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Exploring the Diverse Roles of Imagery in Select Poems of Kamala Das

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Abstract: Kamala Das, one of the leading Indian English Poets, is renowned for her confessional poetry which reveals her frustration in married life, her futile search for love, her extra-marital affairs, her protest against the injustice done to the women by the patriarchal society, and so on. Her poetry is characterised by a frank treatment of love, sex and the body. She, however, disapproves of the all-pervasive nature of lust and longs for a relationship based on genuine love, true affection and mutual trust. It goes without saying that her poetry teems with various images which widen the significance of her ideas and reveal the intensity of her varied feelings. However, the present paper seeks to examine some of Kamala Das's important poems to explore the diverse roles played by imagery in her poetry. In other words, the paper is to exhibit how the images serve manifold functions in the poems of Kamala Das.

Keywords: Imagery, confessional poetry, love, lust, frankness.

Introduction

Imagery refers to a mental picture dawn with the help of words. It may refer to a phrase or passage which makes the alert reader visualise something. However, it “includes not only the visual sense qualities, but also qualities that are auditory, tactile (touch), thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinaesthetic (sensations of movement)” (Abrams and Harpham 169).

Kamala Das is one of the most important Indian poets in English. She is a bilingual author writing in both her mother tongue Malayalam and English. Her poetry is confessional



in nature, since it reveals her private life, her unhappy conjugal life, her extra-marital affairs and the like. Her poetry is marked by an “uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex” (Naik 218). In her poems, Kamala Das has voiced her protest against the subjugation and exploitation of women by men in a patriarchal society. She has also exhibited her feelings of loneliness, alienation, deprivation and despair. Her poetry shows her endless search for true love even in the arms of other men. M. k. Naik observes:

The result is confessional poetry obsessively mulling over love, sex and the body’s wisdom. Several faces of Eve are exhibited here – woman as sweetheart, flirt, wife, woman of the world, mother, middle aged matron – and above all, woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of the psychological processes behind both femininity and masculinity. (Naik 219)

In some of her poems, Das recollects her happiest days of childhood spent in her ancestral home in Kerala. However, “the total impression Kamala Das’s poetry produces is one of a bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within” (Naik 219). Again, it is interesting to note that her poetry is dominated by a wide range of powerful images. Indeed, each and every poem by Das teems with images which are both suggestive and connotative. Her images not only foreground her myriad feelings but also enhance the implication and significance of her poetic works. In addition to that, her images serve to create a serious and tragic atmosphere in most of her poems. In the essay entitled “Poetry after Independence”, Rajeev S. Patke has beautifully pointed out:

Her [Kamala Das’s] poems struggle to develop a sense of self which is alternatively sustained and thwarted by her own sexuality, defined and disfigured as that is, in its turn, by being trapped in the rut of social institutions. Her poems count the cost suffered by freedom and honesty, in the relation between emotional and sexual needs, in marriage and outside. (Patke 284)



However, a close examination of Kamala Das's Poetry will reveal how images play a large number of roles in her individual poems.

In her celebrated poem "The Freaks", Kamala Das presents the pangs of a woman who fails to find emotional fulfilment or love in her married life. The poem dramatizes a situation where the husband is making love to the wife. The poet laments that her husband does not care for love or her emotional needs. Rather, he is obsessed with her body and his carnal desires. She here expresses her feelings of disgust and hatred towards her selfish and lustful husband. However, Das makes use of a large number of powerful images which expose her feelings of repulsion, boredom, loneliness, emptiness, despair and unbearable pain. For instance, the image of 'sun-stained cheek' brings to the fore the repulsive nature of the ugly face of the poet's husband. Again, the image of a 'dark cavern' used to describe his mouth points to his ugliness and hollowness. That he lacks the tender feeling of love and affection has been highlighted by the image of the dark cave. The speaker of the poem further uses the image 'stalactites' to portray the ugly and repulsive nature of her husband's teeth. His right hand is on her knee: it suggests the act of love making. While the woman longs for love and emotional fulfilment, the husband is absorbed only in the act of physical intercourse. The poet uses the image of 'puddle' to describe lust which has enslaved her husband. This image, no doubt, points to the fact that the husband's carnal desires are a hindrance to the achievement of true love. The unfortunate woman, i.e. the poet laments that she has been waiting for love for a long time but in vain. The image of an 'empty cistern' used to describe her heart is suggestive of her pathetic plight caused by the indifference and selfishness of her husband. Moreover, the image of 'coiling snakes' is indicative of the monotony and repulsion that are the inevitable consequences of a disastrous marriage. The poet, however, confesses that she pretends to feel the urge of lust to save her face:

I am

A freak. It is only to save my face



I flaunt at times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (Kamala Das: Selected Poems 76)

“The Grand Mother’s House” is another important poem by Kamala Das, which registers her feelings of nostalgia for her happy days of childhood spent at her grandmother’s house. Her unhappy and loveless conjugal life makes her reminisce about the genuine love that she received from her grandmother. The poem also sheds ample light on the state of stagnation and dead silence that began to reign supreme in the grandmother’s house after her sad demise. However, the poet uses the image of silence when she says that “the house withdrew into silence” after the death of her grandmother. The image unquestionably suggests the feelings of bereavement and emptiness occasioned by the grandmother’s death. Again, the image of snakes in the expression “snakes moved/among books” foregrounds the young poet’s feelings of fear and disgust. The moon is another powerful image used in the poem to emphasise the poet’s sense of dread and despair. Two other images occur in the following lines:

How often I think of going there,

To peer through the blind eyes of windows or

Just listen to the frozen air. (Kamala Das: Selected Poems 87)

There is no denying the fact that the image of ‘blind eyes’ not only indicates the eternal darkness of the grandmother’s house after the death of its owner but also connotes the poet’s feelings of loneliness and alienation. Moreover, the image of ‘frozen air’ serves to accentuate the state of stagnation in the house as well as the feelings of coldness and despair caused by the grandmother’s death. The other two images which are equally powerful and connotative are found in the concluding lines of the poem:

I who have lost

My way and beg now at strangers’ doors



To receive love, at least in small change? (Kamala Das: Selected Poems 87)

The image of losing way suggests the poet's deviation from the conventional notion that a woman must cling to her husband for ever, no matter whether he is good or wicked. The image of begging at the doors of strangers is indicative of her efforts to find true love in the embrace of other men. These two images indubitably help strengthen the confessional mood of the poet.

“The Looking Glass” exhibits Kamala Das's liberal and unconventional attitude towards love making or sex. She makes it clear that a woman should surrender completely to her lover by standing naked to him in front of the looking glass on the floor of the bathroom. She should expose each and every delicate part of her body to arouse and heighten her lover's sexual passions. In this way, consummation of love can turn into a reality. The poet, however, lays bare the pangs of a woman who has been deserted by her lover. However, the image of the lover and the beloved standing ‘nude’ in front of the looking glass brings to the fore the view that love making has nothing obscene or objectionable about it. The poet advises a woman to admire the perfection of her lover's limbs so that he may feel motivated to satisfy her “endless female hungers”. The readers also come across the image of reddened eyes, which throws a good deal of light on the intensity of sexual passions felt by the lover. The image of jerky urinating also highlights the lover's excitement and wild passions. The poet proceeds to make use of a number of images suggestive of feminine charms, youthful passions and erotic feelings. These images include ‘long hair’, fragrance between the breasts and ‘menstrual blood’. While focusing on the plight of a deserted woman, Das uses the image of ‘burnished brass’ to drive home the fact that her body once gleamed with passions and delight when it received the lover's passionate touch. She laments that her body is now ‘drab’ and ‘destitute’.

“A Hot Noon in Malabar” is another personal poem in which Kamala Das reveals her intense longing for her ancestral house in Malabar. The poem teems with the feelings of



nostalgia and sheds much light on the contrast between city life and rural life. The poet here reminisces about the scene in Malabar during a hot noon. She lets us know that fortune tellers, bangle sellers and strangers came to Malabar to earn their livelihood. They sometimes refreshed themselves at the well. Again, Das lays bare her feelings of alienation, boredom and agony as she is now tied to a dull life in a remote city, far away from her parental house in Malabar. However, the images of “beggars with whining voices”, men with caged parrots and fortune cards, Kurave girls with old eyes and bangle sellers serve to portray the colourful scene in Malabar. The image of parrots in a cage may symbolise the pitiable plight of the poet herself who has been subjected to confinement, suffocation and deep anguish in a patriarchal society. The image of the feet devouring ‘rough miles’ emphasises the hardships and sufferings of the poor people who reach Malabar after a long journey on foot for their survival. Again, the poet uses the image of hot eyes “brimming with sun” to accentuate the scorching heat felt by the strangers at Malabar. The image of ‘jungle voices’ points to the unrefined and strange nature of the strangers. Another powerful image is found in the phrase “my/ home in Malabar” which is suggestive of homely comfort, true love and individual freedom.

