dynamism, intensity, and its being rooted in the Indian soil. She “explores her inner world of failings, frustrations and relationships” (Daruwala 1980: xxvi). One of the most impressive qualities of Kamala Das is her ability to remain true, frank, and uninhibited in her expressions, while writing on such delicate aspects as love, unhappy married life, and frustrating relationships. But at the same time, she becomes quite apologetic when faced with a hostile reaction from the society. This *ipso facto* renders her position preposterous and provides the critics a good debating ground.

Kamala Das is highly sensitive and finds it difficult to obey any dictate against her wishes either from an individual or the society at large. In the spell of this rebelliousness, she becomes prone to commit at times such acts as are against the norms of the society. Independent as she is by nature, sometimes out of whims or carelessness she would not do works she ought to do. Such works done against the norms of the society or left undone on personal ground fill the poet with remorse and it is out of sheer repentance and as a matter of expiation that she chooses the mode of confession to relieve her of the mental burden. Not being able to visit her waiting grandmother is one such thing for which she finds it difficult to forgive herself. Similarly, she also finds herself at the defensive for cheating her husband and indulging in extra-marital relations. In her poems these two points have been highlighted as the main issues constituting the bulk of her confession.





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In her poem 'Composition' the poet gives the rationale of her confessions saying that it is no use feeling ashamed or regretting for the guilt already committed and it is by making confession, which she describes as 'peeling off... layers', that one can get a relief. She also says that by making confessions as such one can 'reach closer to the soul'. Thus, the poet finds confession as an effective means to mitigate the ignominy arising out of the guilt committed by her. In the Preface to *My Story* also she makes a similar statement to justify her act of writing an autobiography as she says, "I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience." In fact, departing with 'scrubbed-out' conscience and 'reaching closer to the soul' signify one and the same end as both are meant to relieve the poet of the sense of guilt she carried on account of her unconventional conduct. Thus the confessions made by the poet both in her poems and autobiography are quite plain and simple and there is no mystery whatsoever about them to search them treating the same as "a million dollar question" as S.D. Sharma (Kaur, 1995: 2) is inclined to do. The poet herself makes this point absolutely clear when in her poem 'Composition' she regards her confessions as "the ordinary events of an ordinary life."

Kamala Das in her poetry presents the persona of a woman with an offended psyche, who had an inborn grudge against the society. Her mental trauma had its genesis in the sour relationship that existed between her parents whom she describes in *My Story* as "horribly mismatched." She also suggests that if their marriage survived it was only because of her mother whose "timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony" (4-5). She also noted with dissent the terms dictated by her father to her mother telling her as to how to live and what to wear. As mentioned in her autobiography, her father under the influence of Gandhi soon after their betrothal asked her mother to wear only Khadi of white or off white colour. As a result of this, her mother after wedding removed all her ornaments except the 'mangalsutra' and looked like a widow but still did not make any protest as she was "mortally afraid of the dark stranger" i.e. her father (4). These early experiences of an unhappy family where the woman was treated as a slave of the husband probably led Kamala Das to entertain a prejudice against the menfolk. Besides, she also faced racial discrimination at her school that was meant mainly for European children. But it was something obvious from the very beginning that she was not one who could take things lying down. Therefore, once



when her brother got hurt in the process of being teased by one of the white boys, she scratched the face of the offender in a fit of rage.

It thus becomes quite evident that Kamala Das *ab initio* had a rebellious instinct who could not tolerate any sort of discrimination and injustice being meted out to her. Her anti-male stance became quite pronounced when she suspected outrightly the bona fides of the assurance of freedom given to her by her husband at the time of marriage. Not only this, she from the day one began to doubt the character of her husband on a very flimsy ground. She also dubbed him selfish and always dominated by sexual motives as he, on the very first night, allegedly treated her savagely and brutally. She also accused him of having been involved sexually with his maidservants and also of homosexual relations. Aggrieved by the flirtatious behaviour of her husband, she decided to adopt a promiscuous life herself even going to the extent of indulging in a man-hunt with the help of her trusted maid-servant unmindful of the fact that such sexual aberrations might cost her dear.

