

## A DISCOURSE ON THE POETIC CRAFTSMANSHIP OF KAMALA DAS

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### ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is not merely a love poet and confessional poet, laying bare her own thoughts, torments, passions, and experiences but she is a poet of spontaneity with a translucent automatic perception. Kamala Das's skill as an artist, especially her command over the technique of poetic creation is perfectly matched with her deep insights into human behaviour. She sculpts, paints, and sings with words relating her artistry. This paper sets out to discuss the literary artist in Kamala Das and also the stylistic devices and stylistic analysis and art of her composition. It devotes itself to a discussion of various devices – the shifting mood and the rhetorical question, the imagery and the symbol, sensitivity to colour and the sensuous blending of sound and sense – she makes use of, to concretize her feelings, express the curve of her thoughts, portray her mood of negation, and register her craving for freedom. Whatever be the techniques she uses in her poetry, it is closely allied to the state of the idea and communicated powerfully and aptly through her poetry.

**KEYWORDS:** Stylistic Devices, Stylistic Analysis, Images, Rhetorical Devices, Symbols, Techniques.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das is, indeed, a trend-setter striking new grounds in Indian English Poetry. The self-explanatory and self-revelatory poetry of Kamala Das marks a new direction in Indian English poetry written by women. She has a rare capacity to make poetic monuments of her inspired moments. By the use of her rare alchemic capacity, she sublimates her plurality of love experiences and transforms them psychologically into realms of gold. As remarked by Krishna Srinivas in his *Review of Kamala Das's Collected Poems*: "She is one of those poets who has [sic] a profound interior world which dictates to her spontaneously the law of exterior beauty.... Scintillating and sensuous, her words are transparent and deeply crimsoned" (Srinivas, 1985:22).

The core of Kamala Das's entire creative process is revealed in the one sentence poem that follows: "When thought holds the reins/ and language meekly trots/ a poem gets born..." ("What is a Good Poem?") (Das, 1987: 51). When the poet's mind is on the wings of poetic fancy, eddies and currents of thought run too fast to be caught and fitted into a frame of expression. Conception of an idea needs to be expressed in words to get a local habitation and a name. The use of the horse imagery speaks of the need to control unbridled fancy that runs at an astonishing rapidity so that language can keep pace with thinking process, finding verbal equivalents and analogues. Once the language obeys the poet's impulse, a poem is born, bearing the burden of the poet's experience, and expressing the whole gamut of her feelings. The three elliptical dots indicate that the creative process is a continuous one.

Kamala Das's prose articles throw light upon her method of composition. She wants to be free from all interferences, to enable her to have some continuity in thought. She brooks no interval between the occurrence of an idea and its expression. She herself admits in her essay on "A Woman Writer's Predicaments": "I may have written several books but there are at least about hundred more simmerings within me, all left unwritten only because I have no room to lock myself in, to ensure some kind of continuity in my thought" (Das, 1986: 23).

The poem "Without a Pause" is an intriguing example of Kamala Das's writing style. She attempts to express her thoughts as quickly as possible. Poet needs the freedom to be able to write without a pause, or with the tranquility of mind not disturbed by any unpleasant situation. She composes quickly and silently without pausing, making the most of each creative situation in "Without a Pause"- *Summer in Calcutta*:

A baby- pink telegram reports  
A loss, but don't, oh, don't stop to think  
Of a smile now gone, a favour left  
Undone, but write, write, write, write without

A pause, while beyond the bolted door  
Life crouches, a skeletal wild-eyed  
Cat, but in these rooms, there is no sound,  
No motion but that of this pen. On  
This paper, so bridal-white, write of  
Life's purity, of life's betrayals...  
Write of the seed's first awareness, of  
Children's malice, of adult love, of

Darkened rooms, where the old sit thinking,  
Filled with vaporous fear. Write without  
A pause, don't search for pretty words which  
Dilute the truth, but write in haste, of  
Everything perceived, and known, and loved...

(Das, 1965: 50)

Kamala Das does not stop writing even at the report of a loss suffered or at the thought of "a smile now gone, a favour left/ Undone," but writes without a pause. The raw material for her poetic creation is not the life confined to the four walls of a room but that which lies beyond the bolted door. The world outside throbbing with life and activity is her workshop. The poet's inspired imagination catches words, phrases, symbols, and images from the vast panorama of life. She takes life for her poetic staple from which she spins out or moulds a telling lyric or a moving poem. She writes in "haste, of / Everything perceived, and known, and loved," of her search for pure love, of "life's betrayals," of "the seed's first awareness, of / Children's malice, of adult love, of / Darkened rooms, where the old sit thinking." The repetition of the verb "write" four times means that she writes incessantly, never searching for "pretty words which/Dilute the truth," or give it a false glare or a sensational glitter.

Because she writes her poem during midnight in haste, the tiredness she feels during day-time has had its effect upon her poetic creation. As she remarks: "Afterwards when I reread the night's poem I would find that my fatigue had woven itself into its fabric becoming woof to the wrap of my words. Then my heart would protest in silence. If my heart were a puppy it would have yelped in pain ("A Woman Writers Predicaments") (Das, 1986: 24). Elsewhere Kamala Das realizes the inadequacy of words to express herself in "The Cart Horse"- *Collected Poems*:

Of late my words have worn  
Thin, my speech resembles  
The jagged gallop of  
A Cart horse that need to  
Be reshod...

(Das, 1984: 62)

Hence, the need to rewrite the poem a hundred times, as confessed by her : "I have worked on a one page poem for three months, removing words as one could pluck out the asymmetrical leaves from a bonsai, day by day till it becomes starkly beautiful" (qtd. in Remedios, 1982: 59).

