

Symbolism in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

This paper minutely scrutinizes the use of symbolism in the poetry of Kamala Das. By the use of symbolism, literature achieves universality which evokes reader's interest and enables them to sneak a look into the mind of the author. To understand the relation of symbol in a particular work depends upon user's context and attitude as symbol can be personal, universal or cultural. No matter how rational a thought maybe, it has less implication in the field of literature unless it is spun into the texture of images and symbols. The use of symbols and imagery by Kamala Das reveal her personal life, more personal than anyone else. In her poetry she expresses death, desire, sickness and wish of death through the images of decaying body, sun, heat, burial and cremation. Her symbols are always helpful to a reader and the depth of meaning is increased, and helps in linguistic expression.

Keywords:- Universal symbols, Personal Symbols, Traditional Symbols/ Conventional symbols.

I. INTRODUCTION

In general parameters, Symbolism is rather difficult to define and equally difficult to set within specific limits. Yet one can agree with Arthur Symons that without symbolism "Words can be nothing more than arbitrary symbols that human kind has created for the convenience of communicating with one another" (01). Symbols organize record and communicate huge amount of information in a quicker way.

Symbol therefore in a broadest sense of the term is anything that signifies something else; there are a variety of symbols, conventional symbols like "Rose", "Dove" etc.

Kamala Das experiences the sense of being insignificant and dwarfish as her husband could not love her according to her wishes, instead exploited her and played with her emotions. Her turning into dwarf is symbolical. She has been as free as swallow before marriage. In the poem "Old Playhouse" she states:

... .. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf (*Old Playhouse, 01*).

Kamala Das was completely in the grip of her husband. The dilemma of a married woman, like a caged bird, the captivity has been depicted in the opening lines of the poem "The Old Playhouse": "You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her" (Das 01). Joya Chakravarty tells about the relation of Kamala Das with her husband thus: "Her husband was interested in sex, she sought companionship-the result was a hollow union" (04).

Every kind of symbol, personal as well as universal, is employed by Kamala Das in her poetry. Her husband leads an artificial life. The windows of his room remain shut and there is no natural light or fresh air in the room, so the room stinks of stale, foul breath. Even the flowers in the vase give out the odour of man's foul breath. The nature imagery, the summer of your love, the ruder breeze, and burning leaves reinforces her

suffering and suffocation is aptly symbolised through the word 'Smoke'. The urban imagery-artificial lights, air-conditioner & cut flowers in the vase point out the unnatural state of her sapless life and the plight of her mind which is darkened by the loss of hope:

I lost my will and reason, to all your

.... Your room is

Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always shut (*Old Playhose* 01).

It is quite stated by Z. F. Molvi, "In the poetry of Kamala Das, the world of harmony and love is symbolized by her grandmother. With her grandmother's death she woke up to the brutal facts of life" (92).

Her grandmother had given her a sense of security and protection which she vanished in her married life. "My Grandmother's House" gives a glimpse of the house which made an impact on her personality reveals Kamala Das' nostalgic desire for her family home, Nalapat house, in Malabar, Kerala. In this context, Satish Kumar articulates:

The old family home is [...] feeling of joy and rescue her for a short while from the unhappy present (139).

After the demise of her grandmother, the house lost its kindness and majesty. Her sign of her security now stand as a wasteland for her.

The poem "A Hot Noon in Malabar" contrasts the irresistible past with the miserable present. Malabar comes to symbolise her childhood days and she recaptures it to regain her lost self.

Anisur Rahman expresses the vital ancestral memories of Kamala Das and articulates, "symbols of undefiled purity which she left once and lost forever" (31).

A. N. Dwivedi points out, "As a poet, Kamala Das makes ample use of images and symbols" (65).

Kamala Das herself declares, "I have always had a passion for symbols" (*The Blind Walk* 140).

Arlene R. K. Zide opines: "Kamala Das' themes transcend the 'personal' because what she attempts to poetise, is the 'Universal experience' of a woman." (Arlene, 239).

Fire is an important symbol, associated with death and funeral. In 'Wood Ash' fire is a devastating energy burning down everything. In "Forest Fire" it is an all consuming passion to ingest all experience.

The sun as a symbol is used to symbolize the sensual passion that too 'burn out'. The poem namely "The Dance of the Eunuch" is filled with heat, though the word 'Sun' does not appear in the poem. The 'sun' here is an inactive symbol that represent the words suggesting its several manifestations such as 'hot' 'fiery' 'dry' and 'drought'.

In "Composition" and in "The suicide" the sea is taken as a central symbol. In the poem "Composition", during childhood the Sea was only the winds/ ceaseless whisper in a shell. (*The Descendants*, 34).

The prominent symbol in the poetry of Kamala Das is the human body in its various shapes and shadows. The body appears in Kamala Das' poetry often as a symbol of lust and female differences vanish and lovers become one. In the poem "The Seashore" the poet says:

The body asserts,

....not knowing

.....The dry grass of your hair (*The Descendants* 25).

It is believed that in love a female needs not the body but the mind of a man that Kamala Das does not get generally in a male dominated society. In the poem “An Introduction” Kamala Das says:

I met a man. loved him, Call
Him, not by any name, he is every man,
.....the oceans tireless
Waiting (*Summer in Calcutta*, 60).

Here the implied meaning is that the desire to image with the sea is symbolic of her desire for the union with her man for the emotional fulfilment.

Frustrated in married life and the breakup of emotional ties from her husband are symbolically present in “The Bangles” and represents the suffering caused by the burst of the ideal love between husband and wife. Bangles in India are considered a symbol of matrimonial status.

II. CONCLUION

Thus to conclude, one can argue that Kamala Das’ poems are the finest pieces of personal records. They reveal the darkness recesses of her mind and they often bring to focus deepest pangs of unfulfilled love. The use of symbolism makes her poems more attractive to the reader and also brings to public domain the discussions on female subjectivity and female sexuality.

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