Kamala Das appears to be a woman of complex personality and a blend of discordant elements. For instance, she hates sex and is oppressed by the over-sexuality of her husband who, she says, is capable of arousing with his “nimble finger tips” only “skin’s lazy hungers” approaching her like “carnivorous plants” (The Freaks). But on the contrary she herself tries to seek a so-called fulfilling love desperately allowing her in the process to be sexually used by anyone who comes her way. She outrightly dubs her husband as “selfish and a coward” who “neither loved nor used her” and “was a ruthless watcher” (The Sunshine Cat) but at the same time looks to him for peace and security at the time of need. It is again he to whom she eventually wants to return after having failed to locate the love of her imagination outside the legal orbit. Thus she seems to cultivate a love-hate relationship with her husband. Besides, she seems to be bold enough to openly disclose all the secrets of her personal life saying that she must “let her mind striptease” and “extrude autobiography” (Composition). But at the same time, in the face of hostile reactions to her shameless disclosures, she retracts from all her allegations. Thus she disregards the norms of the society like a rebel but, faced with a hostile reaction, she surrenders with the same speed and alacrity. She dubs maidservants and city-dwelling women as adulterous which is indeed a very sweeping and objectionable remark (Das 1988: 183). But paradoxically, in spite of these uncharitable remarks



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against women, she is still hailed by some of her critics, like Iqbal Kaur, as the champion of feminist cause and a spokesperson of the women of every shade. Mrs. Kaur, who went to interview her and stayed with her family for three days, found Kamala Das as an ideal mother, wife, and mother-in-law. But to sheer disappointment of the onlookers, this ideal lady later at the age of 67 marries a man of 39 years converting herself into a Muslim to suit the religious commitments of her young bridegroom. This shows that Kamala Das is a woman of paradoxical traits and this ambivalence makes it difficult to form a definite opinion about the real traits of her personality.

The rebellious attitude of Kamala Das is mainly demonstrated by the fact that she never cared for her husband and indulged in illegitimate relations with several men. The man was, in fact, so meek that he had no guts and courage to prevail upon his erring wife and to bring her to reason. But, on the contrary, she always tried to justify her objectionable behaviour, blaming the husband on various counts e.g. for his lustful and savage behaviour, for sparing no time for her and children by remaining over-busy with his office work, for having illicit relations with maid-servants, cousins, and sisters-in-law, so on and so forth. In her poem 'Composition' she airs her frustrations saying that she has learnt 'friendship cannot endure' and that 'blood-ties do not satisfy' and therefore resolves to seek love out of the 'legal orbit' and to become corrupt 'at least physically' (Das 1988: 95).

This confessional statement lays bare the psyche of the woman who, driven by her nymphomaniac urges, ventures to break all the canons of morality by indulging in promiscuous relations, all in the name of seeking the so-called tenderness. How could a man who, as per the poet's own version recorded in *My Story*, did never offend her, and tolerated all her ignoble deeds addressing her time and again with such affectionate words as 'my baby,' 'an intelligent girl' etc., and who attended to her personally during her frequent illnesses and who always discharged his marital obligations and domestic responsibilities providing her all type of protection and security be called as devoid of tenderness is beyond comprehension. The poet by offering different arguments at different times to justify her untoward conduct herself made her case weak and ambivalent. The fact remains that rather than anything else her own promiscuous nature was at the root of all her problems. Besides, the type of complete man which she was yearning for as a love-mate was impossible to be found in a particular individual.



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Kamala Das cultivates a love-hate relationship with her husband. She openly praises him as an intellectual, hard-working, dedicated, and caring man whose very presence she views as an assurance of security. In her poems as well as autobiography, she has conspicuously brought it home that her husband was a large-hearted man who always adopted a forgive-and-forget policy towards his ever-erring wife. But as against this, the element of hatred in the poet towards her husband was far more dominating. As a matter of fact, the major chunk of her creativity has been devoted to accusing her husband on various counts and justifying her aberrations. However, the fact that emanates from her poems clearly suggests that she is not an ordinary type of woman to settle down within the ambit of marriage. She remains ever-frustrated and cultivates an insatiate urge for an imaginary type of love which eventually turns her into a man-hunter, promiscuous and nymphomaniac. However, she vehemently denies such tags being attached to her (Das 1988: 192).

But there is no denial to the fact that she seems to suffer from an ‘asking for more’ syndrome which forces her to change lovers often on use-and-throw basis. The idea of getting freedom from the husband as such, has been the main thrust of the poetry of Kamala Das expressed eloquently in her poems like ‘I Shall Some Day,’ ‘Composition,’ ‘The Prisoner,’ ‘Substitute’ etc. and in her prose writings. There are critics who, expressing outrightly their sympathies towards the poet, accuse her husband of not according her a fair deal. They, however, miss to appreciate that both the persons were temperamentally different. While the husband was having a bureaucratic temperament, who always gave precedence to his office work over anything else, the wife was interested only in the fascinating world of love and sex. The poet, therefore, found it impossible to sit content and tried desperately to find love beyond the ‘legal orbit’ of marriage and indulged in extra-marital relationships. In her poem ‘Substitute’ she says that “After that love became a swivel-door/When one went out, another came in” (Das 1996: 54). In this way the poet raised a banner of revolt not only against her husband but the age-old norms of the Hindu society which treated the marital bond as sacrosanct and the institution of marriage as a sacrament. She further resolved openly to be unfaithful to her husband ‘at least physically’ (Das 1988: 95) without bothering about the fallaciousness of the fact that one could not become physically corrupt unless one was mentally corrupt first. The moral degeneration of the poet, despite her very many excuses to justify the same, in fact, looks





