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**FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN POETRY: *SUMMER IN CALCUTTA, THE DESCENDANTS, AND THE OLD PLAYHOUSE AND OTHER POEMS***

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**ABSTRACT**

The love poems of Kamala Das usually breathe an air of unconventionality and urgency. Mark the following extract in this connection-“Of late I have begun to feel a hunger/To take in with greed, like a forest-fire that/Consumes, and with each killing gains a wilder,/Brighter charm, all that comes my way.” Kamala Das’s poetry is concerned with both the external and internal worlds, and her response to the external world, in particular despite her inner restlessness, is marked by an admirable sense of poise and perfection.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Kamala Das is primarily a poet of feminine longings. Her poetry and prose reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male-dominated society, and in them she appears as a champion of women’s cause. She raises her forceful voice against the male tyrannies in such poems as “A Relationship”, “Summer in Calcutta”, “An Introduction”, and “Marine Drive”, and in such essays as “Why Not More Than One Hundred?” and “What Women Expect Out of Marriage and What They Get”. In them she comes out as an ardent spokesman (or, spokeswoman) of women’s „liberation“ movement. Kamala Das expresses the secret hopes and fears of womankind as seen in the poem “Afterwards”: “Son of my womb,/ Ugly in loneliness./You walk the world’s bleary eye/Like a grit. You cleverness/Shall not be your doom/As ours was.”

The above-quoted lines highlight a mother’s concerns for her son. And the following poetic passage reveals the monotony and

tiresomeness of a hollow married life: “I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon/You built around me with morning tea,/Love-words flung from doorways and of course/Your tired lust. I shall someday take/Wings, fly around...” Evidently, Kamala Das speaks here as a “liberated” woman, who resents „the cocoon“ built around her and desires to flit about without any restrictions. The fairer sex receives a better deal from this sensitive poetess, who airs out its grievances and sufferings in a striking fashion.

Mrs. Das is unquestionably a poet of love and sex. As such, she is not so much preoccupied with the metaphysical quest of a restless soul, nor with the formulation of any theory of poetry. She writes almost invariably about the power of love and the appeal of the body. She confesses that she “...wrote the poems in the book “Summer in Calcutta” to make a man love me, to break down his resistance”. As an honest poet of love, she looks very frank and naïve, without the „intellectual pride“ and the domestic air of the well-known Australian

poetess, Judith Wright. It should, however, be remembered that Kamala Das wrote her poetry against a more conservative and tabooed society than that of Wright. She has, therefore, more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity. More often than not she concentrates on sexual love, and her woman-persona rises as though in a mood of revolt. The love poems of Kamala Das usually breathe an air of unconventionality and urgency. Mark the following extract in this connection—"Of late I have begun to feel a hunger/To take in with greed, like a forest-fire that/Consumes, and with each killing gains a wilder,/Brighter charm, all that comes my way." Kamala Das's poetry is concerned with both the external and internal worlds, and her response to the external world, in particular despite her inner restlessness, is marked by an admirable sense of poise and perfection.

#### **Summer in Calcutta (1965)**

This poetical work opens with the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs", which sets the tone (of irony) and temper of the entire volume. There are many poems on the theme of love, but few which speak of the glory belonging to a really exalting love-experience. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" objectifies, through an external, familiar situation, the poet's strangled desire within. The poem is powerful and bold indeed, and displays an admirable sense of proportion in the use of imagery and metaphor.

The next poem, "The Freaks", paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive and the woman is burning with desire, but she is helpless. It is about „a grand, flamboyant lust“. Another poem, "In Love", brings the poet face to face with the question whether she could feel her sexual experience „love“. It is aglow with heat and passion. "In Winter" also carries the warmth of the sexual act of her soul „groping for roots" in his body. "A Relationship", too identifies love with physical desire—"It was my desire that made him male/And beautiful". The poem "Spoiling the Name" mocks at the significance generally attached to words and, figuratively, to abstractions. A name is an abstraction, and in a woman's case borrowed from someone else; it is a weight and a burden, as all

abstractions are. She, therefore, asks: "...why should this name, so/Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room/Where I go to meet a man/Who gives me nothing but himself, who/Calls me in his private hours/By no name ...". This poem shows Mrs. Das's craftsmanship, but is rhetorical in tone.

