



## *Mind that sees and hears and is aware: An eco-critical thought on select works of Kamala Das*

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### Abstract

Kamala Das exemplifies significant aspects of contemporary poetic sensibility which are essential both intrinsically and historically. Her honest investigations of the self, urban life, women in traditional Indian society, matters of post colonial identity and the political and personal struggles of the marginalized are woven with words in the background of a revealing ecology. The landscape and its features give soul to her poetry and it declares that Kamala Das truly belongs to the world. The two components of nature, organisms and their environment are not only complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and inter-related. Ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment. In this relationship they are very much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one disturbs the other. The depiction of South Indian village culture and environmental settings in her poetry are a true depiction of relationship between man and nature. Yet it can be said that the writer may not have written with the thought of Ecology at all and it was just coincidental. The present paper reads the representation of nature and man in select poems that contrast the grandeur and permanence of nature with the transience of human history.

**Keywords:** eco - criticism, social landscape, fatalism, inner landscape

### Introduction

Kamala Das' writing is full of sensuous phenomena which always retain a sensory quality that is realistic and direct. It is connected to the empirical reality of the situation described and it presents emotions and subjective reactions with descriptions. Her emotions seem to be an inherent part of that reality which is as real and concrete as any physical object can be. Reality in her poetry embraces both emotions and nature alike. Das often manages to form this sort of unity of inner and outer events and these moments are the best in her poetry.

Kamala Das has gone beyond the entire socialist-realist mode of exploring the tormented psyche of the solitary human beings haunted by guilt, pain, and love less ness. She travelled from the outer drama of social events to inner drama of emotions and proved that women and nature in her creations fertilize each other. It is seen that nature culturally and emotionally constructs a background for her creations. Nature makes the writer think more carefully about the way she reifies, consume or idealize it. Ecology in her poems has to do with love, loss, despair and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with reading and writing and even sexuality. Theodor Adorno, a twentieth century re-interpreter of the Marxist theory memorably declared that art is not nature but wants to redeem what nature promises.

The ecological thought thus ramifies into every aspect of modern life, extending far and beyond the arenas traditionally understood as involving encounters with nature. Nature is happening all around us and it begs to be described in the prose and the poetry. Kamala Das's poems use sea, oceans, storms, and woodland animals as images which evoke strong mental pictures. This wonderful assemblage of verse appeals

to the senses as it uses language to paint pictures with words. Imagery intensifies our experience with the poets writing as he or she illustrates for us what they feel. Through nature the imagery of the poem flows from the pages to the soul. The poet has thus shared with us how nature has touched her.

Kamala Das maintains the shortest interval between emotion and expression. She composes a raga of herself in her poetry. She always believed that true literature can originate only from tragedies and sorrows of life and for her nature is the only witness to the tragedies of her life. She achieved greatness not only because of the contents of her poem but also because of the techniques of writing poetry and her craftsmanship.

Unquestionably, she occupies an important position among the poets who constitute the modern tradition of the Indian poetry in English. This trend that emerged in the early fifties still continues to be seen in one form or the other. As Kamala das reminds us in her poem "An Introduction", the modern poet has to sense the surrounding before the mind speaks:

The speech of the mind that is  
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and  
Is aware (An Introduction)

The poet has a sharp nose for 'the smell of dying things and the heavy smell of rotting' and she has the honesty to recognize through her self-searching that her small defiance's in poetry or in dreams do not add up to much and give her very little staying power. How painful, frenzied, and self-consuming the life of an ill adjusted sensitive individual can be in the rotting and decaying society is well brought out in a poem like "The Dance of the Eunuchs" where the atmosphere

and the rhythm re-inforce the meaning conveyed by the central image of a group of sterile and harassed individuals dancing their grotesque dance as a command performance. This is the dance of a man and woman both celebrating at the end the season of drought. The paradoxical nature of the situation and the customary Indianness of the scene helps to make "The Dance of the Eunuchs" one of Kamala Das's best poem.

In 'Jaisurya' Kamala Das treats her body as an elemental force and a part of the naturalistic order and she writes that 'For a while I too was Earth'. The poem focuses on her experience of child birth using the images of darkness and light to speak of the emergence of the child from the womb into the world.

Kamala wrote "Composition" when she was living in a flat at Bombay's Cadell road, the windows of which faced the sea and let in the chilly westerlies. She recollects that the night was silent except for the continual thumping of the tides of the beach. She had cultivated an excellent sense of rhythm even though she never learned prosody. The reason was that for years she had lived beside the sea and had an ear for rhythm. Kamala thus achieved greatness as a poet not only because of the contents of the poem but also because of her technique of writing poetry and her craftsmanship. With a vast range of vocabulary she could even differentiate between the shades of meanings. Hence, her poems are randomly chosen to find evidence of the ecological thought in pervading in them.

