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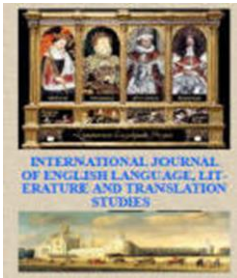
RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY IN KAMALA DAS' POETRY

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ABSTRACT

A probe into the religious sensibility of any writer throws up some relevant questions. The questions have been raised very early both in the English and the Vedic traditions of thought. However, the questions and the answers are pertinent even today in any discussion about religious awareness in poetry. In an exploration of Kamala Das's written works, one comes across several instances when experience precedes faith as in narratives of her early childhood experiences of Krishna and Kali and in some of her poems about Krishna like "Krishna" (Raveendran 1991, 54). "The Maggots" (1991, 46) and "Radha-krishna" (1991, 47). In these specific instances, as in several others, faith stems from experience to complement the other instances that led to kamala Das's works in which faith led to existence. Hence an overall analysis of Kamala Das's written work gives a complex, dynamic picture in the relationship between faith and experience. The self in its moments of ecstasy and clear lucidity turns back on itself and becomes aware of its imperfections. This leads to a sense of pain and humility. The seeker consciously tries to bridge the gap between the self and God by trying to strip away the superfluous and unreal paths of the former and trying to sublimate all that is remaining.

Keywords: religious sensibility, spiritual tenor, imperfection, faith, exaltation.

Introduction

Kamala Das is one of the leading names in modern Indian English Poetry. Her works have had intense critical scrutiny from different angles. In spite of all this the spiritual tenor in her poetry has remained largely unexplored. It has either been ignored completely in some earlier studies or has been pushed to the background in others. Mohan Lal Sharma begins his essay from the stance that the religious dimension in Kamala Das is not the result of a well cut out philosophy but of casual moods and experiences. The poems, as Sharma points out, show a tendency to view the body in combination with the soul and not in isolation from it. The body is the medium through which all the exaltations of the soul are communicated. At the same time Kamala Das is not blind to its limitations. She loathes the act of physical union devoid of love and cries out against the severe injustices meted out to women by male just. Sharma views the Krishna myth, so predominant in Kamala Das's poetry as the factor that impelled her to enter into multifarious relationships with men which in turn brought her into contact with the world of dichotomous physical experiences. Poems like "Advice to Fellow Swimmers", "Ghanshyam" and "An Introduction" show how Kamala Das moves from

body consciousness to the cosmic consciousness or consciousness of the universal 'I'. For Kamala Das, poetry as a means of self-realization and the progress in this path, according to Mohan Lal Sharma, may affect her expressive enthusiasm in inverse proportion.

Kamala Das's love poetry has two dimensions viz., the poet's devoted search for an ideal lover (of which Krishna is symbolic) in defiance of social conventions, and her powerful relationship with men. The second aspect, leads to a fervent exhortation by Kamala Das to woman to move out from their stereotyped space. Kamala Das's love poetry is the result of a tension in the mind of the female protagonist, who is always denied whatever she craved for. The obsessive hunt after the ideal love (which is the spiritual experienced through the physical) lands her invariably into various relationship most of which give her only just or the physical devoid of the spiritual, by the poet to give her search a mythic dimension.

The Poetry of Kamala Das" comes out with a new understanding of religiousness .It is the search for a private value system that can regulate and give meaning to one's existence rather than a blind adherence to tradition and convention. A realization of the eternal relevance of the interaction between the individual and the universe constitutes this search. Kamala Das's poetry abounds in religiousness on account of the intensity with which she speaks out against an existing system full of decay, squalor and hypocrisy after identifying a personal value system. In fact Kamala Das is full of scepticism and distrust towards such an institutionalised programme which breeds the most perverse type of suspicion, violence and hearted towards a fellow religion as her poem "The Inheritance" illustrates:

This then was our only inheritance, this ancient virus that we nurtured in the soul so
That when at sundown, the Muezzin's high wail sounded from
The mosque, the chapel bells announced the angelus, and
From the temple rose the Brahmin's assonant chant, we
Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a hate (Das 1986, 20)

By 'spiritual', it means that illuminated experience of the transcendental at a point of time (hence the experience is prompted by the events of the past) that finds expression not necessarily through relativistic features like space, time and language, though they may be sources of expression. The word 'mystical' has been used to denote any awareness or perception other than the normal day-to-day perception through the senses. This term is so vast that it includes at one end of its spectrum an embodied awareness of God through heightened activity of the senses (the Krishna factor with reference to Kamala Das) and an impersonal or disembodied awareness of God that follows an introspective spiritual quest.

