



Kamala Das And Her Mythological Manifestation: A Study Of Selected Poems With Special Reference To Radha-Krishna Myth

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Abstract: Kamala Surayya (1934-2009), better known as Kamala Das and revered as “the mother of Indian English Poetry,” regardless of her plaintive poetic voice, is a highly anthologized and distinguished figure in contemporary Indian English literature, encompassing evocative poetry, novels, and short stories to her credit. The present study, taking into account Das’s selected poems, such as “Krishna,” “Ghanshyam,” “Radha,” “The Maggots,” “A Phantom Lotus,” and “Radha-Krishna,” painstakingly portrays the mythical-cum-spiritual imagery and symbolism she borrowed from mythology, emphasizing the cyclical and spiritual aspects of her experiences. Das extensively employs mythical imagery, which enables her to explore the collective unconscious and use archetypal symbols and stories that have universal appeal across nations and time. She gives her poetry a feeling of universality and timelessness by referencing mythological characters, gods, and goddesses from Hindu mythology. While serving as a link between the past and the present, these mythical images connect the reader to historical traditions rich in knowledge and significance.

Index Terms - Imagery, symbolism, spirituality, myth, love, feminine sensibility

Renowned for her confessional poetry and explicit autobiography, *My Story*, Kamala Das occupies a unique place in Indo-Anglian literature based on her outspokenness and honest depiction of female sexuality. Although Das’s voyage of divine love eventually ended in profound disappointment and dissatisfaction, she reflects her sense of self with an influential force of revolt against the patriarchal social system, advocating for the rightful position of the exploited and marginalized women. She believes true love should lead to self-discovery and self-growth, fulfilling romantic and emotional longing. Das does not advocate promiscuity; her love poetry expresses her lifelong yearning for fulfillment through genuine love. Her frank and straightforward writing style lends a unique quality to her poetry as she openly writes about her husband, lovers, menstruation, her uterus, and sexual desires. By promoting free sexual expression as a means of self-discovery, Das rebels against an androcentric society, effectively articulating deeper implications of her love poetry through a distinctive style and striking imagery.

Since ancient times, mythology has been a relentless source of inspiration for artists and authors. The study of literary texts embellished with mythological illustrations reveals a new approach to literature, often exploring a connection between contemporary literature and mythology. Myth has multiple meanings, making it complicated or challenging for readers to understand what it all means. The way mythical themes are intricately woven into a work of literature shows how complex the idea of myth is. Given this, exploring a few instructive definitions of myth is worthwhile before scrutinizing the mythical imagery in Kamala Das’s poetry. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, a myth is:

“a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.” (Knowles)

Alternatively, an American scholar, Joseph Campbell, notes that mythology refers to:

“An organization of symbolic narratives and images that are metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and fulfillment in a given society at a given time.” (Campbell, 2)

Thus, an in-depth study of mythical writing reveals an inherent urge in writers to link to their past.

India's cultural, mythical, and spiritual charms have relentlessly influenced and inspired writers globally. Notably, spiritualism is gaining unprecedented currency in the modern world because of humanity's increasing involvement in earthly pleasures and materialism; guilt-ridden humans often crave salvation through spirituality, and the same is the case with Kamala Das, who committed adultery while seeking emotional fulfillment. Having experienced endless betrayals, she longs to unite with her ideal lover, Lord Krishna, by imaginarily sailing in the boat of spirituality. Her spiritual aspiration resists her enjoying sexuality with her lovers, as she has unwavering faith in the soul's union while questioning the fleeting nature of human life. As a seeker of true love, Das relied on her husband and lovers for ideal love; however, she eventually realized the futility of her pursuit, as a spiritual union with the transcendental being is unattainable through earthly means.

Known for provocative writing on female sexuality, Kamala Das broadly employs the mythological imagery of Radha-Krishna, which relates to human emotions. Her poetry, though, embellished with evocative imagery of Radha-Krishna's spiritual love, primarily delves into the themes of love and sex while referring to Lord Krishna as her “husband” and “lover,” which is often viewed as unconventional in Indian culture. In one of her controversial essays entitled “I Studied All Men,” which examines a woman's disillusionment with men, Das expresses her emotions about her multiple affairs. In her quest for true love, she even dreamed of being Krishna's beloved, as she asserts:

“Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna.”
(The Old Playhouse And Other Poems, 15)

Kamala Das fantasizes about Lord Krishna as her husband, representing godly figures, Radha-Krishna, as common human beings, and their attachment, like a conjugal union. She longed for a “mate” like Krishna and a deeply affectionate relationship like the one between Radha and Krishna. For emotional fulfillment, she pins her hope on Krishna, imagining her husband, who can soothe her anguished soul, as 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)

In the larger context, Das aims to highlight her vision of ideal love through Radha-Krishna legends, symbolically showing the significance of soulful love in man-woman relationships. In Hindu mythology, Lord Krishna is widely considered a mythical lover, whereas Radha, the seeker of eternal love, represents an epitome of selfless devotion. Das, immensely inspired by Radha-Krishna's spiritual union, truthfully depicts these mythological characters as archetypes to sanctify the search of her female personas for a sense of satisfaction outside of marriage.