"An Apology to Goutama" constructs a dialectical opposition between the ascetic and the sensual, between Goutama and her own man. The opposition is actually between two kinds of eyes, two kinds of voices, two kinds of faces, rather two modes of living: "... while your arms hold/My woman-form, his hurting arms/Hold my very soul." The poem rests on this vital contrast for its strength. "The Fear of the Year" highlights a gloomy mood. "My Grand-mother's House" has also the mood of wild despair: "...I who have lost/My way and beg now at a stranger's doors to/Receive love, at least in small change?" And in "The Wild Bougainvillea" we hear about the poet's sadness and how she "groaned/ And moaned, and constantly yearned for a man from/ Another town." In "The End of spring", the poet, while waiting for her lover's phone call, sinks into brooding over „the fear of change". And "Too Early the Autumn Sights" also evokes a mood of premature desiccation within: "Too early the autumn sights/Have come, too soon my lips/Have lost their hunger, too soon/The singing birds have/Left." Even in this poem of so conventional a mood, Mrs. Das is able to squeeze out of common images a bit of visionary quality.

"Visitors to the City" is a passionate etching of a scene composed of "sights and sounds" offered by one morning on Strand Road. "Punishment in Kindergarten" is warm and muffled, and recounts the picnic of the poetess at Victoria Gardens to which she and her classmates were taken, and the incident which followed it (as Kamala Das tells us in her autobiography). She was all alone near the hedge, while other girls were playing at a distance. The poem demonstrates the poet's capacity to smell the flowers as well as the pain of being slighted. It has hardly any suggested larger meaning.

The title-piece, "Summer in Calcutta", projects, through action and gesture, a self-contained mood of sensuous luxury. The image of the April sun in it brings to the poet a sense of

sensuous repletion, of warm intoxication which inspires as well as relaxes so that „my worries doze“ and „...wee bubbles ring/My glass, like a bride“s/Nervous smile, and meet/My lips, Dear, forgive/This moment“s lull in/Wanting you, the blur/In memory.“ The poem celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over „the defeat of love“. It is an Indian poet“s creative reaction to the torture of the Indian summer. What distinguishes Kamala Das“s reaction is her unconscious intimacy with this torture.

“The Siesta” is associated with sleep, “the sunlit tank”, which brings „an anonymous peace” to her, or with dreams which “glow pearl-white”. But what the mysterious siesta brings to her is neutralized by her supposed inability to meet „this alien world which talks/ of Gods and casual sins”. However, the poet is concerned more with the vulnerability of “the anonymous peace” of the siesta, its inability to withstand the challenge of the wakeful world rather than with the siesta itself. The display of the potency of this challenge is the poet’s oblique commitment to it.

“With Its Quite Tongue” expresses the poet’s agonised concern with the wretched coldness of heart. Another poem, “My Morning Tree” deals with the familiar theme of desperate longing for fulfilment. Its images are sharp, structure is carefully organized, and mood poignantly objectified. In it the poet looks forward to the moment of the blossoming of “a sudden flower”, though the images like the „ugly tree” and the „fleshless limbs” of the tree give no hope of this blossoming. The poem is one of dark despair; and the sense of fulfilment which so strongly dominates poems such as “Winter”, “A Phone Call in the Morning”, “Love”, “Spoiling the Name”, “In Love”, is here imagined and telescoped but not without involving the cost of an almost brutal irony, for the blossoming may not only come too late but may be the end itself. The „passive” limbs of her desires and passion will flower into a „red, red morning flower” of death.

