

## The Myth of Radha Krishna - A Timeless Schema for Transcending the Body: Critiquing Kamala Das's Poetry

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### Abstract

'... I am sinner / I am saint. I am the beloved and the betrayed' ("An Introduction") - such acute is the self-consciousness of Kamala Das that almost axiomatically she has been defined as one of the iconoclastic poets of India in the post-independence era. A woman who throughout her life has searched for pure love but has experienced only loneliness and indifference in return, now nurtures a feeling of utmost depression and isolation. Through myriads of images, she shows the audacity to expose through her poetry the shackles of authority imposed upon her by the patriarchal society. In her personal life, constant ignorance from her father and indifference from her husband has whetted her spirit to redefine her identity which had almost ceased to exist. One who has pined for pure love from her husband who has wanted nothing but her body, takes recourse to Lord Krishna-the ideal paramour known for the proliferation of sublime love, and finally like Radha who is Krishna's alter ego, she acts as a rebel to challenge the societal norms by inordinately ignoring the taboos associated with the marital institution and sacrificing her all to run extra marital affair which is not at all sanctioned by the patriarchy. Being cornered and silenced in her domestic life she who once has denounced her body saying 'I am / now my own captive' ("Captive"), quite interestingly accepts such condition with sheer resignation and realizes that she is left with her body to protest against carnality and that she can transcend the bodily love and her husband's carnality only by sacrificing herself to Krishna as she confesses- "your body is my prison, Krishna, /I cannot see beyond it" ("Krishna"). If in the drudgery of her husband's carnal love she compared herself to a caged bird, she deliberately wants to be captivated eternally by Krishna's love — '...towards you my thoughts today/must race like enchanted fish' ("Ghanashyam"). It is not that Das merely sublimates her feminine ego by surrendering herself to Lord Krishna, rather "the affair with 'Krishna'", as Jayakrishnan Nair succinctly opines, "is a living experience.... She is comparing here the unavailable Heavenly bliss with the practically available detraction and disaffection in the real life". (*Cutting Edges: Biology of Experience in the Poetry of Kamala Das* 206). In this paper my humble endeavour

would be to re-read Kamala Das's poetry and show how she is relegated to marginality because of her female body and finally transcends it by taking recourse to the myth of Radha-Krishna.

**Keywords:** Kamala Das, Body, Transcendence, Patriarchy, Radha-Krishna, Spirituality

Kamala Das is generally known as a poet of the body. So excessively she uses the body-images in her poetry that K.R.S Iyengar calls her "aggressively individualistic" (677), Merrily Weisbord sees her as "love-queen of Malabar" and M. Prabha designates her sarcastically as "paparazzi's dreamgirl" (225). However, if her poetry is closely examined it will be observed that all such criticism appears as a result of misrepresentation of Kamala Das because according to her, body stands for sexuality which in its turn also metaphorically represents the textuality of her poetry. Though she uses numerous images which emerge from the physical and sensual aspects of body, in actuality they project the degree of patriarchal domination and intensity of her domestic confinement. However, the internal landscape of her mind is pretty ambitious to see her body as a potential source of acute self-consciousness and as a "corporeal ground of intelligence" (Rich 62) to aggressively assert her identity. But it needs to be kept into our mind that though Das lives through her body, she eventually makes an effort to bring tranquillity to her muddled heart by going beyond physicality and immortalizing her love by sublimating her feminine ego and surrendering to the ideal love of Lord Krishna and dedicating her body to Him. Rightly does Niranjana Mohanty observe:

Das in her early poetry seems to romanticize the gender difference through her frank revelation of the anatomical imagery. In her later poetry she idealizes and immortalizes the gender difference by way of sublimating her feminine ego at the altar of Lord Krishna. (Mohanty 26)

In this paper my endeavour would be to re-read Kamala Das's poetry and show how she is relegated to marginality because of her female body and how she finally attempts to transcend it by taking recourse to the myth of Radha-Krishna.

