



Portrayal of women in Kamala Das' Alphabet of Lust

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Abstract

India has been the country of excellent writers whose works have been appreciated all over the world. The style of writing and the topics covered by the writers has changed over the period of time. Both male and female writers have made exceptional contributions through their creativity and have enlightened us with their thoughts. Kamala Das is one such female writer having done remarkable works and has written about women. Her bold writing style has captivated the attention of many critics in the Indian society. Her work has been analysed and debated by the writers of all generations. One such novel written by her is *Alphabet of Lust* which talks about female sexual desires and the experience of being an Indian woman. Her book talks about the women side of the story. Until this book was released, the concept of female sexuality did not exist in the society. That era was conservative about women and discussing sexual desires was a taboo for Indian women. This novel of Kamala Das' was a breakthrough for the women at that time and people became aware about the female emotions and desires. This paper talks about the portrayal of women in Kamala Das' novel *Alphabet of Lust*.

Keywords: Generation, Conservative, Feminism, Patriarchy

Kamala Das (1934-2009) also known as Kamala Surayya, was an Indian female writer known for her bold expressions about women in the country. Her works in Malayalam and English gained popularity because of her honest and guilt free opinion about women sexuality. Her biography *My story* in English and *Ente Katha* in Malayalam was very famous. She got married at an early age of 15 and has three children. She used to write at night and started with short stories and poems. Later, her contribution increased after her bold work caught attention of the people in the country. In her novel *Alphabet of Lust*, she has talked about the exploitation of female in the family. She says that:

“Often, perceived harmony disguises intense differences of power and resources within the family and the monopolization of control and decision-making by the most powerful member(s). This is most apparent in the exercise of power and violence within the family. Women, children, and the elderly have been the most common victims of family violence, reflecting their relative lack of power and resources in the home and in the larger society.” [1]

Her work resonates with the condition of Indian society at that time and she had the guts to portray the same in front of her readers. She has explained that patriarchy has been the root cause of such mindset. The culture where women are considered to be the weaker half in the marriage whose freedom of expression was not appreciated. In her interview with Iqbal Kaur, she said:

“A writer can either be evil and plot the manipulation of young minds or the writer can be not so evil but conscious of his or her power to manipulate and use it. Perhaps I’m doing that now. I’m trying to manipulate the minds of the people.” [2]

Her bold acknowledgement and honest confessions has inspired the society. Her outspoken persona has made people admire her guts. She had talked about using fiction in her literary work based on her observation in the society. Kamala Das has been honest in her confessions and shares everything with her readers without any filters. Her readers are like her priest listening to her confessions. Carolyn Heilbrun got inspired by Kamala and said:

“the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman’s life in what is called biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without recognizing or naming the process . . . Woman of accomplishment, in unconsciously writing their future lived lives, or, more recently, in trying honestly to deal in written form with lived past lives, have had to confront power and control. Because this has been declared unwomanly, and because many women would prefer (or think they would prefer) a world without evident power or control, women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over- take control of – their own lives” [2]

Kamala Das had converted to Islam in the year 1999 and took the name Kamala Surayya.

“Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is the Purdah. Second is the security that Islam provides to women. In fact, both these reasons are complementary. Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women a sense of security. Only Islam gives protection to women. I have been lonely all through my life. At nights, I used to sleep by embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is my company. Islam is the only religion in the world that gives love and protection to women.” [3]

This confession put her life in danger and she had started getting threatening calls from the religious activists. But her bold and outspoken persona had no fear. She belonged to a high class society and was ignored in her childhood. Her early marriage and motherhood had left bitterness and dissatisfaction in her life which can be seen in her work and her actions. Her work portrays woes of an unsatisfied married life where he talks about a woman’s physical desires and emotions. In her novel *Alphabet of Lust*, she says that:

“Our bodies after love-making turned away, rejecting. Our words began to sound like clatter of swords in fight. After that love became a swivel-door, When one went, out, another came in, Then I lost count, for always in my arms was a substitute for a substitute. I went to him for half an hour as pure woman, pure misery fragile glass, breaking crumbling. With a cheap toy’s indifference I enter other’s Lives, and Make of every trap of lust a temporary home. I’ve misplaced a father somewhere and I look for him now everywhere” [5]

Her isolated and unloved life can be seen in her expressions through writing where she talks about a woman's lust and love. Kamala Das has been transparent about portraying the lust of women for the opposite gender and boldly expresses that in her work. Writer Devendra Kohli says that:

““Almost, all the critics of Kamala Das have been quick to notice that part of the strength of poetry emanates from her powerful personality. But while the vigour of her personality seems to operate rather transparently, and on the surface as it were, it does not detract from the complexity of the women's ambivalence which is the certitude and the precariousness of sexual love.”

