

SPIRITUALITY IN THE WRITINGS OF KAMALA DAS: A VEDANTIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract- As the world is becoming increasingly involved in capitalism and materialism, the pursuit of spiritual goal is gaining more currency than ever before. The spiritual and mystical charm of India has always attracted people from all over the world. Kamala Das having suffered betrayal in love and personal life takes solace in age old wisdom of mystics and saints. Like an ascetic, she attempts to rise up from the happiness and sorrow. She realizes that any kind of involvement whether dealing with the emotion of love or hate would not let her grow spiritually. The present research attempts to investigate the elements of Ancient age old philosophy of Vedanta - Advaita and Shuddhadvaita in her writings.

Key words- Advaita (non-dualism), Shuddhadvaita (pure monism), transcendental self, Self- effacement, Pantheistic faith, Beauteous Krishna, quest, sensual pleasure.

Introduction- Since time immemorial India has been known as a repository of wisdom and spiritual knowledge. Different sages have posited their theories in a bid to establish a relation between the self and the Metaphysical Being. Vedanta is one of the six schools of age old but much valued Hindu philosophy. It can be further divided into six sub-traditions such as Advaita (non-dualism), Dvaita (dualism), Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism), Dvaitadvaita (dualistic monism), Shuddhadvaita (pure monism) and Achintya Bhedabheda. The present research paper aims to study Kamala Das' works in the light of two sub-traditions of Vedanta- Advaita and Shuddhadvaita.

The study of oneness and realization of spirit within is the main objective of spiritualism. A constant struggle to realize the reality and renunciation of worldly pleasures bestowed many saints with the realization about the secret of this universe. The best part of Indian spiritual tradition is, not to contradict any other method of knowing the truth but to assimilate all the knowledge and realize the ultimate. As compared to the western methods of understanding the reality, spiritualism in India does not bother much about reasons and logic but with a constant meditation on self and thinking about one goal. Discussing about the connection between soul and the Supreme Being, Bodhasarananda writes in his book *The Views of Swami Vivekanada*

If there is one doctrine that runs through all our apparently and contradictory sects, it is that all glory, power and purity are within the soul already; only according to Ramanuja the soul contracts and expands at times, and according to Shankara, it comes under a delusion. Never mind these differences. All admit the truth that the power is there- potential or manifest, it is there- and the sooner you believe that, the better for you (2).

Spiritualism is deeply rooted in our Indian culture and heritage and its many connotations are manifested in different religious practices in India. Numerous saints and spiritual leaders in India have given a message of peace, brotherhood and co-existence. They have also guided the common masses towards their spiritual goals. It is believed that God has sent us on earth with a definite purpose and that purpose is to be compassionate and be of some service to the world besides actualizing our own self.

The sages and hermits have always been concerned about this transcendental self. They constantly attempted to elevate and enlighten themselves spiritually. The man can be considered as a complete whole consisted of three different levels- body, mind and spirit. To realise and understand the third but the most important level, the man has to act consciously and bring first two levels in perfect consonance with each other. It is then possible for a man to drift from the state of dualism towards the state of oneness wherein all the three levels of existence come together in perfect harmony.

Generally speaking, only few female writers have concerned themselves with the subject of spiritualism in their works. It was only in the twenty first century that feminist writers have started showing a kind of transformation with regard to religion and spiritualism. Before this period, only a few feminist writers had paid attention towards this aspect. After the revival of the women's liberation movement and particularly after 1980s, feminist writings with religious and spiritual commitment have appeared in considerable quantity.

Kamala Das' works can be considered as an attempt to explore her inner self. Though time and again, she talks about her association with different men but underlying theme in her works is her yearning to become one with her inner self, her soul. She aspires for the free and unrestrained development of her spirit and in this quest, she has often broken her marital limitations imposed upon her by the society. Hence, her ventures outside the marital ambit should be viewed only by keeping all the considerations in mind. In this regard, Prasad aptly remarks-

Her poetry has been compared to that of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Judith Wright. Her Poetic corpus configures an inner voyage, and awareness beyond skin's lazy hungers to the hidden soul. It enacts her quest, an exploration into herself and seeking of her identity (35).

Philosophy of Advaita

Das' poetry is immensely imbued with philosophical tenets of 'Advaita' of Adi Shankaracharya, the great philosopher of 8th century. Advaita School of 'Darshan' treats all the living beings in the world as the manifestation of the same Metaphysical Reality. All creatures possess the same self i.e. 'Atman' and it is impervious to worldly sufferings, mortality or decay. It pervades

all the creations and appears distinct but it is the reflection of the same Universal Being i.e. 'Brahma'. Brahma, according to Shankaracharya is the only reality, rest all is illusion or what he calls 'Maya'. Since Advaita's concept of 'Maya' is similar to the idea of 'Shunya' of Buddhism, Shankaracharya is also known as 'Prachhanna Buddha' or pseudo-Buddha. He argued that the acquisition of knowledge is the only way to attain God.