In “The Old Playhouse”, Kamala Das has portrayed the consequences of unhappy conjugal life, such as her sense of confinement, helplessness, loneliness, physical and mental torment, her loss of freedom and self-identity, her mental and emotional inertia and her desire to get rid of her painful existence through death. At the very beginning, the poet reveals her helplessness and anguish through the image of a swallow which has been tamed and imprisoned. This image brings to the fore her feelings of confinement, agony, boredom, alienation and suffocation caused by the selfishness, indifference and egotism of her husband. This image also accentuates the fact that her husband has robbed her of her freedom and individuality, and turned her into an object of sexual gratification. The image of “bitter sweet juices” points the mixed feelings of pleasure and pain experienced by the unhappy wife during love making. Again, the poet uses the image of “braking saccharine into your tea” to



emphasise the stereotyped domestic duties which are imposed on a woman by the patriarchal society. Another important image used in the poem is that of a dwarf which is suggestive of the fact that the 'monstrous ego' of the selfish husband has reduced the poet to an insignificant level. The image, therefore, connotes her loss of identity, individuality and freedom. Kamala Das demonstrates the end of her happy days through the image of summer that "begins to pall". Moreover, the image of artificial lights illuminating her husband's room is indicative of his lack of feelings and spontaneity while the image of windows "always shut" highlights the poet's forced alienation from the rest of the world. We also come across the image of "cut flowers" which may suggest the poet's pangs of rootlessness and desolation. Interestingly enough, the central image of the poem is the old playhouse where all lights have been put out. This image is used to describe the poet's mind. It indubitably foregrounds her mental and emotional stagnation, her passivity and her feelings of loneliness, emptiness and despair. Like the old playhouse, the poet has been subjected to desolation and neglect. Apart from that, the image of Narcissus haunted by his own lonely face intensifies the feelings of isolation and disappointment which keep on plaguing the poet. However, the poem ends with the poet's desire to rid herself of her painful existence through death.

"The Sunshine Cat" is an outstanding confessional poem that lays bare Kamala Das's frustration in both marital and extra marital relationships. The poet here talks about her loneliness, helplessness and subjugation at the hands of her self-centred and lustful husband. She confesses that neither her husband nor her lovers have succeeded in providing her with love and emotional satisfaction. All of them have exploited her body to satisfy their carnal desires. However, the images of chests with new hair and the great-winged moths suggest the poet's feelings of disgust and repulsion towards her husband. The image of a "bed made soft with tears" brings out her pathetic predicament resulting from her anguish, disappointment and torment. The same feelings of helplessness are revealed in the image of "walls with tears". Again, "a streak of sunlight" is another image suggesting the illusory nature of



happiness and contentment. However, the central image of the 'sunshine cat' points to her despair and dehumanisation caused by the cruelty and selfishness of her unfeeling husband.

In "The Wild Bougainvillea", Kamala Das relates one of her experiences during her stay in Kolkata. One summer day, she felt gloomy, dejected and restless. She was eagerly waiting for a man from "another town". However, she came out and started walking through the city to get rid of her sufferings and gloom. She came across various signs of moral depravity on the beach and streets, and finally felt the onslaughts of time on the tombstones. She, however, found the signs of life in some flowers blooming beside the tombs. She, therefore, regained her faith in life, forgot that particular man and enjoyed a peaceful sleep at night. In a word, the poem shows her reaffirmation of life as well as her robust optimism. Like other poems of Kamala Das, this poem also teems with a number of suggestive images. For instance, the image of "mourners behind a bier" foregrounds her feelings of gloom, grief and despair. The image of "troubled sea" serves to reveal her anxiety, restlessness and mental torment. The images of "underside rotting", rotting of garbage and dead fish bring to the fore the moral degradation of the city of Kolkata. These images also point to the fact that the past glory of the city is on the wane. Moreover, the poet makes use of the images of "obtrusive breasts" and "sickly smile" to emphasise the moral degradation of Kolkata. It goes without saying that the image of tombstones indubitably represents death, decay and despair. The images of marigold and red bougainvillea, on the other hand, connote life and hope. These flowers thus serve to restore hope and meaning to the life the poet.