Kamala Das (1934-2009), the renowned south-Asian poet, right from her childhood had suffered from the feeling of social alienation. In her school days she was made to feel inferior to those Anglo-Indian students by not allowing her to interact with the governor's wife due to her body's brown complexion. In *My Story* she laments:

When the visitors came the brown children were always discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company. None of us looked too pretty in those days (3)

This is indeed detrimental to her mental health and responsible for social castration which gives birth to the fear of being degraded, dominated, or becoming insignificant. Even Simone de Beauvoir critically observes that the position women occupy in society is “comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race” (Parshley 9). Women are always put into the marginal position not just because of her ‘feminine’ sensibilities, but because of the social system which is exclusively regulated by patriarchy. Helene Cixous realizing the importance of the female body as a possible outlet of the unconscious has advised all that “write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (Cixous 880). Kamala Das who with her ‘sad woman body’ has lodged a protest against her dominant male counterpart and also gives vent to her unconscious desires prompts K. Satchidanandan to opine that right from her adolescence, “her female body inscribes itself on the text and she remembers too her first encounter with masculine violence that belongs to the same frightening world of trees in the storm the mutterings of the funeral pyre” (Satchidanandan 119). In her remarkable poem “Introduction” she herself records the mental and physical torture she had experienced in the wedding night:

... he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. (*Selected Poems 5*).

Sometimes her husband’s torture becomes so unbearable that she wears the mask of physical satisfaction and pretends to consider her husband’s insatiable lust as true love:

I am a freak. It’s only  
To save my face, I flaunt, at  
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (*Selected Poems 9*)

It may appear that Kamala Das’s poems only bear her intimate personal experiences; rather they record the vivid experiences of womanhood. In her poem “In Love” she expresses her utter disgust towards sexuality and hints at the cocooned claustrophobic condition of women in a patriarchal society:

This skin-communicated  
Thing that I dare not yet in  
His presence call our love. (*Selected Poems 11*)

Das's preoccupation with the body is functional in the sense that through it she registers a protest against the society and also makes a sustained endeavour to transcend it to reach the soul. She is enormously preoccupied with the body only for the purpose of "generating in the reader the desired sense of disgust for the reprehensible aspects of human behaviour" (Ahmed 133). She gets married at a very tender age, but her husband has constantly 'neglected' her mind, prioritized her body, and finally relegated her to almost non-entity. Even she herself sacrifices her all in the process of locating the centre of man's desire. Confesses she in "Loud Posters":

I've  
Spent long years trying to locate my mind  
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath  
The bone. (*Selected Poems* 17)

The representation of body in Das's poetry is quite obvious as it not only helps her to assert her own identity but also serves as a potential threat to patriarchy and also an attack to the lustful male ego which made her feel her own body as a veritable prison which she is trapped in. Hinting at the authoritarian atmosphere both husbands and fathers create, Meenakshi Thapan rightly says:

Woman is allowed little or no space for an independent, self-perceived articulation, definition or expression of her sexuality. Her body becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community's expression of caste, class, and communal honour. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honour of the family, community, and nation. (Thapan 6)

When the voice of a woman is suppressed, she is only left with her body to protest. She depicts her inner anguish and pangs because of her loss of liberty. In "Captive" she utters: "... for years I have run from one / gossamer lane to another, I am / now my own captive" (Das *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 113).

Das's later poetry marks a significant transformation in her approach to body and love. Her disgust for gross physicality and the gradual decay of the body prompt her to look beyond sex and death into a state of spirituality. Her desire for the spiritual fulfilment of love is evident in "Anamalai Poems":

There is a love greater than all you know  
that awaits you where the red road finally ends

its patience proverbial; not for it  
the random caress or the lust  
that ends in languor.

Critics usually hold her poems to be sensual and typically centred on the body. But it should also be noted that such love is bound to wither with the degeneration of the body. Thus, it is a futile attempt to search for love in the world of philanders and nymphomaniacs. So, to save herself from the charges of over-indulgence of sexuality and promiscuity, to sprinkle her soul with love and enter into the world of spiritual transcendence, she treads into the mythical, ideal world of Radha-Krishna and Vrindavan and reaches closer to the soul “by confessing / by peeling off my layers” (Das *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 29). The bliss she finds from her close association with Krishna lies in contrast to the lustful, frustrating love of her husband.

