



RADHA- KRISHNA MOTIF IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

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Abstract: Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Surayya, was an Indian poet and writer who wrote extensively in English and Malayalam. Her poetry often explored themes of love, desire, gender, and the complexities of human relationships. While she drew inspiration from various sources, including her own personal experiences, it is worth noting that the motifs of Radha and Krishna are not prominently featured in her poetry. Radha and Krishna are central figures in Hindu mythology and are often depicted as divine lovers symbolizing the union of the individual soul with the universal consciousness. Their story is celebrated in Hindu literature and art, particularly in the context of their eternal love and devotion for each other. However, Kamala Das's poetry tends to focus more on personal emotions, intimate relationships, and social issues rather than drawing explicitly from mythological or religious symbols. Her work delves into themes such as identity, sexuality, patriarchy, and the constraints imposed on women by societal norms. That being said, it's essential to remember that poetry can be interpreted in various ways, and readers may find indirect allusions or subtle references to different motifs depending on their own perspectives. While Radha and Krishna motifs may not be prevalent in Kamala Das's poetry, her works provide ample material for exploration and analysis from multiple angles.

Keywords: mythological love, manifestation of God, true bliss, Advaita philosophy ideal love.

Kamala Das is a distinguished Indian poet. She is one of the prominent poets who have contributed much to the Indian Literature. She has depicted her inner feelings through her poetry. She is the first woman who spoke against the male tyranny. She wrote short stories like- *A Doll for the Child Prostitute (1997)* and *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories (1992)*. Kamala Das is a subjective writer who wrote in a very simple language of a layman. She herself says that she “wrote the poems in the book *Summer in Calcutta* to make a man love me, to break down his resistance” (Kohli 29). It’s through her poetry only the readers get to know about the cravings of love which she had.

Ideal love for her is the love between Radha and Krishna. In the poems of Kamala Das, she turns to Lord Krishna and identifies herself as Radha and considers Krishna as her lover. *The old house and other poems*

is the collection of 33 poems. This collection has the poems which reveal the feelings of Kamala Das. She describes her childhood memories in this collection. She yearns to go back to her childhood spent with her grandmother. Kamala Das has used mythology in many of the poems of this collection like “Vrindavan”, “Ghanashyam”, “Lines addresses to a Devadasi” and many more. She pines for the true love and changes many lovers but her wish remains unfulfilled. She finds the true lover in lord Krishna. The poem “After the illness” was written after Kamala Das recovered from her illness. Though Kamala Das is known largely as a poet of sex and body and different critics and reviewers have interpreted her works in different sense. Radha-Krishna motif is too conspicuous in her works. She writes-

I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child I used to regard him as my only friend, when I became an adult I thought of him as my lover. It was only by imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give pleasure...We do not have him physically to love us; we have to worship a bodiless one. (*My Story* 20)

The above words are spoken by Kamala Das in her autobiography, *My Story*. She considers Lord Krishna as an ideal lover for her. After getting betrayed in her life she turns to Krishna for love, friendship and solace. She sees Krishna as different figures. Sometimes she considers Him as her friend, lover and husband and sometimes as God while sometimes as the manifestation in all men. This is clearly depicted in the above words spoken by Kamala Das. Raghunath Sahoo also writes in his book about Kamala Das- “It is obvious that Das does not look for godhead in the figure of Lord Krishna; she rather seeks for an ideal lover in the figure of Krishna” (Sahoo 6).

There are different mythological love stories depicted by many Indian authors in Literature. Kamala Das has depicted the myth of Radha-Krishna in her poetry. Krishna was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu who is considered as the Supreme God. Krishna is described as a dark skinned one with a flute in his hands and Radha was a gopi who is Krishna’s beloved. Radha-Krishna myth has been beautifully incorporated by Kamala Das in her poetry. Kamala Das was so close to her grandmother and hence she was also deeply influenced by her sister Ammu, who was a worshipper of Lord Krishna and also wrote many poems in his praise.

Kamala Das poetry has two aspects- one is the search for physical love and the other for the ideal love. According to Dwivedi Das early marriage at 15, suppressed her feminine instincts and developed a negative mentality towards men and their false modesty. Kamala Das had love relationships with many men but for her the ideal love is the one which existed between Radha and Krishna. She confesses- “I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha” (*My Story* 165). In the above lines she says that she waits for her lover Krishna who has forgotten to return to her. She lives in the mythological world and the actual world side-by-side. Krishna’s role in her life is an eminent one.

Krishna as her Lover/ Husband

Kamala Das symbolises Krishna as a perfect lover and identifies Him with her husband. She delineates Krishna as an ideal lover with whom she can establish a bond of love. She turns to Lord Krishna and finds

a divine lover in him who can love her eternally. Raghunath Sahoo aptly remarks in his book- “The image of Krishna is more real than the figure of her husband” (*Philosophical Dilemma* 9).

In her article, “I Studied All Men’, she writes “Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna” (49). She puts Lord Krishna at the place of her husband. She has portrayed Radha and Krishna as mere human beings and their love as the love between any man and woman on this Earth. Kamala Das wanted a partner like Lord Krishna and the love relationship that was there between Radha and Krishna. She believes that it is only Krishna as her husband who can save her from the sufferings of life. She writes- “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” (*My Story* 74).