In the poem "In Love", Kamala Das has once again expressed her feelings of disgust and repulsion towards her lustful husband. The burning sun reminds her of her husband's repulsive mouth. She has to lie with him and satisfy his lust despite the fact that her emotional needs remain unfulfilled. The poet makes it abundantly clear that he is bereft of love, affection and such tender feelings. However, a number of images figure in this poem. At the very outset, the image of "the burning mouth/ Of sun" is used to emphasise the repulsive mouth of her husband. Moreover, the poet has used the image of "pale and/



Carnivorous plants” to drive home her husband’s lack of tender emotions and his obsession with lust. His embrace is as painful and tortuous as a “finished jigsaw”. This image, no doubt, suggests the fact that his embrace is not at all welcome to her. It brings to the fore her feelings of agony, anguish and repulsion. There is also the image of “the corpse bearers” crying “Bol Hari Bol”, which reveals the poet’s mood of gloom and despair. Again, the image of “moonless night” serves to accentuate her feelings of deprivation, emptiness and disappointment. The poem ends with her refusal to regard her husband’s lust as an expression of love:

This skin communicated

Thing that I dare not yet in

His presence call our love. (The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry 272)

In “The Dance of The Eunuchs”, Kamala Das has presented the pitiful plight of the eunuchs who are leading a death-in-life existence. She here relates how the eunuchs came and started dancing in the scorching sun. Their cheeks had green tattoos on them while their hair was decorated with jasmines. Their voices were harsh and their songs were melancholy. However, the image of their skirts which keep on going round them may suggest their monotony and boredom. The image contained in the expression “till they bled” points to the eunuchs’ physical and mental sufferings. Again, the poet has used the image of “sorry breasts” to foreground their barrenness as well as their pangs stemming from disappointment and mockery. Moreover, the image of “half-burnt logs from funeral pyres” not only emphasises their wretched sufferings but also connotes that they are on the verge of death. Kamala Das goes on to use the images of ‘drought’ and ‘rotteness’ to accentuate the eunuchs’ sense of emptiness, infertility and emotional decay. However, it may not be out of context to point out that the eunuchs and their predicament seem to objectify the poet’s own sufferings, anguish and despair.



“An Introduction” is a confessional poem where Kamala Das introduces herself to the readers by talking about her birth-place, nationality, language, and, of course, her frustration in her conjugal life. She begins by confessing that she does not know politics though she can name the politicians. She defends her use of English as medium of writing poetry. She uses the images of cawing of crows and roaring of lions to drive home the point that English comes to her naturally and spontaneously. She proceeds to make use of the images of “trees in storm”, “monsoon clouds”, “rain”, and the “incoherent mutterings of the blazing/ Funeral pyre” to assert that her language is not deaf or blind like those things. Again, she reveals her sufferings at the hands of her husband and voices her concerns about the oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society. She uses the image of “the hungry haste/ Of rivers” to highlight the fact that her husband only cared for sex and he always made haste to satisfy his carnal desires by exploiting her body. The image of “the ocean’s tireless/ Waiting” brings to the fore her fruitless waiting for real love and her disappointment. Another powerful image is found in the expression “sword in its sheath” which represents the husband’s narrow-mindedness, egotism and rigidity.

Conclusion

Thus, Kamala Das’s poetry abounds with powerful images which serve a large number of functions. Most of her images are instrumental in foregrounding her feelings of discontent, isolation, loneliness, deprivation, boredom, anguish and emptiness. The images also lay emphasis on her pangs arising out of her loss of self-identity, individuality and freedom. There are some other images which help enhance the frankness and honesty of her confessions. Her images also enable her to voice her protest against the tyranny of patriarchy more effectively. Apart from that, her images accentuate the far-reaching consequences of a disastrous marriage. Again, the images serve to reveal her hatred towards her selfish, repulsive and lustful husband who does not bother about her emotional needs. Hence, one must conclude by saying that the numerous images of Kamala Das not only enhance the



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aesthetic beauty and literary importance of her poetry but also perform a number other functions.

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