

MYSTICISM IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

Much criticism has focused on the themes of love, sex, rebelliousness, as well as various aspects of feminism in the works of the legendary Indian English poet, Kamala Das. Undoubtedly, love is a prominent theme in the poetry of Das. However, not much attention has been paid to mystical elements in her work. In all mystical traditions of the world, love is deeply connected to mysticism, with the mystic attempting to achieve a direct communion with a deity or a higher power. This paper argues that Kamala Das's poems depict facets of mysticism and often reflect the sentiment of bhakti. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to this dialectic of love and mysticism in the poetry of Kamala Das, to understand how the poet negotiates the relationship between the two, and to explore facets of Das's unique kind of mysticism in her poetry. As part of my argument, I shall look into the role that the Hindu deity Krishna and his consort Radhaplay in contributing to mystical elements in Das's poems.

KEYWORDS: *Mysticism, Kamala Das, Indian English Poetry, Bhakti, Radha-Krishna*

INTRODUCTION

According to the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, mysticism is “the personal experience of ultimate [r]eality” in which persons “encounter the Divine or spiritual realities more directly, separate from traditional mediums of religious experience.” He adds that “[t]he study of this phenomenon tended in the early 20th century to focus on the psychology and the phenomenology of the personal experience, generally described as an altered state of consciousness with specific characteristics, processes, stages, effects, and stimulants.” In the poetry of Kamala Das, we encounter the poet's preoccupation with love. In mystical traditions of various religions, the mystic too, is deeply concerned with the nature of love. Das's poetry, through its preoccupation with love, often takes on mystical overtones. This mystical thread is expressed in her poetry as an unending search for love and the ideal lover. Much criticism has focused on the theme of love in her poetry, but has not co-related it to mysticism. It is my view that Das's poetry, through expressing love in its myriad facets, delves into the “the phenomenology of the personal experience” as presented by mystics and bhaktipoets such as Meerabai, Kabir, and Jayadeva; in doing so, her poetry becomes infused with mystical elements. Mysticism also implies “a spiritual grasp of the aims and problems of life in a much more real and ultimate manner than is possible to mere reason;” it is not surprising that poetry, with its potential to dwell on inner experience and exploration, has been chosen as a vehicle by the mystic-poets of the world including the devotional poets of India to express the same. Das's poems too, through their exploration of inner experience and their confessional tone, often depict elements that can be called mystical.

One of the key features of mysticism is the desire for transcendence, or the desire to go beyond the limitations of the material world and experience a state of oneness with the divine or a higher power. The desire to transcend the limitations of the material world in Das's poems often comes into play after the poet is done with expressing the limitations of human relationships, or after experiencing disillusionment with the world. These limitations stem from a number of causes. The nature of marriage itself is viewed as bondage; however, it is something which must be endured. Relations outside the sphere of marriage too are a bondage for the poet, due to their transient nature. In both marital and extra-marital relationships, Das expresses dismay at finding lust instead of love, of encountering disharmony instead of compatibility, setting the stage for disillusionment. In the poem "The Freaks," the poet describes a moment between a woman and her lover who is unflatteringly described as possessing a cavernous mouth "where stalactites of /Uneven teeth gleam":

....[O]ur minds
 Are willed to race towards love;
 But, they only wander, tripping
 Idly over puddles of
 Desire.....Can this man with
 Nimble finger-tips unleash
 Nothing more alive than the
 Skin's lazy hungers?

 I am a freak. It's only
 To save my face, I flaunt, at
 Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

The cavernous mouth of the lover in the above poem signifies an appetite for lust, hence her lover is unable to awaken anything more than lust in the woman, who longs for love. It is to be noted that the woman in the poem flaunts "a grand, flamboyant lust" not because this is what she feels, but because she believes that is what she is expected to do as part of the ritual of courtship.

The poem "Composition" is significant for the manner in which it parades all manner of human relationships the poet can conceive of, and drives home the point how each one of them has failed to provide meaning to her life:

I have lost my best friend
to a middle-aged queer,
the lesbians hiss their love at me.