Kamala Das employs mythical imagery in her poetry to convey her profound faith in Lord Krishna, an epitome of eternal devotion, and simultaneously empathizes and identifies herself with Radha, who eternally cherished her ideal lover, Krishna, in expectation of getting her emotional wounds healed. In her poem, “**Radha**,” Das deftly correlates the intensity of her fondness for Krishan with that of Radha, seeking a spiritual state of oneness and merging with His divine consciousness:

“The long waiting
 Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
 And the reasoning
 So that 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.” (Selected Poems)

These lines beautifully portray Kamala Das's longing for eternal love, spiritual fulfillment, and uniting herself with Lord Krishna. Meanwhile, the repeated use of the word “melting” emphasizes her wretched condition, yearning for spiritual liberation, and a profound sense of surrender, escaping from sensuality to spirituality. As Radha was married to another man, her union with Lord Krishna, according to some noted scholars, is considered “adulterous” given her deep connection with Him. Similarly, Kamala Das, a married woman, desperately longs for Krishna as an ideal lover. Her glorification of Radha is justifiable owing to her unyielding faith in Krishna and fearlessness about social criticism. Taking this into consideration, W.G. Archer's observation is worth noticing as it explores how the Radha-Krishna love story has provided countless themes for Indian art and culture:

“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)

As Lord Krishna is portrayed as a devoted and protective partner in Hindu mythology, every virgin girl's “long waiting” is eventually an aspiration for a perfect partner like Him, striving to make her wedding a chaste bond.

In her poem, “**The Maggots**,” Kamala Das honestly expresses her helplessness in confronting the reality:

“Sunset, on the river bank, 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,
 do you mind my kisses love, and she said no, not at all, but thought, what is
 it to the corpse if the maggots nip?” (Selected Poems)

The experience of Radha with her lover mirrors Kamala Das's predicament, who longs for emotional intimacy and a sense of safety in the arms of her husband; however, his seductive or sensual touch frustrates her, destroying her inner self. The poem, enriched with allegorical and metaphysical elements, vividly describes Radha-Krishna's meeting on a riverbank with striking mythical imagery, conveying Das's deep sadness and sorrow. It was the last meeting between the divine figures before Krishna left for Mathura after loving his beloved consort. Before departing, Lord Krishna kissed his beloved, but even a parting kiss from Him failed to stir her emotions. When asked about her detachment, she said that His kisses are like maggots on a corpse, symbolically emphasizing that a person who is apathetic in a dissatisfied relationship feels no sensation, regardless of damage or impact. In a broader context, the poem highlights the stark reality of human life. Notably, Das not only deals with Radha Krishna's divine love tale but also her own miserable life, pessimistically painting a dismal image of her lovelorn life with striking imagery, which, according to Anisur Rahman, is equally praiseworthy:

“The poet imparts religious symbolism to the poem through the execution of mythopoetic images. The collection of the common and plebeian images adds up to the richness of the poem.” (Rahman, 28)

While Lord Krishna's legendary tales are a source of divine love, Das aims to reveal women's predicament through the unenthusiastic representation of Radha-Krishna's love, simultaneously expressing the intensity

of her anguish and quest for ideal love. Radha's unwavering devotion to Lord Krishna and defiance of social constraints influenced Kamala Das during her soul-searching journey, enabling her to explore her identity, freedom, and long-cherished ideal love. The narratives dealing with Radha and Kamala Das portray their yearning for profound and passionate love; both Radha and Das longed for a perfect lover who could fulfill their deepest desires, transcending societal limitations. Notably, the quest of both Radha and Kamala Das was deeply personal, seeking spiritual fulfillment. While Radha's love is purely spiritual, Das employs the Radha-Krishna myth to explore female sexuality under societal constraints.

