

Kamala Das-The Audacious Libertine

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Abstract: A close perusal of the works of Kamala Das has been done to elicit the “disillusionment” or “hallucinations” leading to an explicit sensual theory unseen hitherto in Indian writing in English. All works of the writer, including her poems, stories, memoirs and other forms of writings have been perused to trace the writer’s journey through a landscape of hallucination and disillusionment leaving the readers confounded more often than not! It also emerges that the great poetess has always had an insatiable desire that is often seen by conservatives as blasphemous and the modernists as voyeuristic. But neither of these schools should be taken seriously. The following analysis makes every possible effort to be objective and discerning so as to arrive at fair and just conclusions!

Keywords: Feminism, sensuality ,male chauvinism, anatomy, sexuality, My story, Love Queen of Malabar, male anatomical ego, The descendants, The Maggots, Insatiable desire, Krishna, Islam, iconoclast ,Merrily Weisbord, love making, feminism, womanhood, libertine.

I. AN OVERVIEW

Kamala Das, as some would argue, is the *mother of India’s post colonial poetry*. Her works are however, never confined to poetry as evident from her prolific contributions to all other genres of writing!

Kamala Das’s writings are widely regarded as harbingers of a *breakaway tradition* in the Indian society. Outright references of feminism, woman hood and male and female anatomy are as much part of her writings as their aesthetic qualities!

An unhappy child hood and an early marriage have indeed contributed to her lament in most of her works. A husband who tries to force himself upon her is often depicted as an *embodiment of male chauvinism*.

However, does the male chauvinism (which embellishes most of her works) precipitate or provoke her innate sensuality? Can it be the reason for her *libertine outlook*? Does the alleged male chauvinism contribute to her *explicit sensualities*? We need to seek honest answers to these questions. A discerning analysis shall throw light on the disillusionments and hallucinations that play a role in shaping her personality and writings!

II. THE DISILLUSIONMENT

Early marriages often batter and bruise the psyche of a girl child who is cruelly under prepared to make love, says Simon Murray, a renowned social psychologist. This is perhaps true as far as Kamala Das’s disillusionments are concerned. The bruised and battered psyche often nurtures prejudices that are hard to surmount t continues Simon Murray, the social psychologist.

Available evidences indicate her husband had encouraged her to be a writer of prolific nature. We see the same man being depicted as the representative of the male dominated society. Well, it can be argued that she respected him as a devout wife. However she ideologically differed with the male society that saw women as objects of lust! The argument loses its sheen as she talks of her deceased husband decades later in glowing terms and emphasizes that while in Calcutta it was he who encouraged her to shed her inhibitions and turn to literature in general and poetry in particular!

III. THE HALLUCINATION

If her works are any indication, her ordeals begin with her first day of the marriage; what is traditionally considered to be first night turns out to be the most traumatic experience in her life. Her man forces himself upon her. Here she sees a pervert who represents the male community in general. One needs to empathize with a young girl who has been forced into an early marriage there by succumbing to the guile of male anatomy.

But then it is indeed a momentarily impulsive reaction of a young mind as evident from what happens to her with the passage of time. Her husband (as mentioned earlier) encourages her to turn to literature. Needless to say the rest is history!! Yet she emphatically talks about his *conjugal inadequacy and inclination towards same sex* in her autobiography, MY STORY. Her husband's insistence to *charm his superiors* is another vehement statement she makes in her autobiography!

A psychological outlook of what happens to her in her first ever physical union with a man would reveal that she is a victim of *male anatomical ego*. This easily finds utterance in all her literary works later on. A psychologist would rather tell us that the problem lies more in the social evil of an early marriage than the *muscle flexing of a male*. This however is not to justify the *male anatomical ego*! Nevertheless, one should look at the larger picture of the *social evil*, the fulcrum around which everything else revolves!

Kamala Das, however chooses to depict the above experience as a typical *male psyche* that would haunt her for the rest of her life. There are *men soldiers* who besiege her thoughts. There are perverts, eccentrics and psychopaths who hound her and scan through her anatomy and remorselessly play with it!

IV. THE AUDACIOUS LIBERTINE

She declares a war against the male kingdom perceived to be against her. However, her own *unbridled sexual desires* are always depicted as *aesthetic*! In her opinion womanhood means an *aesthetic eroticism*. Her second book of poetry THE DESCENDANTS explicitly urges women to:

*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*

Slowly but consistently she turns into a woman of exuberant desire who finds her husband physically incompatible and sexually inadequate. She confesses at a certain point in time that she became *unfaithful to him at least physically*! Here we see a woman who craves to break the shackles of restrictions and establish a *self-proclaimed theory of female anatomy*. It can easily be deduced that it is not the much talked about male chauvinism but it is her self-proclaimed theory of female sensuality that worries her to the core!

Her confessions about her extra marital adventures are often lauded by critics as daring and candid. But this does not have a psychological basis! Extra marital adventures are not a remedy to address an inadequate and perhaps unconsummated married life! An iconoclast shall never rule out a legal separation under these circumstances!

Kamala Das later on confesses her autobiography is more of a fiction than a memoir. A close study of her works further reveals that she has more often fought against her own shadows than the much publicized male psyche!

V. EMPATHY FROM MERRILY WEISBORD

Kamala Das's explicit sensuality finds empathy with Merrily Weisbord whose THE LOVE QUEEN OF MALABAR hails her as a kindred spirit and daring memoirist living outside convention and a loveable iconoclast. The 14 year old friendship is part of post colonial literary folk lore now! It is already on record that Kamala Das seduces her new devotee with stories about the love-making between Lord Krishna and His consort, Radha!