The "composition" works out the desire to the lyrical conclusion when she writes:

Ultimately,  
I have come face to face with the sea. (Composition)

Here, the sea has elemental associations. Merging with the sea symbolizes the merging of the poet's consciousness with the oblivion of peace, the escape from the body. "The Swamp" is really descriptive, and the poem is clearly a metaphor serving to reveal the inner landscape of the poet's mood. The tropical lush background of Malabar is sensuously related to her own feeling of love. The piece is strategically placed after the poem "The Stone Age," which once again dwells on her passionate nature. Deliberately the poet binds herself to this naturalistic order where the body functions only as a part of nature, giving in to the pulls of the elemental forces. As the poet herself ironically indicated, she is being trapped in the Stone Age, in the swamp.

Kamala writes in this context that she is at peace and she likens God to a tree which has as its parts the leaves, the bark, the fruits and the flowers each unlike the other in appearance and in texture but in each lying dissolved the essence of the tree. The poet's power of observation is quite sharp, but it comes into play only when she is viewing small and isolated objects and the scene has been reduced to manageable proportions. For example, there is a sensitive and accurate description in "Pigeons":

Pigeons on the ledge  
Of an afternoon dream  
Sit strangely silent,  
The hot dust rises  
Falls on the sun pealed beaks (Pigeons)

But the same poets when she has to describe the social landscape in a poem like "Farewell to Bombay" and "Afterwards" can give only flat descriptions having little resonance or precision. Kamala Das's poetry does have an authenticity and force to the extent that she honestly brings out the triviality and shallowness of the life she is condemned to live as a woman belonging to the middle class. Her voice becomes the voice of the reader who is born, who suffers and dies, only to be born again as one of the colors of the rainbow which joins the two horizons of sensibility: thought and passion.

The title piece in "Summer in Calcutta" scatters its fall-out of heat, sweat and weariness over the entire volume. Even the imagery painfully recurs. Summer heat, urban modes; vital heat, urban sophistication; the contrast between the desire and the spasm, the dream and the reality- Kamala Das explores this unresolved tensions. Calcutta is the 'continent of Circe' squeezed into little space. Under the Indian sun, although sensuality lures irresistibility, yet it fails to satisfy. The feelings and the introspection sound the depths of the oceanic sense of frustration; and the calm and fulfillment eludes forever.

She has revealed the essence of her poetry with mastery of phrase and a control over rhythm in the background of nature and the nature imageries without which her thoughts would not have been completely conveyed. Kamala Das exercises a special care in her words and the combination of those words into phrase, clause and sentences. She shows a rare understanding of the meanings, the appropriateness and the subtlety of the words. The words come to her effortlessly and become one with her emotions. The same is with nature. Nature and her emotions are blend to vend out her thoughts. The tone in many of the poems is conversational and the diction is colloquial. This conspicuously is the case in the poem entitled, "An Introduction" in which Kamala Das seems to be holding a dialogue with the sea.

The "Hot Noon in Malabar" presents a peculiar sight. It is an intensively emotional and personal poem. It is one of her typical works evoking Malabar landscape and its lush greenery. This poem very powerfully evokes her sense of belonging to the Malabar and her *tharavad* from the core. Kamala Das, the poetess, observed that when the noon was hot, beggars came to their door with whining voices they shouted for alms.

A retinue of other persons also came to gather on the veranda. Among them were the men from hills. They carried parrots in a cage and fortune cards. Those were the instruments with which they created faith among the credulous fatalists in Malabar. The hot noon was suitable for brown *Kurava* girls to come to Malabar to carry on their livelihood. They used to read palms in light sing song voices. They were followed by old bangle-sellers. They close the poetess's veranda as cool and conducive. The bangles were attractive while the bangle sellers were covered with the dust of roads. The bangle sellers had to walk down long. The road was rough and it was hot.

The hot noon was marked by the strangers who fearfully opened the window-drapes and looked in the room. But they were not able to see anything because their eyes were affected by the hot rays of the sun. It was impossible to see anything with that eye in a shadowy room. They turned away and

looked at the well with great eagerness. They wanted to quench their thirst. There were also strangers who suspected each other. They remained silent. If they were excited, they became angry and their voices ran wild, as wild as free animals in forest.

Thus, the hot noon in Malabar was very pleasant for the poetess. She wishes to spend the noon amidst those wild men, wild thoughts and wild love. It was a torture for her to be away. She had wild thoughts in that hot noon Love instinct grew in her. She became passionate in that hot noon. The home of the poetess in Malabar became noisy and dusty in that hot noon.