Elements of Advaita in Kamala Das' Works

We get a peep into Das', life philosophy when we read her work not with a prejudiced mind but with a considerate and unbiased thinking. The stamp of Advaita philosophy is evident on her poetry and other works. At times, effect of this philosophy in her writings becomes too conspicuous to overlook. In her poem "An Introduction" Das echoes the precepts of Advaita when she says that her experience becomes everyone's experience and everyone's experience becomes her own.

Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I, anywhere and,
Everywhere I see him who calls himself
I; . . . (*Summer in Calcutta* 61).

Vivekananda's views on Vedas and Vedantic philosophy are worth considering here. Discussing about Brahman, he says

The Brahman, the God of the Vedanta, has nothing outside of Himself; nothing at all. All indeed is He; He is in the Universe; He is the universe Himself. Thou art the man, Thou art the woman, Though art the young man walking in the pride of youth, Thou art the old man tottering in his steps (p 19).

It is striking to notice the similar sentiments reverberating in Kamala Das' poems. Like the followers of Advaita, she has firm belief in the existence of soul. At times, she becomes so obsessed with the idea of soul that she starts pondering over the gender of human souls. She writes

Is she male who with frail hands
Clasp me to her breast...
...And is he female who
After love, smoothes out the
bed-sheets with
Finicky hands and plucks
From pillows strands of hair? (*The Descendants* 16)

In her another poem "The Doubt" Das combines the elements of mysticism and reality. She has got wary of carnal desires and feels conscious about the existence of soul in every living thing. The mere sight of a human dead body sends her into deep thinking and poet starts contemplating about the gender of the departed soul. She wonders why the dead body of a person is not called as he or she but 'it'. "When a man is dead, or a woman/ We call the corpse not he/ Or she but it" (*The Descendants* 22).

Das also realises the transient nature of human body and its ultimate decay. She is fully aware that her corporeal frame and beauty will wither away soon. She writes in her poem "Gino"

This body which I wear without joy, this body
Burdened with lenience, slander, toy,
owned by man of substance,
shall perhaps wither, battling with
My Darling's impersonal lust.
Or, it shall gross and reach
large proportions before its end (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* 13).

She acknowledges the divine presence in all the objects of nature. She feels there is some inexplicable power which pervades everywhere. As with the age and time, the poet becomes mature and fully aware that God cannot be attained through the physical love. She still feels that vacuum in herself. She also senses the presence of the almighty in all the faces, voices and the natural objects. Here we are also reminded of the great poet Wordsworth who expresses similar sentiments like her. Her poems have overtones of Wordsworth's Pantheistic faith where he also considers all natural objects as the very manifestation of God. Das in her poem, "Lines addressed to a Devdasi" says

Ultimately there comes a time
When all faces look alike
All voices sound similar
And trees and lakes and mountains
Appear to bear a common signature (*Tonight, This Savage Rite* 20).

It also dawns on the writer that it is only through Him she can attain her spiritual goal. She writes

I am at peace. I liken God to a tree which has as its parts 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 whatness of it. Quiditis. Each component obeys its own destiny. The flowers blossom, scatter pollen and dry up. The fruits ripen and fall. The barks peel. Each of us shall obey that colossal wisdom, the taproot of all wisdom and the source of all consciousness (*My Story* 213).

Advaita also considers life as a dream, a false reality. The only reality in the world is the soul and its ultimate goal is its union with the Supreme Being. Prof. Thompson in his article "A Dream inside A Locked Room" discusses the philosophy of Advaita

...Hindu philosopher Gaudapada (eighth century CE) and Shankara (788-820 CE) systematised these ideas in their philosophical commentaries on the Upanishads. They argued that the self and the world as they appear in the waking state are an illusion produced by the mind, a false reality like what we see in a dream.

Das also expresses the similar views about the idea of death. She considers life on the earth as a mere dream and death as the ultimate reality. She writes in her autobiography

I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our own human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been, despite all emotional involvements, as writing on moving water (Das 213).

She realizes the futility and hollowness of her existence and feels that only death can relieve her from this misery and pain. Exploiting death as a metaphor for freedom and relief from the bondages of this life, Kamala Das hints at looking beyond her physical existence. She looks at death as her saviour from her predicament. In her poem "Contacts", Das writes

When I
Sleep, the outside
World crumbles, all contacts
Broken. So, in that longer sleep
Only the world
Shall die, and I
Remain... (*The Descendants* 19).

This oscillation between the physical world and the world beyond creates a dilemma in the poet's mind. On one hand, she expresses her inability to come out of her 'cages of involvements', on the other she wishes to rise up high into the transcendental realm. Commenting upon her dilemma Harrex says that Kamala Das's poetry contains "an Indian tension... between the Marxist and Vedantic attitudes, between Kerala communism and Varanasi spiritualism" (23).

Philosophy of Shuddhadvaita and its influence on Kamala Das

Besides Advaita philosophy, we also get to see the strong presence of Vaishnava theology of Vallabhacharya in her works. Vallabhacharya was a Telugu saint who propounded the philosophy of Shuddhadvaita. Apparently when the abstract theory and philosophy of Shankar's Advaita failed to provide her much-needed solace and spiritual fulfilment, she turns towards 'Beauteous Krishna'. As per Vaishnava theology, Lord Krishna in his 'Satchidanand' form is absolute and the entire world is his creation 'Leela'. It is only through his worship one can attain salvation 'Moksha'. But for attaining this blissful state one has to resort to the act of Self-effacement i.e. complete annihilation of ego and unconditional surrender to His will.