Kamala Das has been frustrated with her domestic life. Her husband only used her to fulfil his physical needs. Her father was also a neglected father. She only had a bond of true love with her grandmother. She wants to make herself free from the male tyranny. It was Radha-Krishna vision only through which she gets an idea of true relationship. She opposes the male tyranny and the social evils of the society.

Kamala Das writes her poetry openly to revolt against the male dominated society where there is inequality between men and women. Through her poems she portrays her poignant situation in which she had led her life with her husband and other men with whom she had extra-marital affairs. She did not get satisfaction in love from anywhere.

She realizes that her relationships with men are a temporary stage of her life and only Krishna can give her eternal love. She considers Radha as the luckiest of all as she has been loved by Krishna. Das is of firm conviction that if she has to attain the true bliss of Krishna’s love, it would only be possible through his manifestations in human form. She declares “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” (*Femina*19).

In her another poem ‘Radha- Krishna’, she writes about her yearning for the union and represents the tree as symbol of eternal life.

This becomes from this hour
 Our river and this old Kadamba
 Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
 Souls to return someday
 To hang like bats from it’s pure Physicality. (*Summer In Calcutta* 37)

In another poem ‘Radha’ we see the love affair of Radha with Krishna. Kamala Das identifies herself with Radha and says that she has been waiting for the union with her lover Krishna.

In his first true embrace, she was girl
 And virgin crying
 Everything in me
 Is melting, even the hardness at the core

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but you. (*Tonight This Savage Rite* 23)

In this poem Kamala Das as Radha surrenders herself to Lord Krishna to unite with him. The repetition of the word ‘melting’ describes the pathetic condition of poet and her yearning. The love between Radha and Krishna is described as an adulterous one by Chaitanya. Though Radha was married she still comes to meet Krishna and was in love with him. In the same way Kamala Das was also married but looks for an ideal lover in Krishna. Her love like Radha was an adulterous one. She has aptly written in her poem ‘Maggots’ to describe this,

At sun set, on the riverbank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...
That night in her husband’s arms Radha felt
So dead that he asked, what is wrong?
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?” (*The Descendants* 22)

Kamala Das has a desire to surrender herself to Lord Krishna completely. She cannot see anything beyond Krishna. She wants to get deeply engrossed in His love only.

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. (*Collected Poems* 75)

Raghunath Sahoo writes in his book, “She enjoys the world of eye and ear with God Krishna as her eternal lover. In her best poem ‘Ghanashyam’, she shows her synthesis of physical love with spiritual love. She surrenders and submits herself to Ghanashyam” (*Philosophical Dilemma* 46).

She describes her love with Krishna clearly in her poem “Ghanashyam” also. She writes, “We played once a husk-game, my lover and I/His body needing mine, his ageing body in pride/needing the need for mine” (*Collected Poems* 95). In the same poem she has compared Krishna to a fisherman and describes his qualities and writes-

Shyam, O Ghanashyam
You have like a fisherman cast your nets in the narrows
Of my mind, And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like enchanted fish. (95)

Kamala Das has always thought of merging with Lord Krishna. She clearly depicts that through the line written by her- “But illogical that I am from birth onwards I have always thought of Krishna as my mate... it was only imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure” (*My Story* 105).

Many critics had interviews with Kamala Das and talked about her life and her extra ordinary way of portraying events of her life. Once she had an interview with Iqbal Kaur who also wrote a book on her. Kamala Das admits

Religion was a part of my life when I was practicing Hindu. I went through all these rituals and I kept a lamp glowing for many years in my Pooja room. But now I have come away from religion and the more I move away from religion, the closure I come to God, my concept of God Krishna is my lover. He will embrace me. He will kiss me, my partner. (166)

Kamala Das surrenders to Krishna as her beloved Radha. She writes- “My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to it is desire?” (*My Story* 197). She wishes to get united with Krishna and describes her desire through her poetry. She writes-

Ghanashyam, You have like a koel built your
Nest in the arbour of my heart
My life until now a sleeping jungle
Is at last astir with music. (*Tonight This Savage Rite* 18)

In the poem ‘Radha-Krishna’, the views of Chaitanya are also there when he went to search Krishna at Puri. Radha Krishna love has been glorified by Kamala Das in a remarkable way which made her a distinguished poet. She has used the Radha-Krishna myth to portray her quest for an ideal lover in Krishna who will never betray her like all other men she has had relationship with. In loving Krishna she gets total freedom while in loving her husband she is not free and bound by various societal norms and wedlock. Sudhir Kakkar remarks- “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” (*The Inner World: A Psycho- Analytic Study* 142).

Krishna as God

Kamala Das can be compared to Sufi Saints. They consider themselves as beloved and the God as their ‘Ashiq’. They believe that worshipping their ‘Ashiq’ or lover will help the saints to meet Him. Thus to meet Krishna and attain spirituality through him she started worshipping Krishna as God. Raghunath Sahoo also calls her as “a woman of God Krishna”.