Denis de Rouge Mont from a reader-oriented position points out that poetic expression, rather than incarnating realities, is found to veil it when a person is in an illuminated state. The reader in his/her day-to-day state of perfection is under the impression that through poetry s/he has been made accessible to the otherwise inaccessible experience. But when s/he is in an illuminated state of perception there is the realization that the poetic medium had been hiding or veiling the picture of reality all along. The reality exists in a state which cannot be expressed through language and hence it has no alternate meanings, i.e., it exists, not because there is something different to itself but because it is itself. Poetry operating through language, fancy and imagination introduces alternate meanings and hence veils the picture.

Kamala Das's poems have elicited voluminous response on the critical front. It would be appropriate to make a distinction between the modern and traditional understanding of confessionalism. The modern understanding of confessionalism implies an existential position in which the individual identifies his/her existence as preceding every other thing including awareness of that existence. In such cases poetry is no doubt cathartic, but not necessarily purgatory. In other words it stops short of being an outlet for private thoughts, desires and despairs. The American confessional poets like Sylvia plath, Anne sexton and Robert Lowell follow this understanding. In the older understanding with religious connotations, poetry is not just a tool for getting some sort of self-relief but more a starting point in the search for something higher. Underhill speaks of purgation as the second stage in the evolution of mystic consciousness. In this stage the individual is aware of his/her limitations with respect to God and strives to reduce the inequalities. But there is more to

spiritual realisation than a disciplined attempt to rid oneself of all imperfections. Thus confession, one of the ways prescribed to activate this process of purgation, is the stepping stone to a larger spiritual awakening. The confessions of St. Augustine and Rousseau have to be seen in this way.

Chronologically speaking, Kamala Das is very much in the first category. Her poems contain a narcissistic strain and thus fall perfectly in place as a parallel to the American confessional poets. Hence the different critics who have placed Kamala Das in this category are not wholly wrong. In fact, two different conclusions are seen to be arrived at even within the space from which these critics function. They are unfavorable comparison of the Indian English poet with her American counterparts and an impartial comparison without a judicial stance.

With Kamala Das it was physical (bodily) suffering that promoted the urge for self-discovery. Several of her hospital poems like "Ischemia in August" "Death is so Mediocre" , "Old Cattle" and passages from *My Story* suggest this. But with the American confessionals the causative factor was psychic derangement, which in itself was the result of the individual subject's existence being projected against the Christian religion where sex is almost invariably a sin. With respect to Kamala Das it must be pointed out that the existence was projected against Hindu religious discourse namely Bhakti religion even celebrates the function of sex in mystical union. Thus her mind is not laden with the oppressive weight of guilt and sin which drives the American confessional to desperation and eventual suicide. For Kamala Das, death is in the extinction of subjectivity in the divine bliss, eroticism or transcendental experience can offer.

This means that in Kamala Das's poetry, at one stage, there is the replacement of the subjective 'I' with the universal 'I'. This is illustrated best in "Someone Else's Song".

I am a million, million people
Talking all at once, with voices
Raised in clamour, like maids
At village-wells.
I am a million million deaths
Pox-clustered, each a drying seed
Someday to be shed, to grow for
Someone else, a memory.
I am a million, million silences
Strung like crystal beads
Onto someone else's Song (Das 1965, 31).

The poet has internalized the whole external world in herself. The only sense of distinction that remains is with God who is denoted by the phrase 'Someone else' in the poem. In other words the 'I' shifts from the existing subject to the essence of the subject. The self has also intuited its (essence) identity as that of the external world and hence the 'I' becomes symbolic of the whole cosmic process. This is the romantic 'I' found in the poems of English romantics like Wordsworth and Shelley. Both St. Augustine and Rousseau in their confessions tend to speak from such an angle. Kamala Das's rather ambivalent use of 'I' when she describes her wait for love and her experiences of it (occasionally she is found speaking as Radha waiting for Krishna) also fortifies this aspect. As she herself points out in the interview appended to this thesis, experiences like love, birth, death, pain and bliss (which are the major themes of her poetry) are universal and timeless and cannot be pinned down to one individual or age.

Though confessionalism, in its modern understanding, has played a role at some stage of Kamala Das's creative life she has been able to expand it or reach beyond it to the romantic 'I' or confessional 'I' of antiquity. Kamala Das's poetry is characterized by the libido getting attached to itself at the failure to get attached to an object. This results in the narcissism of her poetry.

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