

## THE UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCES OF KAMALA DAS IN SUMMER IN CALCUTTA

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Kamala Das is one of the most distinctive and original of Indian—poets writing in English today. All her poetry is in the nature of a ‘psychic striptease’. In points of enjoyment and applause, she stands next to none in the whole length and breadth of Indian poetry in English today.

Kamala Das as a poet treads on familiar grounds, and she never tries to transgress her self-imposed restrictions. She is after all, a woman with a narrow range of experience in life, but she makes the best of the crippling situation around. In this context, she reminds us of another woman writer, Jane Austen, who is so well known for her ‘two inches of Ivory’. Like Austen, Kamala Das also moves within her limited range with grace and skill. The advantage of this range is that it offers to the reader only what the writer has personally felt and realized and nothing borrowed from the source.

Kamala Das’ poetry is inspired by the unpleasant experiences of her conjugal life. She has expressed the emotions of love, lust and frustration with deep intensity and in a passionate manner. Her first collection of poem ‘Summer In Calcutta’ represents the heat of her Calcutta experiences. Her soul was agonised and her poems give expression to the deep agony, sufferings and disappointment in an impassioned manner. She herself expresses her mental state in her remarkable autobiography entitled ‘My story’.

In this collection (summer In Calcutta] of poems the poetic intensity of the writer is apparent. She successfully communicates the mood of aridity and sterility that fills the poem combined with its biting irony.

Watching the dance of Eunuch’s was an exciting experience for the poet and she gives vent to her melancholy and also her appealing aridity. In her imagination the poet considers the eunuchs as some mysterious creature. The intensity of poetic experience is enhanced by sinister ‘Birth-death’ contrast.

The publication of 'Summer in Calcutta' changed the history of Indo-Anglian poetry, especially of women writers. It was a time when "...Indian women had moved on from such colonial and nationalist themes as the rewriting of legends, praise of peasants and from general ethical statements to writing about personal experiences. While outmoded diction and sentiments were at last overtaken in favor of a more contemporary and less artificial manner, the subject matter of the women poets was often limited to well-meaning platitudes about romantic love, which were treated without depth, complexity, interest or even the projection of much emotion."<sup>1</sup>

Summer in Calcutta, presented to the Indian readers a different type of poetry. Earlier poets looked at the Holy Books, Historical characters for their themes, while she looked into her own self. Her poems were like parcels of dynamite. It could explode on your face, specially spreading its contents all around bringing to naked eye the oppression and enslavement of women in our own Modern age. As Keki Daruwalla rightly says, "The intensity of feeling, ably controlled in her better poems, and the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex, immediately won for her a big audience. Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near neurotic world. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout."<sup>2</sup> In fact, she goes diving deep into her own self, unraveling mysteries which were never known to Indian women, or more honestly speaking, none dared to unravel them in the past, in such a way, in such an orthodox, custom-ridden, conservative society. Such poems would have been burnt down had she lived half a century ago and dared to write the stuff she writes now. Bruce King is right when he writes, "Das's themes go beyond stereotyped longings and complaints. Even her feelings of loneliness and disappointments are part of a longer than life personality obsessive in its awareness of its self, yet creating; a drama of selfhood."<sup>3</sup>

She can never persuade her to forget that she is a woman, who craves for love, companionship and understanding. When she published her poems, "on the one hand it produced derisive laughter but on the other, more scholarly people often appreciated it as a maiden effort of an Indian woman to express herself without much inhibition circumscribed by the false and hypocritical rules of a conservative society."<sup>4</sup>

A closer look at her poems will show that love, sex, marriage and companionship were important subjects to her. Hari Mohan Prasad and Chandra Prasad Singh have understood these points clearly when they write,

**Her poetry has often been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over exposer of body or 'snippets of trivia.' But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poet is the poetry fully obliterating Eliot's distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating 'A poet's raw material', she says, is not**

**stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.<sup>5</sup>**

She wrote her poetry, on her own self discovering and expressing the different layers of hypocrisy, which got over coated in our day today life. But she was bitterly criticised for that by the high priests of social morality. Her idealistic ideas of love and domesticity became a casualty of rash criticism, for which she was not fully prepared.

While she finds it difficult to adjust to the barrenness of a married life, her childhood experiences and little joys sustains her in the cities. According to Bruce King the hollowness of her adult life is always overshadowed by the innocence of her childhood. There is a possible contrast between the village life and the city life in many of her poems. Her grand-mother is in her inner mind some kind of a complex which gives her the strength to face the realities of life. The sense of loss, depravity, alienation and superficiality get submerged under the 'yellow green pond' of her native village. She becomes sensitive the demands of active life, and its needs.

