

# KAMALA DAS: INDIAN IMAGERY AND VISION

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*Abstract: The present paper is intended at unfolding the selective linguistic and stylistic features that are apparent in the poetry of Kamala Das based on detailed analysis of a few of her representative poems. The poems selected for the analysis from her poetry volume symbolize a variety of subjects treated by Kamala Das and are of adequate length to hold most distinguishing features of her style. Her present volume deal with personal anguish and dilemma in love business as found in her first poetic corpus. The most of her poems give ample evidence to her painstaking efforts with life to rise the above of mundane problems she tries to seek a smooth way for her life-journey on an ideal path outshines every sphere. In Indian English literature, Kamala Das' most remarkable achievement is her own sense of writing in Indian English. Often her expressions, idioms, choice of verbs and syntactical structure are part of what has been termed the 'Indianisation of English'. This is indeed a act of accomplishment for Kamala Das. It has served as an important chapter in the development of a Indian national literature.*

## Introduction:

Kamala Das is one of the best-known contemporary Indian women writers. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam, Das has authored many autobiographical works and novels, several well-received collections of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories, and essays on a broad spectrum of subjects. Since the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), Das has been considered an important voice of her generation, exemplified by a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists. Das's provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, and women's roles in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalized people. Most of Kamala Das's poems deal with the theme of unfulfilled love and the yearning for love. The '*Dance of the Eunuchs*' is a good example of a poem dealing with this theme as it stands in a class by itself, the subject of the poem being 'the eunuchs'. This poem is included in the first poetic volume *Summer in Calcutta*.

In the poem, the poet finds an objective correlative in the dance of the eunuchs to represent the theme of suppressed desire within. How painful, frenzied and self consuming the life of an ill-adjusted sensitive individual can be in the rotting and decaying society, it well brought out in the poem 'Dance of the

Eunuchs', where the atmosphere and the rhythms reinforce the meaning conveyed by the central image of a group of sterile and harassed individuals dancing their grotesque dance as a command performance:

To dance, wide skirts going round and round,  
Cymbals  
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,  
Jingling ...

It contrasted with their 'vacant ecstasy', suggesting a gulf between the external, simulated passion and the sexual 'drought and rottenness' inside. The 'vacant ecstasy' of these figures symbolizes the restless turmoil as experienced by the poet herself. It is an ecstasy which has no source of joy or happiness to sing of, but it is an aimless pursuit devoid of my accomplishment. The contrast is sustained all through the poem. The eunuchs have 'jasmies in the hair', but their songs are melancholy and voices harsh. Their dance is more 'convulsions'. 'A hymn to 'drought', not to passion. Even the rain their dance brings is scanty:

The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning. And rain,  
a meager rain that smelt of dust in Attics and the urine of lizards  
and mice ...

The dance the eunuchs is a dance of the sterile, and therefore, the unfulfilled and unquenchable love of the woman in the poet.

**Analysis:** The poem constitutes of a single stanza of 20 lines. There are 8 stances in all of which 4 are ended by ellipses and therefore incomplete in a sense. There are 169 words in the poem. The average sentence length runs to 21.12 words/sentence, as illustrated in the poem.

Out of 169 words that constitute the poem, 126 are monosyllabic 37 disyllabic, 5 are disyllabic and only 1 word out of these in tetra syllabic and only 1 word out of these is tetra syllabic. Among consonants, sounds and the order of their occurrence is as follows :

(i) nasals, liquids and continuants –

/m/ /n/ /n/ /l/ /r/ /w/ /j/  
(4)

(16) (43) (15) (32) (52) (14)

(ii) fricatives and aspirates –

/v/ /d/ /f/ /s/ /z/ /h/  
(4) (28) (9) (44) (5) (5)

- (iii) affricates –  
/g/  
(7)
- (iv) plosives –  
/b/ /d/ /g/ /p/ /t/ /k/  
(11) (18) (5) (2) (22) (17)
- (v) clusters –  
Br gr dr kr tr  
kl fl bl  
nd nt .. etc.

The poem is stark commentary without a break or change to new stanza. Thus there is continuity in through movement until we reach the poem's end. Regarding the punctuations, It is observed that:

- (i) 17 lines out of twenty have mid-line Punctuations  
(ii) 5 lines out of 20 have end-line punctuations, and  
(iii) 2 lines out of 20 have both end and mid-line punctuations.

It seems that the poet is too engrossed in projecting and recapturing the scenes of the afternoon in her mind that she repeatedly leaves ellipses at the end of the sentences. In the poem of 8 sentences, there are as many as 4 sentences which have been left incomplete, ended by ellipses. This perhaps indicates the superfluity of thought and inability to pen them in words. The poet, perhaps, rather willingly marks the ellipses when she feels the pain or the joy, or the expression are too universal to be put down in words before the reader. Moreover, the ellipses provide a gap which can be filled by the reader and it is up to the whims and fancies of the reader to supply appropriate words to complete the picture or the story presented.