quite askant in many ways. Under these circumstances, one simply feels pity for the poor husband who after day's toil for earning bread for the family and discharging his marital obligations wanted to sleep peacefully to prepare himself for another day's work, his poet-wife wanted him to share her unusual fancies. But while expecting a lot from her husband, the poet makes a shameful disclosure of her worth as a housewife in her article 'I Have Lived Beautifully' that "I was never entrusted with housekeeping... My only duties were the bed-connected ones" (Das 1975: 41). Besides, the excuses put forth by the poet to vindicate her extra-marital sexual affairs are wholly untenable, preposterous and farce and are not capable of justifying her sexual aberrations made in the name of finding out an ideal lover which she herself was not sure of getting. In her interview to Iqbal Kaur the poet, out of sheer desperation, thus says: "You find me one human being. Today I am ready to walk out with that human being who loves me" (Kaur 1995: 167).

In short, the poet fails in her bid to find the kind of love she yearned for even outside the wedlock. In her poem 'Captive' she describes her act of changing lovers by way of the metaphor "running from one gossamer lane to another" implying thereby that even after reverting to such unsavoury designs as to defile the sanctity of marriage vow, she still fails in finding a true lover resulting in her frustration to persist more vigorously. This arouses in the poet a sense of distraction against the worldly pleasure symbolized by love and lust, and tends to drive her to seek love in Lord Krishna, the universal lover, saying "Only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine...." (Das 1988: 92).

The poet seems to have great fascination for the love life of Lord Krishna whom she adored from her early childhood and felt that only he could provide her a fulfilling love. Therefore, when she had a satisfying relationship with a dark-complexioned elderly fellow known for his 'fabulous lusts' she hailed him as Krishna (Das 1988: 180). But, despite it, she as per her unstable mind thought that even Krishna ditched his beloved Radha, went to Mathura, and forgot to return and was, therefore, equally cruel implying thereby that turning to him would also not serve her purpose. So, she eventually thought that she should get solace only in the company and care of her husband.

In the above description three contradictory facets of the mood of the poet are perceptible. First, seeking satisfaction in marital life; second, search for an ideal lover and adoring Krishna as one; and third,



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finding fault with the company of Krishna again thinking to return to her husband. It is thus clear that in her search for a fulfilling love the poet moves in a circular orbit. She deserts her husband, not satisfied with his company, indulges in indiscriminate sexual affairs and becomes fed up with the same, then turns to Lord Krishna and allegedly finding him also cruel eventually resolves to return to the old home, which she describes in her poem 'A Relationship' "That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace/And even death nowhere else but here in/My betrayer's arms...." (Das 1973: 41).

Thus, tired of her love experiments she realizes that she can find peace only by returning to her marital home. But here too she doesn't forget to call her husband a 'betrayer' expressing thereby her deep antipathy for him as also to shift upon him the burden as usual for all the ills that have happened with her. Interestingly, this home-coming too did not prove final as is revealed by the fact that after the death of her husband she again started indulging in her old cravings for seeking love which led her to take perhaps the most drastic step of her life by marrying at an old age a Muslim much younger than her. Thus, during the life-time of her husband, in the quest of an ideal lover, she moved in a circular way in the process of which she walked out of the wedlock and having failed in her endeavour eventually returned to the same completing the circle. But after the death of her husband, she left the circle walking downward thereby turning the circle of 'O' into a 'Q' and putting a big question mark against her real traits and personality.

Kamala Das also gives a philosophical twist to her promiscuous way of life raising such vital questions as God and peace, body and soul, life and death, mortality and immortality etc. However, her ideas on such spiritual aspects are somewhat different from the orthodox philosophy as conceived by the Vedas and the Upanishads particularly when she confuses soul with the *jeevatman* treating the same as subject to rebirth. She also fancies God as her mate who can afford a lasting relationship. In this respect Kamala Das is comparable to the Sufi saints who also worship God as their lover and mate. As for her idea about the world, she finds it full of inadequacies, misery, and pain which she describes as the root cause of her own unhappiness. In her interview to Mrs. Iqbal Kaur (1995) the poet dwells at length upon this point saying, "I am unhappy- because everywhere people are trying to make others unhappy... I am unhappy because of the animals that get slaughtered for no fault of their own. I am unhappy for the human beings who get slaughtered, bombed. We have reached an unhappy stage in life, all of us. It is true and our



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country is going to suffer more, I feel. Who has got the right to be happy now knowing that right around the corner this new cult of terrorism is flourishing- a cult which will attract our children. They will not have any other religion. They will gravitate towards terrorism because it means power although short-lived” (Kaur 1995: 162-163).