Similar thoughts are expressed by Harimohan Prasad about Kamala's writing style where he says that:

“Her poetry has been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over exposer of body or 'snippets of trivia'. But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poet is the poetry fully obliterating Eliot's distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating.” [5]

She further explains in her work about different stages of a woman's life and the changing thoughts as per the changing situation. She says that:

“...You called me wife, I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and to offer at the right moment the vitamins, Cowering beneath your monstrous ego, I ate the magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will. I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon you built around me with morning tea, Love-words flung from doorways and of course your tired lust. I shall someday take Wings; fly around, as often petals do when free in air. And, then, wailing into light He came, so fair, a streak of light thrust into the faded light. They raised him to me then, poured Jaisurya, my son, separated from darkness that was mine and in me. The darkness I have known, Lived with, the darkness of rooms where the old sit, sharpening words for future use, The darkness of sterile womb and that of The miser's pot, with the mildew on his coins. Out of the mire of a moonless night was He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of The wrong is born the right and out of night The sun-drenched golden day. I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life...” [7]

This piece of her work clearly states the submissive nature of Indian women towards her husband and her family. In doing so, she undermines her will and desires and pretends to be happy all the time. Her work talks about the identity crisis of women in a patriarchal society. Men have all the rights of decision making and they are the drivers in women's' life. In her book *Alphabet of Lust*, she says that:

“If they ask me about my identity what can I say but I am the androgyne I am the living mind you fail to describe in your Dead language The lost noun, the verb surviving Only in the infinitive The letters of my name are written under the lids Of the newborn child?” [8]

Her work could be criticised by many readers because of her feminism style of writing but she honestly expressed her experiences in her writings. She felt no inhibition in masking the truth and wanted her readers to know everything she has felt and experienced in her creative way of narrations. She got the opportunity to express herself at a very early stage of her life when she was loaded with the expectations of the society. As a wife and as a mother she had a defined role to play where there was no place for her will and fantasie. As a female writer she says:

“A woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother, before she could become anything else. And that meant years and years of waiting. That meant waiting till the greying years. I didn’t have the time to wait. I was impatient. So I started writing quite early in my life. And perhaps I was lucky. My husband appreciated the fact that I was trying to supplement the family income. So, he allowed me to write at night. After all the chores were done, after I had fed the children, fed him, cleaned up the kitchen, I was allowed to sit awake and write till morning. And that affected my health.” [9]

This depicts a selfish mentality of men who consider their wives as a source of either work or extra income. They do not have the idea that this body of flesh and a mind could have some desires as well. Her work exemplifies the desires of an Indian women and their consciousness about their body. She talks about the guts to embrace the existing body and mind that a woman has got without any guilt. She says that:

“notice the perfection of his limbs, his eyes reddening under shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor, dropping towels, and the jerky way he urinates, All the fond details that make Him male and your only man. Gift him all, Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts, The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your endless female hungers.” [9]

At whatever point he attempted to strip me of my garments, my Shyness clung to me like a subsequent skin and made my developments awkward. Each part of my skin became at that point a seeing eye, an eye that saw my body with abhorrence. Yet, during my sickness, I shed my bashfulness and without precedent for my life figured out how to give up absolutely in bed with my pride unblemished and bursting. Her bold and beautiful expression of thoughts about connecting with your body has amused all her readers. Her writing always had an element of surprise which talks about exploring love and lust through the physical desires. Her writing showed the woman’s need for a human body to find comfort and solace and expressed the same with her work in her novel ‘*Alphabet of Lust*’.

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