Deeply dejected by her husband's and lovers' betrayal and humiliation, Das escapes explicit exploration of sexuality, seeking a mystical and spiritual connection with the divine. She expresses her earnest desire for transcendent love that extends beyond material desires. After a spiritual transformation, her vision of life and love surprisingly changed in her later life, as also depicted in her devotional poem, "**Krishna**":

"Your body is my prison, Krishna, I cannot see beyond it."
(Only the Soul Knows how to Sing, 67)

The above extract is noteworthy as far as Lord Krishna's metaphorical representation, coupled with its moving and meaningful mythological imagery, is concerned. Kamala Das explores her quest for lasting love and fulfillment by metaphorically comparing Lord Krishna's body to a prison and herself to its prisoner, implying her profound relationship with Him. In her spiritual journey, Das actively alienates herself from earthly pleasures, focusing on her spiritual enlightenment. She embraces Lord Krishna's eternal love, getting herself captivated in His "prison" (body); i.e., having renounced worldly pleasures to worship Krishna, she finds her soul united with her ideal lover, achieving ultimate fulfillment.

Lord Krishna's grandeur finds recurring expressions in myriad mythical tales dealing with His passionate devotion, unwavering loyalty, and protective nature. Usually embodying a "mate" of every Indian girl and woman, Lord Krishna is often worshipped as their guardian, protecting them from harm through His spiritual guidance. In this context, Kamala Das's condition is comparable to every soul-seeking woman who abstains from material gratification and yearns for Krishna's eternal compassion and protection. Deeply inspired by the sublimity of the Supreme Being, she feels a sense of security and fulfilling love through "a visionary voyage." In "**Ghanshyam**," a symbolic representation of her mythical realm is undoubtedly marvelous:

"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.
You led me along a route I have never known before..."
(Only the Soul Knows how to Sing, 94)

The above extract emphasizes Das's yearning for a deeper connection with the mythical figure, Lord Krishna, who, according to her, can soothe her suffering soul with the ecstatic joy of divine love that remained unfulfilled throughout her married life. In this poem, which is enriched with extended metaphor and symbolism, the speaker skillfully compares Ghanshyam to a koel who builds a nest in her heart, meanwhile metaphorically comparing her life with "a sleeping jungle," which implies her deep-rooted pessimism before Krishna's association. Deeply saddened by the sensuality of her lovers, Das imaginarily seeks the blissfulness of ideal love through Ghanshyam, her perfect lover. She recalls Ghanshyam and reveals to Him her loveless life, which was previously desolate like a "sleeping jungle" in His absence. However, she is now thrilled with the sounds of His music, as He has built a nest in the garden of her heart. Ghanshyam, she acknowledges, has guided her on a path that was previously unfamiliar to her. Eternal longing for true love by immersing oneself in the world of imagination is the core theme of the poem. A 'koel' building its nest in the heart's arbor and the analogy of a sleeping life being caressed by music highlight the themes of suffering and redemption through mythical imagery. Das awaits her eternal lover, Krishna, like the mythological 'Chatak' bird, which eagerly awaits the celestial water to quench its thirst. Additionally, the extract is noteworthy following its mythological and symbolic significance, as the imagery of "a sleeping jungle" and "a koel" is significant, suggesting Das's loveless and gloomy life, which eventually engrosses her with the sweet music of the koel, i.e., Ghanashyam. Like Das's other devotional poems, this poem is remarkable, underscoring her shift from

sensuality to spirituality and surrendering to Lord Krishna as her devout partner. In this context, M. L. Sharma notes that:

“throughout the checkered career of her loves and lusts, it is Lord Krishna who has been her true paramour and her quest is always single-minded; directed towards Him.” (Burns & W. Jeffrey, 17)

Further, the imagery of “fisherman” and “enchanted fish” portrayed in the concluding lines of the poem carries a significant message, conveying its mythopoeic and metaphorical significance:

“Shyam
O Ghanshyam
You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows
Of my mind
And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like enchanted fish...” (Selected Poems)

The representation of the “fisherman” and the “enchanted fish” is marvelous, implying Kamala Das’s hidden desire. Das, identifying herself as a fish and Lord Krishna as a fisherman, craves His control over her emotions and thoughts, seeking refuge in “the net of His spiritual love.” She is convinced that a woman receives real love from God, a perfect fisherman, i.e., an eternal lover. Lord Krishna, she states, is universal and casts His net in the depths of her mind as her thoughts rush towards Him like a fish, quickly getting trapped or entangled in His net. Hence, the poem emphasizes Das’s spiritual longing, one of her poetry’s dominant themes. Admiring her feminine sensibility and her pursuit of a mythic character, Niranjana Mohanty observes that:

“Das tries to reveal her personality genuinely feminine – through her poetry. But the personality is likely to be influenced and shaped by the forces the deposits of culture lie sedimented in her personality and hence she tries to rise to a height of mystical union with the invisible lover Lord Krishna. Such a willing acceptance of the ideal transcendental lover Lord Krishna is no doubt the result of the impact of the oriental vision of transcendentalism and mysticism. This is perhaps, one of the many avenues of life which help overcome the problems of life.” (Mohanty, 52)