In order to devote herself completely to the service of Lord Krishna, Das identifies herself with Radha and believes that her communion with Lord Krishna can only bring her comfort and spiritual ecstasy. It will also help her escape the suffering and misery of life. She says in her autobiography

Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beauteous Krishna. Always, always I shall love you, I told him, not speaking aloud but willing him to hear me, only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine (96).

Like the great poet W.B. Yeats who wants to escape to the city of Byzantium for the purgation of his soul, Das chooses to surrender herself completely to the 'Beauteous Krishna' for her purification. In her poem "A Man is a Season", the poet describes Lord Krishna as her husband and complains why He lets her spend her time with other men who are mere 'shadows'

A man is a season
You are eternity.
To teach me this, you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands; you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others' arms (*Tonight, This Savage Rite* 21).

Kamala Das's spiritual leanings compels her to look for the Supernatural being in the men she comes in to contact and falls in love with. Her spirituality pushes her into more and more relationships with different men. Kamala Das hopes that while she is with some man someday, she will come across her God, the beauteous Lord Krishna face to face. She writes in "I Studied all Men"

It was entirely without lust. I hoped that some day as I lay with a man, somewhere beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, a contact would be made and that afterwards each movement of my life becomes meaningful. I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* 15).

Kamala Das gets weary of all kinds of human bondages. She is fed up of her failed relationship with her various lovers which could not fill the 'hollowness' within her. She turns towards her Lord Krishna for solace. She describes the entry of Krishna into her life and how He claims her as His own. She admits in her autobiography

Free from the last human bondage, I turned to Krishna. I felt the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing make-up, but making a quite entry. What is the role you are going to play? I asked him. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me ultimately. Thereafter He dwelt in my dreams (195).

In her poem "The Westerlies" Das regrets about her involvement in worldly affairs. Instead of worshipping God she has squandered her youth in carnal pleasures. She writes

My wavy hair, I ought not to have
Walked towards the sea and against

The whiplash of the Westerlies
I should have travelled
Eastwards towards the morning sun,
I should have worshipped (42)

In another poem, "A Phantom Lotus", Kamala Das attempts to identify herself with Radha. Like Radha, she is also desperately waiting for Lord Krishna, who on his arrival will make her His own

...Loving this one, I
Seek but another way to know
Him who has no more a body
To offer, and whose blue face is

A Phantom-lotus on the waters of my dreams (*Tonight, This Savage Rite* 38).

Discussing the use of Radha-Krishna myth by Kamala Das, Kurup writes

By seeking solace in the Radha-Krishna myth, Kamala Das builds up a mythic pattern within her own predicament and achieves a double-purpose: one, she associates the myth with experiences of loss and longing to represent her own quest for ideal love and its failure and two, she uses it as a symbol for the soul's desire to merge with the Godhead. On another level, the soul's readiness to abandon all social consideration for the sake of God justifies her breaking of social ties through adultery. (111)

Das confesses that she had relations with different men but that did not provide her the love and satisfaction she was longing for. She justifies that it was her quest for the bodiless one which brought her into contact with several men. She was only looking for Krishna whose entry in her life would grant her wisdom would make her lose ego. She writes in *My Story*

I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Subconsciously I hoped for the death of my ego. I was looking for the executioner whose axe would leave my head in two (180).

She considers Radha, the lover of Lord Krishna the luckiest of all. She firmly believes that a 'true contact with Him' can only be established through a human form. In "Sex: Mindless Surrender or Humming Fiesta", Das writes

Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all woman, for did she not have his incomparably beautiful body in her arms? How are we to get close to him without the secret entrances of the body which may have helped us in establishing a true contact? Now in my old age, having no more desire unfulfilled I think of Krishna as my friend, like me grown wiser with the years, a house-holder and a patriarch. (*Femina* 19)

Archer also discusses the Radha-Krishna love which has fed different spheres of Indian art and culture with innumerable themes. He writes

By worldly standards they (Radha and the gopis) were committing the gravest of offences, but they were doing it for Krishna who was God himself. They were, therefore, setting God above home and duty, they were leaving everything for love of God and in surrendering their honour were providing the most potent symbol of what devotion meant (75).

Conclusion

Kamala Das' spiritual leanings do not allow her to relish the physical love with her lovers. She is fully aware about the existence of soul and time and again questions the transient nature of human lives. She looks for the image of beautiful lord Krishna in the men she comes across but very soon realizes the futility of her pursuit. It dawns upon her that her spiritual communion with Transcendental Being cannot be attained through worldly means. She becomes wary of the bodily pleasure and turns towards Radha-Krishna myth for comfort and solace. In her sexual relationship also, she looks for the Supernatural Being, her lord Krishna, though she terribly fails to accomplish her goal. Her disillusionment with these men makes her look more inward and makes her more spiritually elevated.

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Bio Note

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