Love

I no longer need,
with tenderness I am most content,
I have learnt that friendship
cannot endure,
that blood-ties do not satisfy

The only exception to the transient human ties mentioned in the poem is the poet's deep bond with her grandmother, a recurring figure in Das's poetry signifying the warmth and comfort of her ancestral Nalapat home in South Malabar and fond memories associated with it. The poet highlights that fact that the poem itself is a confession:

I also know that by confessing
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and
to the bone's
supreme indifference

The poem "Composition" commences with the poet stating that she had "come face to face with the sea" (3), and once again invokes sea imagery towards the end of the poem to indicate the poet's desire for dissolution into something greater than herself, ending with her discovery that we humans are beings trapped in immortality:

The ultimate discovery will be
that we are immortal,
the only things mortal being
systems and arrangements
I must linger on,
trapped in immortality,
my only freedom being
the freedom to
discompose.

The desire for dissolution is carried to an extreme in the poem “The Suicide” in which the poet views merging and dissolving into the sea as a way of transcending all manner of pain, including the pain of failed relationships. She recalls the happy moments when in Malabar she swam naked in the “pale-green pond” until she was chided by her grandmother to cease doing so, for she was too grown-up to play naked in the pond. The poet reflects that the only real movement she knows is “swimming”, therefore, she longs to swim out to the sea. The poem commences with setting up a dialectic of body and soul at the start of the poem:

Bereft of soul

My body shall be bare.

Bereft of body

my soul shall be bare.

In an ending similar to “Composition”, the poet seeks dissolution by merging into the sea:

Sea, toss my body back

That he knew how to love.

....

Only the soul knows how to sing

At the vortex of the sea.

Both the poems “Composition” and “The Suicide” express a desire for dissolution, for which sea imagery is adeptly invoked in the latter poem. The desire for dissolution is also a prominent trait of mysticism, in which the seeker longs to dissolve into and unite with a power outside itself, be it nature or a divinity. In the aforementioned poems, the poet gives primacy to the soul over the body, highlighting the body’s perishable nature and its unenduring ties. Why does the poet repeatedly invoke such a desire? The clue to this is provided by the poem “The Old Playhouse” in which the poet presents her view on the nature of love between man and woman. Das views love between man and woman as saddled with power-play, and at its heart narcissistic in nature:

... Love is Narcissus at the waters’ edge, haunted

By its own lovely face, and yet it must seek at last

An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors

To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

It is precisely on account of the tainted nature of human love that the poet seeks escape into a “pure, total freedom”, not unlike that desired by a mystic. The preceding discussion has looked at poems which mainly talk about carnal love and the bondage of human relationships, and the poet’s desire to escape this through transcendence or dissolution into a power beyond the self, such as nature. A recurring pattern in Das’s poetry is the railing against the limitations of the human body and the inability to find happiness in the man-woman relationship, be it marital love or extra-marital love, as well as all manner of human relationships in general. The deepest limitation, however, stems not

from the transient nature of relationships but from the simple fact of possessing a physical body, which is an encumbrance for experiencing transcendence or oneness with nature, which the poet ardently seeks.

There is yet another way that the poet Kamala Das seeks to go beyond the pains and bondage of the ordinary man-woman relationship: by seeking refuge in the legend of Krishna and his consort Radha. Kamala Das frequently invokes the figure of Krishna in her poetry, blending the themes of love, desire, and spiritual transcendence. In “Ghanshyam”, which can be read as a poem or a prose poem, the poet addresses Krishna, pouring out her lament to him. Krishna is indistinguishable from her husband, and comes across as a source of personal longing and emotional sanctuary from the bondage of mundane existence with its inescapable ties:

The umbilical cord wilts and falls. But new knots arrive. New bondages. New pains. Ghanshyam, I will carry my new peace like a baby in a knapsack. Sages talked to me about you. After the guests had left, after the dishes had been washed, your memory came to me like a snatch of wind from under the door. O Shyam, my Ghanshyam, you have like a fisherman cast a net in my mind's vast ocean. And today, words come running to you like enchanted fish...

According to Fritz Blackwell, a comparative analysis of the Radha-Krishna myth in Kamala Das's and Sarojini Naidu's poetry reveals that while Naidu's poetry contains true devotional elements as expressed by medieval devotional poets or bhakti poets of India, Das's poetry with its emphasis on the body and carnality, cannot qualify as mystical poetry, as Das's “concern is literary and existential, not religious.” Such an analysis, in my view, ignores the fact that eroticism is a part and parcel of the mystical poetry of various religious traditions in the world. When it comes to mysticism in the Hindu religious traditions, the element of eroticism is particularly deeply entrenched.

