
CREATIVE USE OF LANGUAGE IN KAMALA DAS'S POETRY

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People often enjoy literature before they understand it. Because certain words or phrases may appeal to them or they may get a general impression of the meaning of a piece of literature and like it. But a trained reader reads a piece of literature most carefully before he understands enough to enjoy it. If he is simply bewildered by a piece of literature, he cannot enjoy it. On this basic level, therefore, enjoyment is closely related to understanding. For a trained reader, pleasure lies in the process of working out of the meaning of the piece of literature. This process of working out of the meaning of a piece of literature leads to the close study of the language of literature.

The present paper aims at analyzing the creative use of language made by Kamala Das in her poetry. Kamala Das has presented a remarkable aesthetics in poetic terms. True, she is bilingual, writing novels in Malayalam and poetry in English. She has chosen not her mother-tongue but English language for her poetic communication. As she says: "The language one employs is not important what is important is the thought contained by the words"¹ Kamala Das shows it in her poetry that her thought has been adequately contained in her words. Suresh Kohli observes: "An Introduction" is vitally communicative is as much a comment on the poem as an indication of Mrs. Das's use of language which is not her mother-tongue."² She has given original touch to this foreign language. "Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of words and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Idealization of English."³

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Kamala Das's choice of English as the medium for poetic communication does not seem to be deliberate. Commenting on why Indian writers use English for creative expression, Kamala Das says "why in English is a silly question. It is like asking us why we don't write in Swahili or serbocroate. English being the most familiar, we use it. That is all"⁴ In 'An introduction' the poet touches upon this question and replies to those who advise her not to write in English.

. . . . I am an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
two
Then again more emphatically she says
. . . . Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.

(“An Introduction”)

Kamala Das believes that that honesty of expression and sincerity to one's own feelings and emotions are more fundamental to poetry than the language employed. Poetry is but the thought and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself. It is an organization of the best word in the best possible order.

Kamala Das is ignorant of the morphology or even the grammatical nuances of words but she recognizes their vital power and emotive effects. Her poetry is an adventure with the words and their myriad combinations and they unlock a world where experience scramble to be expressed. Poetry for her is a means of unburdening her tortured self, unfolding the mishaps and despairs of her life in order to achieve a state of tranquility. The confessional mode she has adopted makes her expression urgent and loaded with several directions of meaning. This mode aims at the recreation of intense feeling through a structure of words which expresses the turmoil of the self and evokes a responsive emotional disturbance in the reader.

In Kamala Das the emergence of an idea, a feeling or a sensation is immediately followed by its expression in words. The waning of inspiration is practically nil. Thus even while giving an impression of writing without premeditation; Kamala Das displays great power and virtuosity in the use of language. "While giving the impression of writing in haste, she revels a mastery of

phrase and control over rhythm-the words often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly, alive”⁵

There is a total fusion of thought, expression, rhythm and meaning in her verses and the words create a symbiosis of several sensations, visual, auditory and emotive. ‘The Freaks’ opens with a visual image the claps on the reader’s consciousness with sudden impact. “He talks, turning a sun-stained / Cheek to me...” “Nani’ begins with a direct, plain statement that, nevertheless, haunts the reader : “Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself / In the privy one day....” “Herons” begins with the ironic and disturbing confession, “On sedatives / I am more lovable / Says my husband.” The abrupt and spontaneous beginning of ‘Summer in Calcutta’ is striking and the words fall into a quick, evocative image

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass?

(“Summer in Calcutta”)

The word ‘squeezed’ pervades the meaning of the poem. In ‘The Music Party’ the first four liners composed of associative words at once hit at the cold attitude of the lover.

Music in front. A pale
Girl in pink, beside the
Harmonium. Behind
Me, your stillness

(“The Music Party”)

Kamala Das’s poetry is not ‘emotion recollected’ in the coolness of tranquility but an uninhibited expression of emotions and feelings in the white heat of experience. Kamala Das has remarked that every good writer is a sculptor with words. The poet has been conscious of the enormous energy of words and in her own case; words became carriers of feeling rather than meaning. The poem ‘Words’ quoted in full reveals how words can be depositories of disturbed feelings.