The whole scene of the dance of the eunuchs is simply described as through it were captured and held rigid in the poet's imagination. The whole drama took place before the poet's eyes. The appearance of the eunuchs, their dance and the changing state of atmosphere from 'so hot' to thunder and lightning has been well connected with the dance of the eunuchs. There is restrictive use of verbs but an extensive use of nouns and adjectives. The high frequency of concrete nouns condenses the whole picture into a vigorous drama. The use of the verbs is equally foe grounded. The intensity of the actions is reflected in the use of the verbs. The occurrence of verbs can be presented as under:

## VERBS

### Main

To dance, Came, Going, Clashing, Jingling,

(3) Flying, Flashing, Danced (3), Sang, Dying, Left, Beat (3), Wailed, Writhed, Watching, Cracked, Came smelt

**Auxiliaries**

Was

Were (s)

The adjectives are mainly of 'minus' category is thus condensing the picture of the dance. The adjectives, thus qualify the objects-eunuchs in an ecstatic state. Their actions too represent a state which is terrifying as well as awful. The use of adjectives is quite significant.

**ADJECTIVES****Negative****Positive**

Hot (2) Dark (2)

Harsh, Melancholy

Unborn, Sorry

Vacant, Thin

Dry, Half-burnt

Funeral, Poor

Meager, Still

Silent

Wide

Richly

Fiery

Long

Green

Fair Most  
of the eun  
watching :

**Eunuchs**

Appearance      Mental state

Long      braids      ecstatic

flying dark eyes      drought

flashing      they and

bled      tattoos on      rottenness

their      cheeks      in each

**Crows**

action

Sang of

lovers

dying

and

of

**Children**

Wide

eyed

still

jasmines in of them children left  
 their hair some unborn  
 were dark some convulsions  
 were fair were  
 thin in limbs  
 and dry

Thus, the eunuchs are not at all amusing in appearance and actions, but rather they are a source of horror and amazement. Their dance too appears to be mere ‘convulsions’. No beauty or any other appealing attribute can be traced in their physical appearance or their dance and singing.

The linguistic choices made at different levels in the poem and in the interpretation of the poem reveal some more of for grounded features. The patterned occurrence of NPS which clearly reveal the movement of the poem from that of high and vigorous action to silence and stillness:

**NP** → **Adj + N + Verb**

Wide skirts going round  
 Long braids flying  
 Dark eyes flashing

The poet has also inverted the linguistic structure where, the adjective instead of occurring before the noun occurs immediately after, in phrases such as:

Cymbals (richly) clashing  
 Anklets jingling  
 Lovers dying  
 children (left) unborn  
 songs melancholy

The poet has used three fore grounded adjectives which claim special attention. They are as under:

Sorry breasts  
 vacant ecstasy  
 half-burnt logs

The Indian summer and prickly bent. Recur in the poem with symbolic significance. They broadly represent the predominant moods of exhaustion and spent up forces of life. Kamala Das makes us feel the heat on our skin by giving the details of the weather, where hot weather is emphasized by the repetition of the word “hot” and in the second repetition an addition of a prefix “so” heightens the sense of weather. The gulmohar

too is qualified by the adjective “fiery” which adds up to the cumulative impression. The word “jingling”, repeated thrice in the course of the poem. Creates an auditory sensation of the music they danced.

The poet’s encounter with the eunuchs was empathetic and unpredictable. The poet’s bid to express her surprise and the eunuchs’ exhaustion and frenzy is evident by the single counter “oh”. The word transmits the feeling that the eunuchs who are accepted to be good only for their grotesque dancing and singing are assessed by the poet as someone who is seriously pursuing his art. She never expected that hard performance by eunuchs whereby:

. . . oh, they danced till they bled...

The poet emphasizes the nasal sound, since it contributes towards creating the impression for the eunuchs who are neither characterized by male stoutness nor female delicacy. A typical feminine gesture is also noticeable both in their voice and their appearance. But they are unable to produce the pathos because their voices and “harsh” while they sing of “lovers dying” and “children left unborn”. They indulge in their mannerisms only with “vacant ecstasy”. The details of their own bodies are the pathetic and the paths is best expressed by the metaphor of “half-burnt logs from funeral pyres”. The final commentary is provided by the usually noisy crows sitting as though stunned to silence. The rainfall that follows the dance and songs of the eunuchs too is very scanty and meagre and brings not the coolness but only the ‘smell of dust in attic’s and urine of lizards and mice.

The poet has used the word “eunuchs” only once in the poem in the very first line only. In the remaining 19 lines, the poet uses only they, their, some, others, each, these etc. Thus, inability to identify the eunuchs by their names or sex the poet is forced to use the above pronouns. The identity of the eunuchs is similar from one to all as they match or differ only in actions. They cannot be classified as beautiful or ugly men and women.

The poet can only make them out by collectively calling them “these poor creatures”. This selection of pronouns to be used for the eunuchs is governed by the fact that the eunuchs, especially those born in India are considered as a separate community altogether. They are not treated as individuals but as part of the community to which they belong. Thus reference to them is given as not ‘he’ or ‘she’ as is obvious, but by ‘they’ or ‘them’. The plural number is also indicative of the fact that they do not move singly, but always in groups. Finally, the helpless state of the eunuchs is projected by the poet in a typical Indian set up – the ‘fiery gulmohar’ and ‘crows on the trees’, the eunuchs with tattooed cheeks and jasmines in their hair, cymbals and anklets. The imagery and features are very Indian. The eunuchs, discarded by their relatives and

society are victims of a boycott that renders them in a state matching the “half-burn logs”, from ‘Funeral pyres’. The poem has a unique subject and is typically Indian in its interpretation.

**Conclusion:** In the light of feminist critical theory it can be argued that Das has provided Indian English poetry, a new discourse, the discourse of woman’s body language from the point of view of woman. The poet has rummaged through her body to flush out startling images and metaphors in order to body forth her quest for truth, the Revelation and the Apocalypse.

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