It is in the Bhagvada Purana dated at eleventh century AD that we first encounter the idea of bhakti or devotion as the supreme source of bliss or spiritual enjoyment, which is presented as the highest goal. This goal is considered superior to the path of work (karmayoga) and knowledge (jnanayoga). In popular devotional mysticism or the new school of bhakti, which is a later development, “the conception of God as creator, supporter, father, lord and master, or as the ultimate philosophical principle, is subordinated to the conception of God as the nearest and dearest.” The legend of Krishna provides a human touch to God's relationship with mortals. By employing this legend, the bhaktas of the new school, possessed of a peculiar mystical bent of mind, could conceive of God in complex ways: as a supreme being with transcendent powers, and also as an intimate friend or lover maintaining a close human relationship with his devotees. The episodes of Krishna's life in Vrindavan are spiritualized, and are often conceived to happen on a non-physical plane. Krishna's dalliance with Radha and the gopis are thought to symbolize the soul's longing for union with the divine. However, there are also literary and art traditions in which Radha and Krishna are understood to be lovers in the physical sense, for instance, as represented in Kangra miniature paintings and Jayadeva's Gita Govinda. We find a reflection of a similar complex sentiment in Das's treatment of the Radha-Krishna legend. It's not a matter of choosing one interpretation over the other, the devotional or the carnal, for the very reason that both bhakti poets and a modernist poet such as Das often conflate the physical and the devotional in their compositions. Consider the following lines by Meerabai in which she seeks to be united with Krishna “in every limb”:

For your sake, I gave up all pleasures
Now why are you making me long for you?
You create the pang of separation inside the bosom
so that you can come and quench it?
O! Lord! Now I will not leave you
Smilingly, call me soon!
Meera is your servant in birth after birth
Unite me with you in every limb.

In another verse, Meerabai celebrates meeting her beloved Krishna and calls him in her “husband in previous births,” marking a shift from the purely devotional to the notion of marriage in an earthly sense:

Let it rain!
Today, my Ramaiya is with me
At my residence!
....
I have got my Beloved after so many days!
I am afraid he may leave and go!
Meera says: we are united in strong love
He was my husband in previous births!

Kamala Das, voices a similar sentiment, when in “Radha...Anuradha” she calls “Krishna, the husband of all Hindu women” (87). She addresses Krishna as a deity towards whom she expresses devotion, and also highlights him as the physical lover of Radha:

Your face flies and soars before my eyes like a bluebird in
the evening sky. Wherever I look, I see you.
Even when I don't look anywhere, O my beautiful Shyam,
I see only you.
With the many-flamed lamp in my hand, I performed aarati
in front of your idol.
Radha, your life was not a tragedy.
You received his body once.
We know him only as the Bodiless.

In the above lines, Das compares her situation with that of Radha and finds the latter to be more fortunate than her, as Radha had Krishna as her lover in bodily form, before he departed for Mathura. On the other hand, Das, like other women, “know” Krishna only as the “Bodiless.” Das blends in her address to Krishna a mystic-like persona akin to Meerabai’s pining for Lord Krishna, Radha’s longing for her lover & lord Krishna, and a mortal woman seeking her ideal lover in Krishna which she knows to be an impossibility. Das identifies with Radha in another sense as well: like Radha, Das too has sought love outside of her marriage, a fact she has flaunted in numerous poems and in her celebrated autobiography *My Story*.

Kamala Das’s unsuccessful search for true love in her own life compels her to conjure the figure of Krishna, the ideal lover. But that is not the only manner in which Das views Krishna. Krishna is a pivotal and multi-faceted figure in her poetry. Das views Krishna as her friend as does Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, sees him reflected in her husband, her extra-marital lovers, and also seeks refuge in him in a devotional sense as does Meerabai. In Das’s poetry we find a tension between her treatment of Krishna as a transcendent figure and the divine embodied as a physical lover. Das recreates the figure of Krishna to challenge traditional notions of devotion, and presents him as a divine figure as well as a symbol of personal yearning. In my view, her use of the Radha-Krishna legend serves both a literary and devotional purpose.

From the preceding discussion we see that in the poetry of Kamala Das we catch glimpses of the poet’s desire for transcendence and dissolution into a higher power, which are facets of mysticism. Carnality and spirituality are not opposed to one another in Das’s poetry. The presence of bold sexuality and eroticism does not preclude mystical elements from her poetry. Rather, what we find in the poetry of Kamala Das is a blending of the sexual, romantic, and devotional, which creates her own brand of mysticism, one that bears the stamp of her own unique sensibility.

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