All rounds are words, and words and words,
they grow on me like leaves, they never
seem to stop their slow growing
from with....but I tell myself, words

are a nuisance, beware of them, they
can be so many things, a
chasm where running feet must pause to
look, a sea with paralyzing waves,
a flash of burning air, or
a knife most willing to cut your best
friend's throat. Words are a nuisance, but
they grow on me like leaves on a tree,
they grow on me like leaves on a tree,
they never seem to stop their coming
from a silence, somewhere deep within....

(“Words”)

The rhythmic perfection and the internal rhyme intensify the impact of meaning on the reader's consciousness. the powerful impression of the unity of thought and the feeling and the unity of visual and auditory sensations that ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’ creates is primarily due to its excellent rhythmic /musical structure

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling. beneath the fiery gulmohue, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They danced, oh, they danced.....

(“The Dance of the Eunuchs”)

Here words are like quicksilver carrying with them sparkle of sense. However, Kamala Das is free from pure indianisms. The strength of her lines rests on the superb combination, order and placing of words. One of the charges leveled against Kamala Das's poetic art is that it is devoid of humour. her poetry is tense and taut in tone and there are not many light moments in it. Though satire and pun are absent in her poetry, there is sensitive use of irony in several of her poems. Irony is a subtle device which involves stating the exact opposite of what is meant. In irony the unstated meaning is the exact reversion of the stated one.

In Kamala Das's poetry irony serves four purposes; it clarifies the theme and deepens the impact; it functions as a comment on social practices, situations and persons; it channelises rebelliousness and despair along civilized pathways of protest and finally it expresses a mature sense of resignation and compromise with the sorrows of the world. The poem 'Composition' has an ironic structure that enhances the significance of the theme.

Husbands and wives,
here is my advice to you.
obey each other's crazy commands,
ignore the sane.
turn your home into a merry.
dog-house,
marriage is meant to be all this
anyway,
being arranged in
most humorous heaven.

(“Composition”)

In 'Nani' the poet does not receive a satisfactory answer from her grandmother about the death of the maid and year or two earlier. The surging displeasure of the poet is channelised through apparently innocuous line, “.....They are quickly / Who ask questions and move on before / The answers come....” 'Herons' too is a poem of sustained irony leveled against the husband who loves the wife more when she is on sedatives. The pinch of irony lies in the assumptions that on sedatives “...my ragdoll limbs adjust better / To his versatile lust....”

Kamala Das's poetry objectifies the passions and frustrations of her personal relationships. Imagery, symbols and metaphors constitute the most discernible and powerful devices the poet employs to mould her poetic art. Imagery in poetry is the manner in which sensory responses are evoked through the presentation of ideas in a collection of words, conventional or unconventional. Imagery brings to the focus of our consciousness a sensory picture of experience, a recognizable image, a perceptible idea or notion by the deft combination of connotative words. In 'The Stone Age' Kamala Das evokes two striking images of lust in the following lines:

..... ask me why his hand sways like a
hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,
And sleeps.....
This is highly evocative erotic imagery.

(“The Stone Age”)

Kamala Das does not use any exotic imagery or symbols. She has drawn them from everyday circumstances. The imagery of the ‘trained circus dog’ appears in more than one poem: “...I am a trained circus dog / Jumping my routine hoops each day. (Of Calcutta). In ‘The Moon’ the unchanging is identified as the circus dog. “..... It is a trained circus dog / That shall never miss its hoop.” (The Moon)

Kamala Das’s use of symbols, metaphors and similar figurative devices are emotionally conceived and help transmute disordered pains and frustrations into well-defined experiences. She uses all types of symbols. In ‘The Blind Walk’ she declares, ‘I have always had a passion for symbols’. ‘Snake’ is a poet to suggest the quality of lust. In ‘The Freaks’ the heart is filled with ‘coiling snakes of silence’ suggesting the oppressive nature of silence after lust. In ‘Gino’ a lustful kiss is compared to the bite of a krait which fills the blood stream with accursed essence. In ‘The Stone Age’ the ‘hooded snake’ refers to the lustfully searching hand of lover.’ ‘Fire’ and ‘flame’ are recurring fixed symbols in Kamala Das’s poetry . As a child she saw a house burning down. “.... Since then the littlest fire / Has had for me a very secret incantation.”(A Souvenir of Bone)

‘Fire’ is an important symbol, associated with death and funeral. In ‘Wood Ash’ the fire is a devastating energy burning down everything. In ‘Forest Fire’ it is an all consuming passion to ingest all experiences. Flame is the seed of the fire-tree and in ‘Ghanshayam’ the lord is evasive like a ‘spectral flame’. The sun and the sea are two very pervasive symbols in Kamala Das’s poetry. The sun is an obsession with most Indian poets. In Kamala Das’s poetry the sun does not warm, it drabness, hostility and lust. Most of the poems in Kamala Das’s first collection, ooze the summer heat and dust the poem begins with a symbolic representation of the sun as an orange.