That Kamala Das is conscious in her employment of stylistic devices and stylistic analysis, which is clear from her words: "When I compose poetry, whispering the words to myself, my ear helps to discipline the verse. Afterwards, I count the syllables. I like poetry to be tidy and disciplined" (qtd. in Vinson, 1975: 351). That Kamala Das strives to be a master of stylistic devices and stylistic analysis in her craft of poetry, is revealed in the following poem "Words"- *Summer in Calcutta*:

All round me are words, and words and words,  
They grow on me like leaves, they never  
Seem to stop their slow growing  
From within....But I tell myself, words  
Are a nuisance, beware of them, they  
Can be so many things, a  
Chasm where running feet must pause, to  
Look, a sea with paralyzing waves,  
A blast of burning air or,  
A knife most willing to cut your best  
Friend's throat ...Words are a nuisance, but  
They never seem to stop their coming  
From a silence, somewhere deep within....

(Das, 1965: 11)

Kamala Das finds myriad words around her. Words rush upon her spontaneously: "They never seem to stop their coming/ From a silence, somewhere deep within...." She finds herself placed in the paradoxical juxtaposition of the constructive and destructive power of words. She is most wary in their use. Otherwise, she may stumble into a deep chasm, slip into a perilous foam or tread into a scorching clime. A word can cause havoc like a knife on a best friend's

throat. A slipshod use of a word can cloud her vision, envelop her in a world of illusion or invest the word itself with a false glare.

Kamala Das is aptly said to be a poet of social, sensual, and personal observations. These observations and declamations assume expression appropriate to the mood of Kamala Das. She may be languorous and languid at one moment, passionate and turbulent at the other, symbolic, and suggestive or sensuous still at other times. Though the poems of Kamala Das are variations on the same theme, they afford an illustration of a wide range of tones and moods she is capable of. She always creates a mood or an atmosphere for the currents of thoughts which she spins into poems. A situation as in "Hérons" or a mood as in "Pigeons" or an atmosphere as in "Luminol" provides the staple of her poetry.

Generally, a pensive poet she is, not in the Wordsworthian sense, but in a purely personal manner because of the occurrences in her own life, and this pensive mood gives rise to a certain development of her inner vision as in "With Its Quiet Tongue," or "The Siesta" – a vision that constantly projects itself towards a dream-state of mind. In such a state, she is conscious of the pulls of reality, but at the same time poised to reach towards the dream. Probably, it is a condition, a sensuous reverie. That is how we can describe her consciousness. It is a dreamy state in which she has the capacity to make an aesthetic structure as in sounds and symbols. This is the repeated pattern in her poetic method and vision.

The poet's mind is fecund and loses no time in creating appropriate verbal and visual correlatives as in "Too Early the Autumn Sights," or as in "Hérons." In other words, like a musician composing, she creates a particular mood for a particular poem, and hence the rich originality of her verse. By and large, an ineffable sadness is the residue of her experience – a sadness which she variously dramatizes, visualizes, and musicalizes, depending upon the stress of her poetic inspiration. She has her ability not only to visualize the present precise mental state but also to render the lines in the correspondingly correct musical mood as well. Each poem of Kamala Das is an entuned one. Like a passionate composer, who makes symphonic poems of a given experience, Kamala Das does visualize the verbal music of her awareness. She builds an inner music by a rich knowledge of liquid consonants. Each poem is a sensuous fabric of sounds.

There is a strong sense of the painter in her. A pensive thought gives rise to a picture which results in a song. The picture is best portrayed as in "The Dance of the Eunuchs" by a sense of colour and descriptive details strengthened by a rich understanding of the musicality of the sounds of the English language. The poem is a Shelleyan – Tennysonian cultural vignette, capturing in colour and movement and in a tone of sadness, the dance of the eunuchs seeking, gyrating, and listening to their songs and drumbeats. The poem may be an essay in verse as "An Introduction" and "Composition" adopting the colloquial, speaking tone of the voice of the modern essayists and writing in a casual, friendly, confiding manner, say, in the manner of Robert Lynd or A.G. Gardiner.

Kamala Das employs a series of constantly shifting moods in her poetry. A poem begins in a note of attraction towards sex, but ends in a note of aversion to it. This is best seen in "The Freaks," "In Love," and "The Old Playhouse." The poem begins with an initial affirmation of the ecstasy of sex, but ends with an expression of skepticism about sex. For example, the poem "The Old Playhouse" begins with physical images and functions, symbolizing the deep immersion in the lust-centered, male-oriented conjugal life, but ends in an image of an old playhouse typifying the growing dullness and drabness of her repeated sex experiences devoid of pleasure.

Kamala Das uses rhetorical questions carrying negative connotations. A rhetorical question, frequently a form of negation, is used for effect rather than for information. She uses the device to command attention from the reader. She does not look for an answer. Instead, she implies that the answers to her questions should be known. It makes a deep impression on the reader than a direct statement. A few examples will suffice to bring out the effect of rhetorical questions upon the reader. In "The Freaks"- *Summer in Calcutta* the poet-persona poses the question "Can this man with/ Nimble finger-tips unleash/ Nothing more alive than the/ Skin's lazy hungers?" (Das, 1965: 10). The poem "The Conflagration"- *The Descendants* begins thus: "Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried. Beneath a man?" (Das, 1967: 20). "The Maggots" and "Convicts" have each a rhetorical question woven into the fabric of the poem. The tendency towards rhetorical question conveying a mood of negation can be related to her attitude to sex.

## **CONCLUSION**

The foregoing discussion, thus, brings out the literary artist in Kamala Das in whose hands the poem becomes an organic whole where each device - the shifting mood and the rhetorical question, the structure and texture - reinforces the central burden of the poem and contributes to the totality of its meaning.

## **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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