She feels repelled against the existence under the burden of sickening experiences of her later life. But life is always interesting and it has to be lived. Her recollections from childhood afford a soothing effect. Bijay Kumar Das says in this connection,

**Very often it is noted she leans heavily on her memory and from thereon she leaps on to a new subject in the poem. Thus, the past she recounts may be seen as a symbol of old human ties. Placed alongside with the present where she is searching for love, the past recalled throws light on the contemporary values.<sup>6</sup>**

She often feels that love is a hollow word as the male dominated society, shows no understanding of a woman's aspirations,

**...Why should I remember or bear  
That sweet sounding name, pinned to  
Me, a medal, undeservingly  
Gained at moments when, all of  
Me is ablaze with life?<sup>7</sup>**

If many poems speak of unhappiness and the desire for an all absorbing love, others are filled with Das's discovery of the life around her on the streets and in the bedrooms. While marriage has hurt her ego, leaving her unfulfilled, her poems also record a woman enjoying the newness of the world as she wanders the streets and pursues her own interests.

She feels frustrated about her freedom that her husband offered her, when she got married. She expected a husband as understanding, as caring and as authoritative as her grand-mother who looked after her, corrected and advised her. It was a matter of disappointment when her husband told her:

**You may have freedom, as much as you want, My soul balked at this diet of ash,  
Freedom became my dancing shoe how well I danced and danced without rest,  
Until the shoes turned grimy on my feet, and I began to have doubts.**

### **Composition**

Throughout her writing career she searches for love; genuine and understanding love.

**When she thinks of her freedom and life without checks, the memory of that house at Nalapat comes back to her as a soothing thought. She dreams of that house and thinks of going there and listening to the frozen air and bringing an armful of darkness to lie behind her bedroom like a brooding dog, probably to keep a watch on her. The very thought of that house at Malabar created a sort of energy in her and an inspiration to live and love.<sup>8</sup>**

But when she realizes that it is far away from her ancestral home in Malabar, in some far off city, it produces a sense of loss, frustration and a sense of torture in her. In her poem "A Hot Noon in Malabar" she writes in this respect:

**....Yes, this is  
A noon for wild men, wild thoughts wild love. To  
Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet  
Stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my  
Home in Malabar, I so far away...**

In far away barren cities where people neither love nor care each other; she spent her time counting the stars. She could not adjust to the new environs, which did not bother to give her love or kindness. In such a situation, probably she turned to other men, yearning for love, affection and caring.

Her search for love and kindness ends up in a barren waste land, where there is neither life nor hope. She spends her life in agony and frustrations, repenting and weeping most of the time.

**They let her slide from pegs of sanity into  
A bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping  
For sleep had lost its use; I shall build walls with tears,  
She said, walls to shut me in.... Her husband shut her  
In every morning; locked her in a room of books...**

### **The Sunshine Cat**

She had dreams of a loving husband who could provide her the bliss of a paradise. Instead, she feels the heat of a funeral pyre with her head constantly burning. She writes in her poem, "The Invitations,"

**.....As long as I remember, I want no other. On the bed with him, the boundaries of Paradise had shrunk to a more Six by two and afterwards, when we walked Out together, they Widened to hold the unknown city.... End me, cries the sea. Think of yourself lying on a funeral pyre with a burning head.**

It is these frustrations which tempt her to commit suicide. 'The invitation' is from the sea to "Bathe cool, stretch your limbs on cool, secret sands, pillow your head on anemones."

It is therefore; clear that, "her romantic ideas about love and home have been shattered by an insensitive husband and the cries to whom she turned for love. Her husband hurt her feelings and evoked a sense of disappointment in her. The very first attempt that he made to express his love and affection towards her produced a negative emotion in her."<sup>9</sup>

This point has been dealt in detail in her autobiography, My Story

**Before I left for Calcutta, my relative (her future husband) pushed me into a dark comer behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was a goodbye.<sup>10</sup>**

**"This 'goodbye' assumes significance when one considers her alienation from her husband in later years after their marriage. Though basically he was not a bad man Kamala Das could not like him whole-heartedly. One of the reasons, though only psychological was that he was a close relative and they grew up together. She, it seems admired him as a friend and almost as a brother. But the sudden change of roles to bride and bridegroom was a little beyond her imaginations.<sup>11</sup>**

She has also given graphic accounts of her relations with him, before their marriage right from her early childhood. From the following account of her relations with him in the early days, one can understand the embarrassment that she felt when he behaved differently and showed interest in her as a woman.

Her admiration for the man is clear, but it doesn't show glimpses of her love and affection as a man or as a lover. In My Story, she has given expression to her ideas of an ideal lover. She writes,

**“I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands, and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life.”<sup>12</sup>**

She, further, feels unhappy about her marriage, as she appeared to be a puppet and the strings of which being held firmly by her parents. She had no freedom in selecting an ideal lover for her. Others did all the planning for her marriage and she was not even consulted on the subject, leave alone, their trying to know about her prefer. In her own words, “My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives.”<sup>13</sup> What hurt her most was this indifference to her individuality from her relations. As a modern woman she never liked the way in which they moved about and fixed as important an affair as her marriage without, even trying to know her ideas and aspirations. This attitude of her relations actually spoilt her life, according to her and she considered herself a helpless victim:

**I was a victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps out of our union, there would be born a few children.<sup>14</sup>**

This sense of helplessness and alienation prompts her to become a rebel and she looks down upon all her relations with contempt and disgust.

**...Marriage meant, nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours.<sup>15</sup>**

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