“The Testing of the Sirens” is a befitting close to the book looking backwards as far as “The Dance of the Eunuchs”. The poet wakes up from a night full of love and lust to a sense of physical loneliness, goes through a drive with another man with „a

pockmarked face” and, while he is taking her photograph, arises with a keen desire for love which is doomed to remain unfulfilled. Her relationship with either of lovers is a rootless and detached loyalty of the moment, to the first (of the night) that of the limbs and to the second (with the “pockmarked face”) that of “a smile” which is „such a detached thing”. The poem immortalizes the poet’s attachment to one of her family friends, a young man of eighteen years, who used to take her out to Victoria Memorial, photographing her against trees and against flowing water, and entertaining her with Hindi film songs.

In Summer in Calcutta, we have a different category of poems like “The Flag”, “Someone Else’s Song”, “Forest Fire”, “An Introduction”, and „The Wild Bougainvillea”, in which is an attempt to rise above the „private voice” and depict a larger panorama of experience. The technique is almost always one of assuming a vaster identity, as in “Someone Else’s Songs”: “I am a million, million people/Talking all at once, with voices/Raised in clamour, like maids/At village-wells.” Despite the fact that the majority of poems in the volume are dominated by a tone of betrayal and present the poet as a prisoner of her own loneliness and complex moods, the poem “The Wild Bougainvillea” satisfies a peculiarly personal need as a necessary distraction from her mood of sadness and loneliness: „It is good world, and packed with distractions”. The poem “An Introduction” is a candid and witty piece of self-revelation, and is a beautiful statement of her poetic credo, her attitude to language and experience. But the burden of the poem, as indeed of Mrs. Das’s entire work, is to have the freedom to be herself, it is to be herself. Here she transforms her alienation from „critics, friends, visiting cousins”, who say, „Don’t write in English, into a large and more universal alienation (sexual, social and artistic): “... I met a man, love him. Call/Him not by any name, he is every man/ Who wants a woman, just as I am every/Woman who seeks love.”

It is, however, clear from a large number of poems in Summer in Calcutta that Kamala Das’s impersonal note or sense of universality is simply self-imposed and not natural for her. In this volume, the personal moods and feeling triumph over the

impersonal ones for sustained universality is not within the poet's reach.

#### **The Descendants (1967)**

This second poetical volume by Kamala Das has twenty-three poems in all. Most of these poems are further variations of her favourite theme of sexual love. This collection is, by and large, bitterly death-conscious, perhaps death-obsessed. And some of these poems like "The Descendants", "The Invitation", and "Composition" look to be sobered by compassion or humility under a false impression. The truth is that there lurks beneath the pseudo-meta physical poise the inability to reckon with emotional defeat and frustration, with a sense of nothingness: "To be frank,/Have failed/I feel my age and my/Uselessness." The poetess is actually overwhelmed by the smouldering "secret" that "I am so alone," and that life is a colourless design of crumbling patterns, as in the poem "A Request": "When I die/Do not throw the meat and bones away/But pile them up/And/Let them tell/By their smell/What life was worth/On this earth/What love was worth/In the end." The "meaninglessness" of the poetess's life is sourly conveyed in these lines, as also in such poems as "Shut Out That Moon" and "Neutral Tones". The negation of all positives in life reminds us of Thomas Hardy.

The title poem "The Descendants" borders on nihilism which moves the poet in a direction opposite to the faith in the essential continuity of life suggested by "Death Brings No Loss" (Summer in Calcutta). This poem concludes with a ring of finality: "We are not going to be / Ever redeemed, or made new". Another poem, "The Suicide", has weak passages and lacks a dramatic cohesion. It is constructed as a conversation between the poet and the sea. The theme is the poet's contemplated or suggested suicide, but the poem finally rejects it through a renewal of the sense of life. As in her view the body and the soul inseparable. The poet can't choose between a physical death and a spiritual death. For her, the sea is the source of a constant distraction, a nagging threat, and invites her to negation: "The sea is garrulous today. Come in,/Come in. What do you lose by dying, and/Beside, your losses are my gains./It offers her dissolution in a seductive way." The strains of death so explicit in

"A Request" run through "Dear night, be my tomb of "Substitute" and merge into the unredeemed darkness of our fate, of the wounds and the cross, of the fire and the hungry earth of "The Descendants" which would devour us in the end.