Feelings of loss, longings and anguish pervade the poem "The Wild Bougainvillea". The poem shows the poet's attempt to rise above private anguish and depict a larger view on experience. It is an allusion to Kamala Das's own experience in Calcutta during the early part of her marital life. But the reference can be understood as indicating any urban location where it is not easy to sustain the mood of comfort and ease. A lonely sojourn into the unknown areas of the city brings her face to face with life in its manifold aspects, which assures her and she feels that it is a good world full of beauty and happiness. As she walks along the sea she notices stagnant rotten things, undersides of the barges rotting dead and the transience of all earthly things dawns on her. She becomes oblivious to the pain when she sees marigold and the wild red Bougainvillea- vibrant, fresh and colorful-climbing the minarets and growing unaffected by the surroundings. The garbage rot, the dead fish rot and the smell of dying are some of the images of decay and death meant to show the extreme difficulty and frustrating circumstances in which the speaker is placed. The Bougainvillea flower assumes a symbolic meaning in the poem. It is the flower that grows in adverse and extreme conditions. In its beauty and serenity this flower symbolizes the renewal of life.

The imagery of the sights witnessed in her "Grandmother's House" and in Malabar where she was born and spent her childhood is vividly portrayed. After her grandmother's death the house had become a silent place. Her veins are said to be as cold as the moon, the moon being the ensemble of love. The worms in the books are like snakes in comparison to the size of the girl. The air is frozen now as compared to when her grandmother was alive- the surroundings were then filled with the warmth of empathy. She pleads us to listen to the frozen air.

In wild despair, she longs to bring in an armful of darkness. Normally, darkness carries both negative and positive connotations- here it is a protective shadow. This armful of darkness is the essence of her nostalgia. With this piece of darkness, she can lie down for hours, like a brooding dog behind the door lost in contemplation. Now in another city living another life, she longs to go back. The image of the window is the link between the past and the present and the old house becomes a place of symbolic retreat to a world of innocence, purity, and simplicity.

In the "Suicide" Kamala Das reveals her inner mood explicitly. There is a weariness and disgust expressed about the vagaries of the experience of love and lust. There is also the torture the body feels similar to the tossed about sea. But at the end the mood is that of stagnation, deadness. The poet

does not have the courage to kill her and returns with the feeling of deadness remaining within her- the sea has the soul but tosses back the body. "The Suicide" had introduced the image of the sea in which the poet wishes to be submerged. She addresses the sea in *The Suicide* to know the intuitive knowledge of life and death. She wants to ask the sea how to get rid of the women, to learn how to endure life and face death. Kamala Das goes to and fro within her inner self as the sea moves in vortex before her. Sea is an old symbol of timelessness. But her illusive freedom in the lap of the sea is overshadowed by the painful memory of her love affairs. The symbolic use of the sea indicates her emotional restlessness and sad mood. The sea throughout her second volume functions as an objective correlative to her quest for peace.

"The Invitation" has artistically used sea as an escape from her present dilemma. The symbol of sea gives her solace, comfort and redemption against the force of oppression and exploitation of the domineering male tyranny. Here the poet looks at the sea and accepts its invitation of self-drowning. It is the danger of insecurity that brings her face to face with the sea.

The varied themes that Kamala Das has dealt with in her poetry is woven in an intricate web of ecology. She has explained the vagaries of her existence through nature in one way or the other. Nature is something inherent in her which gives completeness to her thoughts. Influenced by the socio-ecological environment of the Malabar she had completely soaked her memories of her childhood in the wrap of natural beauty. She couldn't explain her feelings without the smell and the patches of her old *tharavad*. She associated her feelings with that of the nature and proved that her feelings are directly proportional to nature. The turbulences in nature are identified with her own inner conflicts. It is but true that many a times the element of ecology is discarded in the intensity of her passions.

Nature becomes the stencil of her thoughts which she had brought up to a worldwide arena. Her thoughts that flowed from her without inhibitions shrouded the nature that she had employed in her poetry. Nature is felt with the senses. Kamala's poetry cannot be read it can only be sensed. She has elaborated with the imagery of nature how the environment in itself can touch the emotional heights of a human being. Most eloquently she has captured the essence of the nature hid it between the lines of the poems. That is why when Kamala writes on the smell of death and decay the reader too gets the smell of it. Any object that forms part of the ecology has an effect on the human life. Every element in nature carries connotations that sync to the life of an individual. True to the fact, nature seldom stood out in her poetry to establish itself as that intensely was her feelings, passions and desires described in her poetry. Literally, nature is submerged in the plentitude of her emotions.

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