Kamala Das has written her works in the light of the philosophy of Advaita(non-dualism) and Shuddhadvaita. Vedanta is an age old school and much valued Hindu philosophy. There are six sub-traditions of Vedanta. Out of which two are used by Kamala Das in her works. It has the tenets of ‘Advaita’. According to this all the creatures possess the same self which is ‘Atman’. According to Shankracharya, only Brahma is the reality and rest all is illusion or Maya. She has used this philosophy in many of her poems like “An Introduction”.

Like a staunch believer of Advaita philosophy of Indian tradition, Das believes in the existence of soul and sometimes contemplates deeply about it. She asks rhetorically

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)

She puts aside her carnal desires and thinks about the existence of soul. She realizes the ultimate decay of the human body. She confides in her readers

This body which I wear without joy, this body, Burdened with lenience, slander, toy, Owned by man of substance, shall perhaps, neither, battling with My Darling's in personal lust Or it shall gross and reach Large proportions before the end. (*The Old Playhouse and other Poems* 13)

She feels that there is some divine power which exists everywhere. Through Krishna only she can get spirituality. She writes in 'My Story' -

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 whiteness of it. Quidit. 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. The similar views were held by Kamala Das about the life and death. For her, death is the reality and life is a dream. She writes-

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. (213)

We see the presence of Vaishnava theology in her works. Kamala Das turns towards Shuddhadvaita when she did not get fulfilment from Advaita. She turns towards Lord Krishna. According to Vaishnava theology Lord Krishna is the absolute and the entire world is his creation. One can attain Salvation after worshipping Him. In her poem "Ghanashyam" she praises Lord Krishna-

O Shyam, my Ghanashyam
 With words I weave raiment for you
 The ones in saffron robes told me of you
 And when they left
 I thought only of what they left unsaid
 Wisdom must come in silence. (*Tonight This Savage Rite* 103)

All her efforts to look for the ideal lover go in vain. All her relationships with different men proved to be a failure. She got frustrated with her life and turned towards Krishna to fill the void inside her. She writes in *My Story*-

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)

It was the quest of Krishna, the supreme and bodiless which led her into various relationships. Her grandmother was also devoted to Lord Krishna. Kamala Das also got that devotion from her family only. She writes in her autobiography- “In the mornings I went into the prayer room with my grand-mother and sat for an hour listening to her read the Bhagavatham and the Gita” (*My Story* 92).

Krishna as a manifestation in every man

Kamala Das believes that having relationships outside wedlock is not a sin. She considers her extra-marital affairs as a search for her ideal lover. She has described Krishna in every man she encountered with. She had sexual relationships with many men outside of her wedlock. She considers those men as a manifestation of God Krishna. She did not get satisfaction with any of these men. She has been betrayed by all the men she has met with so she finds solace in loving Ghanashyam who is an ideal lover for her. After getting dissatisfied in her life she turns towards spirituality to attain solace. Raghunath Sahoo aptly remarks in his book- “Her spiritual synthesis comes to the fore as a result of her sexual frustration” (*Philosophical Dilemma* 46). She identifies herself with Radha and Krishna as her lover. She writes in an article,

I don't hate man, I love man, I feel a woman is most attractive when she surrenders to her man as Krishna. For her Krishna is not only a lover but also a savior. If she gets united with her she will get Moksha. In this context Raghunath Sahoo remarks -May be these are not adequate for her, probably, there is something beyond i.e. God or redemption. (45)

In her poem, “A Losing Battle”, she explains how she searches for the ideal lover in her relationship with her lovers. She finally realizes that she cannot find Krishna by making physical contacts with men so she starts worshipping Krishna as a Supreme God. She sees her husband as the Manifestation of God. She asks Krishna to clarify all her doubts. In her poem “Ghanashyam”, Das writes,

And each time my husband
His mouth bitter with sleep
Kisses, mumbling to me of love
But if he is you and I are you
Who is loving who
Who is the husk who the kernel
Where is the body where is the soul? (*Tonight, This Savage Rite* 18)

Kamala Das gets disloyal towards her husband and finds Krishna in other men she had relationships with. In the similar way Radha used to love Krishna despite being married to a man. In sexual relationships with other men also she looks for Lord Krishna. Archer writes about Radha which is also true for Kamala Das-

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. (Archer 75)

The poet was looking for her Krishna in the men she loved, though often her search for her Krishna remained futile. Kamala Das with her age and experience becomes mature and realizes that her relationships with men cannot fulfil her spiritual needs. She admits

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 beautiful Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna. (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* 15)

For Das, life is full of insecurities and mindless anxieties which weigh heavily on her soul. For doing this she chooses the path of spirituality to reach God Krishna. Raghunath Sahoo writes about her –“Her mystical association with Krishna can be viewed as a temporal escape from the real world which injures her” (*Philosophical Dilemma* 4).

He aptly remarks about Kamala Das and her search of Krishna in every man. He writes- “The poet’s disgust with failures leads her to a frantic search for the mythical Krishna, the ideal divine lover with whom she desires to establish her eternal bond. This search creates in her awareness of the need to study all men” (8).

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