In "The Invitation", while the sea offers one kind of death, a complete negation, her lover whom she can't disobey offers another, metaphorical death – the feeling of „lying on a funeral pyre/With a burning head". The language of delirium suggests the feeling of torture that seems to accompany her recent treatment of sexually love. In this poem, the poet rejects the way of the sea prefers to shrink or grow in her own way. Although the man has gone for good, the poet is warmed by the memory of her experience. She can't forget the self-contained intensity of the moment of sexual love: "All through that summer's afternoons we lay/On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding/Into throbbing suns. The heat had/Blotted our thoughts .../There is a suffusing organic warmth in these lines."

The poem "Ferns" arrests sexual love in an image of self devouring and self-mocking intensity which suggests that perhaps there is a sense in which her glorification of physical love carries with it an element of disenchantment. Another poem, "Convicts", depicts physical love in the elemental terms of physical labour and heat, and as a physical experience which belongs to no intellectual language: "That was the only kind of love,/This hacking each other's parts/Like convicts hacking, breaking clods/At noon." This is a very sensuous poetic passage indeed.

"Substitute" is both poignant and truculent. The need to conform to the conventions of a hypocritical society makes one's feeling of emptiness all the more painful. The poem is poignant, and is ironical in its meditative refrain: "It will be all right if I join clubs/And flirt a little over telephone/It will be all right, it will be all right/I am the type that endures/It will be all right, it will be all right/It will be all right between the world and me." The abrupt intrusion of the image of crows over the market square flailing the sky "with raucous cries" breaks the spell of this refrain only to prepare the ground for the suggestion of the lack of „metal contact" between the man and the woman in "Our

bodies after love-making/Turned away, rejecting". The tone of the poem is Prufrockian. The pursuit of love in it is merely mechanical without any meaning.

Another poem concentrating on sexual love is "The Looking Glass" : "Notice the perfection / Of his limbs /..All the fond details that make / Him male and your only man./ 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." It is both patronizing and indulgent in tone.

The poem "Captive" describes Kamala Das's love as „an empty gift", a gilded empty container" and herself as the prisoner of "the womb's blinded hunger, the muted whisper at the core". The poem is ambiguous in tone, but the theme of sexual love receives greater relevance from the glory of creation, of childbirth. The same theme finds expression also in her "Jaisurya", which combines the narrative and the meditative, and which details the whole gamut of feelings preceding and following the birth of a son. It brings together light and darkness, fire and water, to weave a pattern of feeling which holds itself up with the joy creation. It is significant that meaningful things happen to the poetess at around noon time under the virgin whiteness of the sun. The child is a day that is "Separated from darkness that was mine/ And in me".

The newly born child is set against the background of "war", "bloodshed and despair" in "The White Flower". The simple prayer wishing her son a long life in the face of the outer threat of violence and death is strengthened by the contract between the white flowers (standing for peace, long life) and the red (standing for blood, mortality, anarchy) of the cherry wine, the rose. The solitary gesture of heroism in "Today some of us will rise and sing of love/In voices never as sweet before, for love like life/Is sweetest just before its end." But the glasses are "cold like a dead man's palm" and there is the horror and the ghastly wailing which tends to subdue the poet's prayer for the preservation of the child.

### **The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973)**

This collection of poems came out in 1973, and contains 33 poems in all. Of these, fourteen are old poems taken from "Summer in Calcutta" and six from The Descendants. The poems reprinted from Summer in Calcutta are : "The Freaks", "In Love", "Love", "Summer in Calcutta", "An Introduction", "The Wild Bougainvillea", "My Grandmother's House", "Forest Fire", "A Relationship", "The Snobs", "Corridors", "Lound Posters", "I Shall Some Day", and "Drama", and those from The Descendants are : "Composition", "The Suicide", "Luminol", "Convicts", "Palam", and "The Descendants". Thus, the collection has only thirteen new poems to be considered here.