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed

Like an orange in
My glass?
We came together like two suns meeting.
and each
Raging to burn the other out....

(“Summer in Calcutta”)

The sun here symbolizes the sensual passion that burn out. ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’ is filled with heat through the word ‘sun’ does not appear in the poem. the sun,here is a dormant symbol represented by words suggesting its several manifestations such as ‘hot’,’fiery’,’dry’ and ‘drought’.

The sea is a most salutary and seminal symbol in Kamala Das’s poetry. The sea was a part of her childhood consciousness as it was only two miles away from her ancestral home nalapat.in ‘Composition’ and in The Suicide the sea is the central symbol. In childhood the sea was only the winds / ceaseless whisper in a shell.

In later life, even when she had no time at all for the sea, its blue memories swayed her voyage.

there was off and on a seascape
in my dreams,
and the water
Here was off and on a seascape
in my dream,
and the water
sloshing up
and sliding down.

(“Composition”)

The sea is a symbol of peace and spiritual detachment and poet often wants to escape into its cool chambers. When despair grips her,

All I want now
is to take a long walk
into the sea
and lie there, resting,
completely uninvolved

(“Composition”)

In ‘The Suicide’ the poet converses with the sea and is momentarily taken in by a desire for death by merging with the sea. “The sea’s hostile cold / Is after all skin-deep.” (“The Suicide”)

In Kamala Das’s poetry the human body in its various shapes and shadows is a leading symbol. The bodies expression are linked up with the poet’s exploration of love and lust. The body appears in Kamala Das’s poetry often as a symbol of lust and female differences vanish and lovers become one. The body asserts,

.....not knowing
What else to do, i kiss your eyes, dear one,
Your lips, like
Petals drying at edges, the burnt cheeks and
The dry grass of your hair...

(“The Sea Shore”)

The male body’s several attractions fascinate the poet even when they are linked with lust-the leonine grace, hemlock smile, ‘ the deep armist and the shadowed groin’. However, it is contemptible and abhorrent pulsating with mere lust.

..... Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate.....

(“The Looking Glass”)

This male vulgarity of lust counterbalanced by the female’s stinking seductions

..... the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers...

(“The Looking Glass”)

As a whole the language of Kamala Das,s poetry is concerned, it has been used creatively by her. Needless to say that she conscious of the creative use of language in her poetry. Style and formal features are important aspects for making an analysis and of working out of the meaning

of a piece of her poetry. In her poetry there is a delightful union of word and meaning which is characterized by the infusion of unique poetic art which is capable of affording pleasure to the reader. It is important to note that oblique use of language operates at various levels. The first is the level of phonemes. It works at the level of phoneme when similar or identical phonemes or consonants are repeated at varying intervals, when consonants or phonemes are arranged without any interval, when new consonants or phonemes are employed and when stops are combined with their homorganic nasals. It also includes alliteration and chime. The second level takes place in the use of words and grammatical items. It includes synonym, adjectives, pronouns, verb and the grammatical forms like tense, case, number, person, voice, affix and particle. The third level deals with the syntactical forms, at this level, we have the subject matter which is of two types: natural and imposed. The craft of Kamala Das is essentially symbolic and metaphor-based. The diversity and profuseness of the symbols, images and metaphors she employs, sometimes deflect the reader's attention from the central themes of the poems to their representations and halt him for a moment on extraneous sentiments and issues. "She lay still, her open eyes two cartwheels / Stunned to a sudden halt...." (Women Without Her Shadow) In Kamala Das's poetry coherence is achieved around articulated themes by the artful enlistment of symbols, images and other figurative devices.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. ¹Kamala Das, Answers to Questionnaire in *Modern Poetry in English* ed. P. Lal (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971)102.
2. ²Suresh Kohli, "The Poetic Craft of Kamala Das", *Thought*, Vol XX, No.11 (March 16, 1968)17.
3. ³Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987)153.
4. ⁴Kamala Das, Answers to Questionnaire in *Modern Poetry in English*, 102.
5. ⁵K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1983)680.)