The poet thus recounts the causes of her unhappiness which include both personal and general. She eventually arrives at the conclusion that “we have reached an unhappy stage in life, all of us.” This universalisation of the grief reminds one of ‘The Four Noble Truths’ of Lord Buddha according to which grief is the fundamental reality of human existence and one can get over it only by exercising restraint on the vagaries of mind and senses. Herein the poet flaunts her knowledge of the basic theme of the Indian philosophy of grief being a common phenomenon and the will of man to become free from the worldly afflictions by way of exercising control on his desires. The poet, however, gives a passing reference to all this and does not do anything concrete to mitigate the sufferings of others, nor does she herself seem to follow the same and mend her ways by exercising control on her sensual pursuits.

In a nutshell, the dominating feature of the woman protagonist of the poetry of Kamala Das is love and lust in the pursuit of which she remains ever busy. The sensual elements in her are so powerful that, despite her best efforts, she fails to overcome them. Even the mythological and spiritual flavours added to it too fail to subside the pungency of its intense smell. In the same way her falling health does also fail to curb her physical cravings. Even in a state of despondency she fancies the presence of her lover around and laments over the loss of her youth saying, “I have left colourful youth behind. Perhaps I mixed my pleasures as carelessly as I mixed my drinks and passed out too soon on the couch of life” (Das 1988: 218-219).

The poet thus, despite her total failure in her quest for an ideal lover, eventually fails to control her physical desires. In this process she not only tries men of different shades and age groups but also Lord Krishna, the God incarnate. Therefore, even after turning “weary and frigid” with her heart resembling “a cracked platter” (219) she still could not become free from the obsession of being loved by others as she writes: “But at daybreak lovers still cling at doorways with wet eyes, wet limbs, speaking the words I once spoke” (219) implying thereby that although she on her part has given up her chase for love, yet she is still



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something most sought for and persons still hover around her to get the alms of love which she once squandered quite lavishly. The implied meaning of all this is that the poet is unable to give up her physical cravings which the future course of her life proves when she is beheld remarrying at the age of sixty-seven. Thus, giving mythological and spiritual hue to love is proved to be a farce and, in fact, the poet could never become free from her sensual cravings.

In the same way the hollowness of Kamala Das's role as a feminist poet is laid bare in her poem 'A Feminist's Lament' wherein even at the fag end of her career she finds herself not yet free from lustfulness as she envies the conduct of Phoolan Devi who, she says, has settled for 'weekly orgasms.' In this poem she also expresses her negative opinion about the need of having economic independence for women, which is by far the basis of feminism and feminist movement, saying that "to feed her, clothe her, and buy for her 1000 sq.ft. flat with a loft for storing the debris of passing years, I was never that ideal dream." Thus, the poet controverts the need for independent space for women which Virginia Woolf ardently espouses in her *A Room of One's Own*. By showing her disinterestedness in all this saying, "I was never that ideal dream" Kamala Das, strikes at the very root of the feminist ideal of economic independence for women and prefers to settle for the so-called weekly orgasms. Curiously, after the death of her husband she gives one to understand through her poem 'Stock Taking' that she is still sought after for love by many, while there are a few others who seek to preach morality to her. The poet rebuffs both- to the former by saying "Do not beguile me with a promise of immortal love" and to the latter by saying, "Do not thrust upon me the scriptures compiled by sages wise and celibate or pacifying philosophies." She however makes her intention clear to opt for the first alternative by telling: "I need a lull in the living/A pause to take stock of all." This shows that for her the satisfaction of sensual desires is far more important than economic independence.

In fact, 'A Feminist's Lament' is one of the leading poems of Kamala Das in the present context which, read with some such poems as 'Composition', 'An Introduction', 'The Suicide', 'Blood', 'I Shall Some Day', 'A Relationship', 'The Old Playhouse', 'Convicts', 'The Freaks', 'Stock Taking' etc., and her autobiography *My Story* and other prose writings, affords a complete insight into the real psyche of Kamala Das. In them we find her sensitivity, concerns, priorities, predicament, frustrations etc. expressed



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candidly and at times obliquely, wherein her confessional and autobiographical overtone has always been perceptible. She, however, appears to be espousing the feminist cause while expressing her anguish against the male authority, but by placing sexual fulfilment above all which is possible only by obtaining the favour of a man she concedes the male superiority thereby controverting her feminist claims.

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