The title-piece, "The Old Playhouse", tells us that love is perhaps no more than a way of learning about one's self or the completion of one's own personality. It is addressed presumably to the husband, and is largely personal. It lodges a protest against the constraint of the married life: the fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort, and male domination. „You" in the poem is possibly the husband, who wants to tame the swallow who is the woman and thus deprive her of her natural freedom. As a result of his egotism, she feels emptied of all her natural mirth and clarity of thinking: "You called me wife,/I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and/To offer at the right moment the vitamins. /Cowering Beneath your monstrous ego /I ate the magic loaf and/ Became a dwarf./ I lost my will and reason, to all your/Questions I mumbled incoherent replies." Here the woman suggestively protests against the male ego and assertion.

And different kind of protest – against the fanaticism of religion – is obvious in "The Inheritance". This poem is bitter, ironical, but not cynical. It deals with the hatred and intolerance that goes in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism. What man has inherited is not love but wisdom but hatred, not babble: „this ancient / Virus that we nurtured in the soul". "Blood" is the only new poem in the longer genre like "Composition" and "The Suicide". Here the onrush of emotions is admirably restrained. It is largely autobiographical, and the poetess' nostalgia

for the old house and for the great grandmother who lived in it is convincingly evoked. Mrs. Das does not idealize the house and the people associated with it: she also does not attempt to reach out into the history of the house of three hundred years beyond what she herself knows of it. Presently, it is an old house with the walls „creaked and torn and moistened by the rains“, and with the fallen tiles, the whining windows and the rats scampering past the door. The grandmother, who is “really simple”, “fed of God for years” and proud of her “oldest blood”, is portrayed with humour and detachment. More than the pathos of the memory of her grandmother, the poem is concerned with the poet’s sense of death and decay. Its short and crisp lines indicate a solemnity of tone and a gravity of mood. Even where Kamala Das speaks of defeat and emptiness and the inevitable darkness which is imminent, the assured clarity of outline, the serious control of nerve, and the poise of movement confirm that the poet is command of herself in a movement of personal reminiscence. There is a pervasive sense of death and decay in the following lines: “I know the rates are running now/Across the darkened halls/They do not fear the dead/I know the white ants have reached my house/And have raised on walls”.

The poem “Nani” is a peculiar blend of irreverence and gravity. The pregnant maid, “the dark plump one, who bathed me near the well,” and who hanged herself in the privy, seemed “A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew/Turning gently on the rope, it seemed/To us who were children them, that Nani/Was doing, to delight us, a comic/Dance ...” Times moves on and the incident is forgotten by the grandmother, but not by the poet. The poem ends abruptly with the poet admiring the “clotted peace” of the dead. Perhaps the poet identifies herself with the dead, but paradoxically the imagery which evokes the peace of the dead belongs not to the world of the dead but to that of the living world.

“Gino” starts on a note of warning and fear, comparing the kiss of a lover to the bite of a krait who „fills the bloodstream with its accursed essence.” This makes her think of the all-pervasive essence of love, and of the sense of death which is also the sense of life: “a July, full of rain, and

darkness/Trapped like smoke, in the hollows of the sky, and/ That lewd, steamy smell of rot, rising out of the earth.” There is a conflict between the desire to experience this poisonous love, possibly love outside marriage, and the difficulty to “dislodge the inherited memory of a touch.” But if this difficulty is anyhow over-come, thoughts of the triumphant love haunt the poet and she dreams of “obscure hands/ Striding up my limbs”, of „ward-boys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors/ To the x-ray room’s dark interior,” of “aeroplanes /Bursting red in the sky,” of “fat/Half-caste children, lovelier than Goods”, and of “Drinking wine in verandahs”. And in a sudden transition of thought, she realizes that her dreams are unreal and that the burden of the body growing uncomely and gross is more real: “This body that I were without joy, owned/By man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with/My darling’s impersonal lust. /Or, it shall grow grass/And reach large proportions before its end.” The poet is obviously articulating here her sense of disease, death and decay of everything beautiful.