Sublimating her feminine ego, she surrenders herself to lord Krishna and yearns to be her confidante. Her longing for purity and divinity makes her turn to the transcendental world of Radha-Krishna where the unification of the finite and infinite, *atman* and *brahman* will be established. In “Radha-Krishna” she writes:

This becomes from this hour  
Our river and this old Kadamba  
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless  
Soul to return someday  
To hang like bats from it’s pure  
Physicality. (Das 132)

Realizing the elusive nature of the ideal feminine self-hood, she honestly tries to identify herself with Radha. Instead of distancing from her lover, she ties a love-knot with Krishna surrendering all her physical possessions. In “Krishna” she accepts exactly what she had wished to deny in “Captive”:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,  
I cannot see beyond it.  
Your darkness blinds me,  
Your love words shut out the wise world’s din. (Das *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 82)

She is ecstatic and therefore wants her body to be dissolved in Krishna and the substance which remains after such sublime union is the ideal love bereft of body. Such feeling is skilfully documented in her poem “Radha”:

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting  
Nothing remains but  
You. (Das *Selected Poems* 45)

Das’s search for something beyond the physical leads her to Lord Krishna and makes her his alter-ego. The Krishna motif not only evinces Das’s love for ideal, it also works as a paradigm of “supremacy of spirit over matter, soul over body, timeless over the temporal” (Dodiya 1).

Das’s relation with Krishna is purely human. Her failure to get peace in married life has prompted her to get out of the wedlock and surrender herself to Krishna. It is not that Das was not willing to get ‘pure’ love from others. She has lost her way and has gone to many as she says in “My Grandmother’s House”, “I who have lost/ My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to/ Receive love, at least in small change?” (Das *Selected Poems* 13), but finally she realizes the futility of such love. She evinces that the ‘band of cynics’ has not only failed to provide her the absolute bliss, but also has toyed with her body. Das succinctly records such experience in “The Sunshine Cat”: “they said, each of/ Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not / In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you...” (Das *Selected Poems* 23). Realizing the fact that the body cannot take her to the world of sublime love and peace and that it actually works as a preventive measure from experiencing true love, she turns to the mythical world of Lord Krishna. Love for Krishna shows her the way to experience absolute liberty from the social codes. Sudhir Kakar succinctly opines that:

[Krishna] encourages the individual to identify with an ideal primal self, released from all social and superego constraints. Krishna’s promise, like that of Dionysus in ancient Greece, is one of utter freedom and instinctual exhilaration. (Kakar 142).

Actually, Krishna is considered to be Das’s ‘mate’ to whom ‘in many shapes shall I surrender... I shall be fondled by Him”. (*My Story* 208).

It is not that Das denies the body altogether to become religious. Rather it is all about her ability to distinguish between ‘spiritual’ and ‘profane’. In order to reach the soul one must go through the body. Purnendu Chatterjee opines:

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Das is covertly positing the universal concept that physical energies must be transformed into spiritual energy in the course of the “inward” journey.(Chatterjee 78)

The image of Krishna appeals more realistically than her husband. Demythicalizing Lord Krishna Das expresses her attitude to Him:

But illogical that I am from birth onwards, I have always thought of Krishna as my mate... It was only by imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure. (Das *Femina* 19)

Her indifference to her husband’s carnal love which lies in stark contrast to Krishna’s ideal love is very pertinently described by Das in “The Maggots”:

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? (Das *Selected Poems* 51)

Das’s quest for ideal love may appear unattainable, however, being alienated by the drudgery of domestic life she, in Krishna, tries to find out the eternal lover in contrast to her earthly lovers. In “A Man a Season” she states such fact quite directly:

A man is a reason,  
You are eternity. (Das *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 81)

Body for Das is a barrier to reach the soul. Once this barrier is traversed one can taste the sweetness of infinite love. In “Advice to the Fellow-Swimmers” she says:

Go swim in the great blue sea  
Where the first tide you meet is your body,  
That familiar pest,  
But if you learn to cross it  
You are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe,  
For, even sinking would make no difference then... (Das *Selected Poems* 116)

Das’s use of Krishna myth is quite deliberate as it not only helps her to transcend physicality, but also lets a therapeutic effect prevail upon her. Writes she herself:



We are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal, and perishable. The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shall I surrender to his desire... I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. Then for me there shall be no return journey... (Das *My Story* 185-186)

Bruce King opines that "... the poems of Kamala Das when focused on love treat it within a broader ranges of themes, more realized settings and with deeper feeling, bringing to it an intensity of emotion and speech and a rich, full complexity of life" (147). Kamala Das under the cover of gross physicality expresses her deep desire for love. In this context she is comparable with ancient writers like Mirabai, Andal, Rami, Janabai and others. When Mirabai denounces her family relationship, accepts Krishna to be her lover and says courageously, "My relations surround me like bees. / But Mira is the servant of her beloved Giridhar, / And she cares nothing that people mock her" (Tharu and Lalita 93) it becomes quite obvious that her words, devotion and courage are echoed to a great extent in Kamala Das's poetry.

