



THE DEVOTIONAL DISPOSITION IN KAMALA DAS' POETRY

B. MOHAN RAJ

Lecturer in English
TJPS College, Guntur



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ABSTRACT

Pain, loneliness and disillusionment are typical in the universe. Kamala Das' poems run the risk of being fully interpreted along existentialist lines given the preoccupation of the poet with such themes. The theistic existentialism espoused by Soren Kierkegaard, provides a suitable framework to understand Kamala Das' unique mix of pain, disillusionment and loneliness on one hand and God, spirituality, devotion, pre-occupation with the body and the soul on the other. According to Kierkegaard, existential agony and despair is a result of the concrete individual's existence. To move out from this pain, the individual exercises consciously selected choices disposition the choice can be a religious one. But the search for an objective God is bound to end in failure. For God, according to Kierkegaard, is the supreme subject and is to be perceived subjectively in the individual. Reason will not lead the individual to God as it is monstrous abstraction. The faith and the passion that keeps the individual's search going is the Truth or the Absolute and not an objective destination or God. The faith and the passion of the existing individual lights up what is otherwise destined to be a blind search. The Kierkegaardian idea can be simplified thus—the unstinting faith of the individual in an objective God leads to a leap of faith and subjective experience of a different order. But this different experience comes not from a realization of an objective God but from the continued faith of the existing individual.

Key Words: disillusionment, existentialism, spirituality, devotional, disposition, faith

Introduction

Kamala Das' preoccupations with the devotional and the spiritual are well defined right from childhood. Her dreams of Krishna are evidence of this. Though she spares no opportunity to condemn the institutionalized views of the society with respect to religion, morality and the conduct of women, the intensely faithful, sincere and reverential tone that she uses while speaking about well-established myths like Krishna and Kali are pointers to Kamala Das' devotional disposition. A passage from 'My Story' describes the experience of a community or group with regard to Kali and the

ferocious form which they worship the Mother Goddess:

When Kali danced, we felt in the region of
The heart and unease and a lap of
Recognition. Deep inside we held the
Knowledge that Kali was older than the
World and that having killed for others,
She was now lonelier than all. All our
Primal instincts rose, to sign in our
Blood, the magical incantations.

The experience is communal as well as private as a whole group invokes the Goddess with devotional fervor. The rising devotional impulse reaches the crescendo with the projection of individual

subjectivities on to the Devi and mention of her state of experience. This experience leads to the mass invocation of the deity who is now more an immediate reality with which emotional identification is possible, than a deity. The method of invoking the Goddess here, is more in keeping with the emotional and communal ways of the Bhakti marga than the meditative and individualistic one of the Jnana marga. Also, this intense awareness of the powerful Mother Goddess can be linked directly to the matrilineal tradition of which the poet is a part.

The poet's autobiography also contains several other instances of her reverential and faithful attitudes towards Gods, myths and epic. In one instance she speaks about her daily ritual of lighting temple lamps and wicks to be placed around her house to honour the Gods of direction like Brahma, Ananta, Indra, Varuna, Siva and the like as laid out in the scriptures with a great degree of devotion. In another instance she writes about the immense liking she had for the ottanthullal narrative of Kalyana Sougandhikam which draws on Bhima's exploits in the Mahabharata when in search of the legendary flower that grew in a demon's garden. This incident also brings to light the strong matrilineal moorings of kamala Das' mind, as it was Draupadi, who commanded Bhima, her adoring mate, "to brave the demons" and "to get flowers for her wavy tresses."

Pain, loneliness and disillusionment are constant features of Kamala Das' writings. Three specific instances that reflect such a state would be (i) the poet's experiences at the hands of men after being driven from pillar to post in her obsession with the ideal lover; (ii) the fear of an early death prompted by a serious episode of heart disease and (iii) the candidature and eventual defeat in the 1984 parliament elections. The first instance gave birth to suggestive and spontaneous poems contrasting the contradictory experiences imparted through the body—mechanical lust on one hand and ecstasy and bliss on the other. "The Stone Age" would be the Classic example of this kind of poetry

The poem can be split into two halves. The first half expresses discontentment with the institution of marriage and the way in which it leads to sex without any emotions. The second half, into which a religious undercurrent can be read as

elaborated, expresses the ecstasies, emotions and bliss of a consummated physical relationship. In some other cases the body consciousness remains in the form of a limiting influence as in poems like "Krishna" "The Prisoner" and "The Old Playhouse". The second instance (fear of early death) paved the way for the autobiography "MY Story" in which Kamala Das is at her self-revelatory and introspective best. The third instance resulted in the "Annamalai Poems" a long meditative poem capturing the spirit and the tone of transcendental mysticism. Thus the deep-rooted loneliness, pain and disillusionment of the poet has a relationship with the religious oeuvre of the poet that is too significant to be ignored. However, the nature of this relationship is such that both the religious and the emotional alternate their positions as the causative and the derivative. The emotional should not be granted the causative status and if it has been done in the premise that builds up this argument, it is only presenting one side of the picture.

In an exploration of Kamala Das' written works, one comes across several instances when Kierkegaardian philosophy cannot be applied—instances when experience precedes faith as in narratives of her early childhood experiences of Krishna and Kali (when she was too young for faith to solidify in her to lead to the Kierkegaardian leap of faith and thus the experience) and in some of her poems about Krishna like "Krishna", "The Maggots" and "Radha-krishna". In these specific instances, as in several others, faith stems from experience to complement the other instances that led to kamala Das' works in which faith led to existence. Hence an overall analysis of Kamala Das' written work gives a complex, dynamic picture in the relationship between faith and experience whereas Kierkegaardian philosophy stops short at a simple, static level. Hence Kierkegaardian philosophy can be applied only selectively to Kamala Das' written and poetic works.

After the self has been awakened to the realization of God's presence (what Underhill terms 'awakening of the self'), comes the purification of the self. 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. The stage is characterized by the longing the seeker has for perfection. Kamala Das' poems like "Composition" where she speaks about confessing or 'Peeling off my layers' to 'reach closer to the soul' and "The Suicide" where she speaks of the 'soul singing at the vortex of the sea', have to be seen in this light.

The Dark Night of the Soul follows what Underhill calls the illuminative phase in which the self has had union with God. After the ecstasy, peace and rapture of such a union the self once again falls back to a lower stage. Sense of separation from God, an enlarged perception of one's own limitations, an emotional lassitude and stagnation of will and intelligence are its characteristic features. During this stage some people of a highly strung and mobile nature are seized by an uncontrollable longing to be in the punitive phase (the final stage in spiritual growth when there is permanent union with God). In such people the Dark Night manifests itself as an ecstasy of deprivation. As in the stage of purification of the self, in the Dark Night too, the seeker's struggle is for perfection, but a more complex and greater perfection. In the "Anamalai Poems" Kamala Das calls this 'restructured perfection'. Kamala Das' following lines in the poem "A Cask of Nothing" fits in perfectly with Evelyn Underhill's description of this state as the great negation:

If I close my eyes I see nothing
If I shut my ears I hear nothing
Nothing but nothing
Inside or outside
The nothing that resides
An ache within
The only content
The human cask can contain (Raveendran 1991, 108).

What experiences await Kamala Das in the remaining part of her life are of great interest for studying religious sensibility as religious experiences exit in life irrespective of whether they can be translated into literature or art. Most of Kamala Das' last poems are centered on a sense of emptiness fashioned by existentialist factors such as old age, weakness and decrepitude but transmuted at some point to the emptiness arising out of an incomplete

spiritual experience. But for all what one knows, the 'restructured perfection' of which Kamala Das speaks about may just be round the corner.

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