The poem “Glass” focuses the attention on the fragility of love-experience and also of the body. The poet says with a sense of pathos: “I went to him for half an hour/As pure woman, pure misery/Fragile glass, breaking/Crumbling.” In contrast to this self-hurting womanliness, “the lover... drew me to him/Rudely/ With a lover’s haste, an armful/Of splinters, designed to hurt, and/Pregnant with pain.” In this poem, the restlessness of the poet is voiced through Freudian search for the misplaced father-figure. She moves from man to man in search of her true home, but there is a sense of wasted effort in the prolonged search. And what in poems such as “Vrindavan,” “Radha Krishna”, and “Lines Addressed to a Devadasi” is mythologized as the woman’s search for Krishna, the eternal lover, is given in “Glass” a clinical version as attempt to look for him the “misplaced” father now everywhere”.

In “The Prisoner”, the poetess compares herself to the convict who “studies his prison’s geography” with distrust and hope: “I study the trappings/Of your body, dear love,/For I must someday find/An escape from its snare.” The term ‘trapping’ is very significant, for it suggests “the trappings of lust from which she must free herself to



know true love" as well as "the soul's cry against its mortal dress". Usually the convict attempts to escape from the prison only to return to his normal course of life. What Mrs. Das suggests here is the fact that there is no real freedom from imprisonment of this world or of lust.

"The Stone Age", like "The Old Playhouse", deals with the reality of love being offered to the poetess by another man rather than by her husband. This poem portrays the husband of the woman-persona as "old fat spider" who weaves "webs of bewilderment" around her and erects the dead, dull stony wall of domesticity, comfort, lassitude, and thus turning her into "a bird of stone, granite dove." The husband is the perpetual irritant, and unwelcome intruder into the privacy of the privacy of the wife's mind, which is haunted by other men. When the husband goes out, she drives along the sea and climbs "the forty noisy steps to knock at another's door". Now the act of defiance having taken place, the deed done, freedom asserted, and the dull cocoon of domesticity assaulted, the lines suddenly come alive with the energy of questioning: "... Ask me, everybody, ask me/What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion, A libertine, ask me the flavour of his/Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like/A great tree, felled, he stumps against my breasts/And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is/Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price..." The freedom that we come across in these lines is the kind of freedom the poetess longs for.

"After the Illness" was written after the poetess' recovery from a protracted illness. It is concerned with the theme of survival of herself as well as of the lover's love for her. It was perhaps the deeply hidden soul that kept his love intact. The ambiguity of the image of "bed-room mirrors" which occurred in "Gino" is more fully exploited in "The Motif in the Mirror". The ambiguity of the image of visual density lies in its being invested with a symbolic mobility. The sense of sensuous repletion is conveyed in this poem not merely by this visual density, this repetition of motif in a visual picture, but also suggested by the image of circular movement in water, of swimming in pools. The

elusiveness of love is expressed in "this reflection of a reflection, this shadow of a shadow, this dream of a dream".

"The Millionaires at Marine Drive" is both astringent and meditative in nature, its subject being the incurable loneliness of the woman. The warmth which her grandmother gave her still haunts the poetess because no man has been able to give her such a genuine love. The grandmother is presented here as an embodiment of tenderness and warmth, and contrasted with her: "... all the hands/The great brown thieving hands groped beneath my/Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonists,/Warmth was not their aim, they burnt my cities/Down ..." There was, in fact, never any "mental contact" between herself and her husband. What she wanted was a lovable "identity with him, but her circumstances brought her only the pain of growing old with "a freedom I never once asked for". This poem makes a shift in Kamala Das's approach to love-theme and from glorification of sexual love she now moves to a general dissatisfaction with the male character which tries to dwarf the woman in her.

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