As Das reaches the middle age she wears the mask of Radha-Krishna myth and tries to sweep away all the hazardous issues associated with marital life in order to refine the stasis of her equilibrium. A. N. Dwivedi remarks:

[Das] is merely searching for a relationship which gives both genuine love and impenetrable security. That's why she sometimes gives a mythical framework to her search for true love and identifies it with Radha-Krishna syndrome or with Mira Bai, relinquishing the ties of marriage in pursuit of Lord Krishna, the true divine lover. (Dwivedi 3)

It is surprising that this very lady who has always revolted to set herself free from the clutches of patriarchy, now wants 'security' from Krishna, stoops to conquer the true love, and entangles herself into the love-net of Krishna like an enchanted fish. Krishna lifts up her soul to a sublime realm as she expresses in "Ghanshyam":

You have like a koel built your nest in the harbour of my heart.  
My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music.  
You lead me along a route I have never known before  
But at each turn when I near you  
Like a spectral flame you vanish. (Das *Selected Poems* 87)



There are many critics who feel that the Krishna-image is a camouflage that Das deliberately wears to escape social criticism. Her rigidity regarding her husband, her extra-marital affairs with many, her all-out quest for asserting her identity are masked by the use of the Krishna myth in the same way as His illegitimate relations are legitimised in the Hindu mythologies. Jayakrishnan Nair candidly says:

...the mythical framework in some of her poems is only an attempt to give them a transcendental look, and the mythological figures of Radha and Krishna are a mere subterfuge to escape social criticism. All this in a broad parlance is only a visionary manner of confectioning for oneself a state of imaginary circumstance, since talking of such subjective desires as personal properties amounts to restoring to verbal expressions without any situational gravity. So imaginatively and poetically dramatizing the self and the other in the mythic extensions and distances solves the whole problem of the poet. (Nair 203)

Thus, the canon of Kamala Das is fraught with turns and twists. If one considers her as utterly sensual, she comes out with her Krishna poems to prompt Vincent O' Sullivan to suggest that "Das must be read as a religious poet" (Sullivan 187). But if one tends to hold her utterly religious, she makes critics like Fritz Blackwell observe that the poet's "concern is literary and existential, not religious; she is using a religious concept for a literary motif and metaphor" (Blackwell 13). She, like Radha, also acts as a rebel to challenge the societal norms, inordinately ignore the taboos associated with the marital institution and sacrifice her all to run extra marital affair which is not at all endorsed by the patriarchy and finally tries to create a utopian world marked by pure love. She does not deny the body to embrace Krishna as she knows that body is the very gateway to reach the soul. She herself surmises in "Suicide":

Bereft of soul  
My body shall be bare  
Bereft of body  
My soul shall be bare. (*Selected Poems* 39)

That Kamala Das has employed sexual images extensively in her poetry is undeniable. But it will also be unjust if she is made to bear with the venom of negative criticism without taking into account her motive and purpose behind such overexposure of body and sensuality and frank disclosure of sexual experiences. Her body was objectified and dominated by her husband when she was innocent and was unaware of the complexities associated with her docile female body. She was tortured and humiliated for not being able to quench the lust of her husband. Then

she decides to go from one gossamer to another so that her husband cannot betray her physically. She is involved in many illicit relationships and gives away her body. In the third stage she realizes the body's inability to eternalize love. The more she gets involved with illicit relations the more it becomes difficult for her to bask in the realm of spiritual bliss. So she dedicates her body to Krishna- the ideal lover who will not only love her eternally and restore her virginity, but also will make her aware of 'cosmic-consciousness' by transcending her ego. Thus, Kamala Das or Madhavikutti's poetic oeuvre signifies her journey from body to the soul, from physicality to spirituality, from being Madhav's frustrated wife (as Kamala Das's husband was Madhav Das) to becoming Madhav's eternal beloved (as Madhav is another name of Krishna). Perceiving Das's quest for transcendence of the body through the myth of "Radha-Krishna" Mohan Lal Sharma quite aptly sums up the argument:

Kamala Das begins with the body and arrives at the realization that body-consciousness can be developed into the cosmic-consciousness, and that the 'self-centered' egotistical existence alone is contemptible. (Sharma "The Road to Brindavan" 101)

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