Weisbord appears a little naïve as her appreciation for Das's frankness is born more out of her *impulse* than *rationale*. THE LOVE QUEEN OF MALABAR revolves around a series of conversations between the two. Weisbord's understanding of Das (as evident from the book) is primarily based on the magnum opus MY STORY, the autobiography of Das. It could be inferred she obviously does not have an in depth knowledge of the Malayali society (especially the feudalistic Nair Society) into which Das was born. This is not to suggest she has not *studied* all the works of Das. But it should indeed be emphasized that her assessment of Das's personality is primarily based on MY STORY. This is indeed a cherry picking fallacy!

VI. THE SATIATED THIRST

Weisbord is soon in for a rude jolt. In her sixties Kamala Das declares she is in love. She has found the man capable of satiating her. The following description of her union with her man (Sadiq Ali) will be of great significance here:

I was almost asleep when Sadiq Ali climbed in beside me, holding me, breathing softly, whispering endearments, kissing my face, breasts...and when he entered me, it was the first time I ever experienced what it was like to feel a man from inside.

Kamala Das soon converts to Islam on the insistence of her lover! Weisbord maintains a studied silence as she does not want to unmask herself. In all her interviews she maintains Kamala Das's action is hardly significant to the cause of her work THE LOVE QUEEN OF MALABAR. Here one does not have to invoke the sixth sense to deduce inferences that Weisbord puts on a brave face to mask the embarrassment!

VII. FACT OR FANTASY?

Kamala Das's references to her husband as an audacious rapist and a shameless homosexual have never been corroborated. There are no available evidences in the form of memoirs or interviews by her husband on the subject. Even Weisbord during her numerous visits to Kamala Das's ancestral home, relatives and acquaintances, finds very little evidences to corroborate Kamala Das's account. Weisbord's work ought to be seen more as a fiction than an honest memoir!

VIII. THE HEIGHT OF HALLUCINATION

Kamala Das apparently suffers from a self-inflicted mania arising out of her insatiable thirst for sensuality. Perhaps she glorifies her outlook as a *sense of sensual aestheticism*. This quite often leads to her grievance of being raped by her husband. She also ascribes homosexuality as the reason for his weird behavior!

She does not spare even Lord Krishna of accusations! The following lines from her poem THE MAGGOTS bear testimony to her perceived grievance:

At sun set, on the river bank, Krishna

Loved her for the last time and left...

That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt

That he asked, What is wrong,

Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,

No, not at all, but thought, What is

It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

The perennial hallucination inherent in her works is quite often missed by the readers as they trade off this quality for what they call a *daring sensuality*! A discerning reader however, will not take long to decipher the contradictions in her works.

Kamala Das is certainly not a feminist. She has never associated herself with any feminist group or individuals. Credits ought to be given where ever they are due. Her theory of female anatomy and sensuality is so unique and the first of its kind. Even her contemporary Sylvia Plath (who often features as a comparison) does not have any such theory to her credit!

IX. AMBIGUITIES

Kamala Das's outlook of male psyche is fraught with ambiguities. Her husband is found to be painfully inadequate in satiating her. Besides, his sexual orientation is believed to be far from straight! She has come across a good number of males who have hardly excited her sensuality. Furthermore, they have all been the representatives of what is alleged to be a man's world. She has to wait for decades to quench her insatiable thirst. Finally a certain Sadiq Ali gifts the *indescribable ecstasy* she has yearned for!!

Unreliable and inaccurate narrations mark her eventful and adventurous journey. A writer evolves at every stage and inaccuracies and complexities often mark a writing career. Hence her account of the early days of her marriage ought to be taken as genuinely sensitive. A girl in her teens is seldom expected to be mature and can hardly stand the male anatomical ego at display in the first ever physical union. A husband nearly double her age pouncing on her as a predator would at its prey, certainly evokes sympathies!

However, contradiction soon surfaces when the teenager finds her man *sexually inadequate*!! His questionable sexual orientation annoys her too. Amidst all these eventful occurrences her husband encourages her to be a litterateur! There are no sources to corroborate this as neither the husband nor the wife is alive today. Weisbord's book on Kamala Das has hardly any input to offer us in this regard! Moreover, the book is basically a panegyric on Kamala Das and her life!

X. A SENSUAL THEORY THE WORLD NEVER HAD!

Kamala Das should probably have propounded and expounded a *sensual theory* comparable to that of THE KAMASUTRA. However, THE KAMASUTRA does not suffer from any inaccuracies or contradictions as regards its contents. Furthermore it is seen as a gospel by the multitude across the world. For it is an aesthetic guide to love making!

Nevertheless, the aesthetics in her sensual theory should seldom be forgotten. The theory that is spread across her various works would make a compelling treatise on the aesthetics of sensuality!!

XI. CONCLUSION

There is no other woman writer who polarizes opinions as Kamala Das does! There are conservatives who find her *blasphemous*. There are *modernists* who derive *voyeuristic pleasure* from her explicit account of love making.

However, neither school of thought ought to be taken seriously. A discerning analysis cannot draw compelling conclusions. But a consensus is obligatory on any analysis. Hence, by virtue of the available evidences (her own account of her adventures) an inference has to be drawn that she is *an audacious libertine*!