Notably, many of Kamala Das’s poems, irrespective of their confessional mode, with a focus on her candid exploration of personal experiences, predominantly represent the anguish of the modern common woman in a male-dominant society. Her genuine depiction of iconic figures, Radha-Krishna, shows her awakened feminine sensibility, simplicity, and yearning for soulful love. She reveals certain attributes to Lord Krishna upon realizing His overwhelming and transcendent quality, as depicted in her poem, “**A Phantom Lotus**”:

“... I
seek but another way to know
Him who has no more a body
To offer, and whose blue face is
A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams ...”
(Selected Poems)

Like Das’s other poems addressing the Radha-Krishna myth, the present poem is remarkable for its underlying message, manifesting “phantom lotus” as a representation of Radha’s passionate desire for Lord Krishna. Das, like Radha, desperately searches for her ideal love that is unattainable. Hence, the imagery of the “phantom lotus,” which is noteworthy from a mythological and metaphorical perspective, emphasizes the speaker’s yearning for spiritual fulfillment. Notably, Lord Krishna’s blue or dark blue complexion, in Indian mythology, is linked with the lotus flower; therefore, the imagery of “blue face” can be interpreted as a reference to a mystical love for Lord Krishna. Further, the utilization of dream imagery conveyed through the phrase “waters of my dream” signifies a longing for love that is not reciprocated because it is confined to dreamland. Analyzing Kamala Das’s use of the Radha-Krishna myth, P.K.J. Kurup states that:

“By seeking solace in the Radha-Krishna myth, Kamala Das builds up a mythic pattern within her own predicament and achieves a double purpose: one, she associates the myth with experiences of loss and longing to represent her own quest for ideal love and its failure and two, she uses it as a symbol for the soul’s desire to merge with the Godhead. On another level, the soul’s readiness to abandon all social consideration for the sake of God justifies her breaking of social ties through adultery.” (Kurup, 111)

After getting out of the cage of carnal love, Kamala Das adores Radha-Krishna’s eternal bond, as illustrated in her myth-inspired poem, **“Radha-Krishna”**:

“This becomes from this hour
Over river and this old Kadamba
Tree, ours alone for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure physically...”
(Summer in Calcutta, 37)

The poem, devoid of tension or distress, is one of Kamala Das’s remarkable poems, depicting a tranquil moment of creation. It adopts an unambiguous or uncomplicated form, representing the essence of the experience it expresses. The poem is embellished with vivid mythological imagery of the “river” and the well-known “old Kadamba tree,” revered in Lord Krishna’s context, portraying Radha-Krishna’s conversation. It contrasts with Das’s sense of monotony and depicts the other side of peace and freedom. Further, the “homeless” soul, which has been compared to a bat, symbolizes her longing for divine love, finding a sense of solace and belongingness in the Radha-Krishna myth, mainly in the imagery of the “Kadamba tree.” This analogy heightens the poem’s impact, as the bat can only see well in the darkness. Similarly, Das’s insight is diminished in the flashing light of awareness, suggesting that she can only achieve her goal in the darkness of death. In short, Kamala Das believes that the soul needs purity and nobility because it forgets its way in the material world. As carnal desire ruins her life, she yearns to get spiritual fulfillment and fill her heart with Lord Krishna’s eternal love. A. N. Dwivedi, discussing Das’s quest for genuine love, remarks about her mythological framework:

“This mythical framework is identified with the Radha-Krishna syndrome, or occasionally with the Mira Bai-Krishna relationship. It is this framework that saves her, in some degree, from the charges of obscenity and promiscuity...”

The Radha-Krishna syndrome is witnessed in all her poetical collections.” (Dwivedi, 36-37)

To sum up, Kamala Das’s embrace of “divine adultery” is disapproved of or rejected by society. However, her myth-ridden poems dealing with the Radha-Krishna motif led to her self-exploration, self-submission, and spiritual fulfillment. The Blue God’s allure, she believes, is unceasing. This truth underpins everything else, rendering mere speculation invalid in matters of faith. It is justifiable to highlight that Das’s poetic journey signifies her progression from the material world to a search for spiritual fulfillment and self-discovery. Her utilization of mythical imagery, coupled with Radha-Krishna’s divine love, creates a consequential and emotional impact by allowing her to dig into complex themes of female identity, social norms, the quest for love, and self-expression. During her prolonged spiritual journey, she underwent the “Bhogi to Yogi” process—a significant personal growth from seeking pleasure to pursue spiritual enlightenment, ultimately achieving recognition in Indo-Anglian literature for her honest and experiential writing.

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