

Kamala Das: Life, Love, Letters

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Abstract: The poetry of kamala das broadens our understanding of life, especially that of a woman's inner experience. She is more a poet, a feminist and a confessional than any other poets of her times. The current paper deals with the endeavor of a woman to feel better and gain understanding of life, love and letters...particularly through different roles and experience. It is undeniable that all the works of Kamala Das have trudge of theme to identify as feminine among the male society with liberated spirit. The twinge and frustration of love, from her various intensely personal and deviously physical angles, is the core behind the linguistic and discourse analysis of her poem in reference.

Keynotes: Kamala Das, feminist, confessional, linguistics and discourse

Introduction: 'The Substitute'

Substitute is the third poem included in the second poetical volume 'The Descendant' by Kamala Das. The poet has treated the theme of dual loyalties in *Substitute* with a difference. She wants to forget her painful past and yearns to remain uninvolved with bitter lingering memories. The opening lines are in the form of an address made to 'Memory'. The poet assumes that her memory is like a sea. It is vast and restless just as the sea is. The tides of the sea can be compared to the lingering memories of the past which keep coming and never seem to stop coming. The 'Great moody sea' of disturbing state of psyche might be caused when the memories are unpleasant – varying states of ebb and tide representing varying states of mind.

The poet has lie undisturbed as one sleeps in tomb. The poet's tomb, however, is not of stone but of the 'night'. The poet wished that night could fall around her and its darkness envelope her completely. This idea is suggested through the lines- Dear night, be my tomb.

The poet finds it hard to believe that she has suffered only losses and has gained nothing in return. She broods and concludes that she has lost even what she never had. Her future seems to have no pleasant surprises in store for her. Her life has become monotonous. She can think of nothing better than the

sequence of 'Love, black mail and sorrow'. The poet thus associated love not with joy and happiness but with blackmail and sorrow. This shows her bitter experiences about love. Yet, the poet assures. Herself that 'it will be all right' if she learns to follow certain ways of life she was unfamiliar with till now. She has to practice phony way like clowns to make things easier. The bitter ironic consolation she extends for herself is evident from... 'paint my mouth like a clown's. The need to conform to the conventions of a hypocritical society makes one's feeling of loneliness more torturous. The poet needs to mix with society, she writes ... will be all right if I join clubs And flirt a little over telephone. The poet is blackly realistic and instead of succumbing to the pressure of painful memories, she positively affirms that ... I am the type that endures . . .

The next few lines seem to pinpoint the course of the poet's suffering. She has been continuously pondering over her plans and ideas which are necessary to set things right. But then, suddenly a reference is made to the past and the poet alludes... It will be all right if I don't remember the last of the days together . . . The poet, though, has attempted to shed her memories of the past, some moment seem to cling on to her mind and these were the haunting memories of 'the last of the days' spent together with somebody. Their meetings started culminating in rows and quarrels. The pursuit of love had become merely mechanical and suggested discord.

The poet shares a desire for security and intimacy. Hearing that he lover is not emotionally attached to her but estimates their relationship to be only a 'physical thing', the poet disowns him, 'End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free'. A passive stance of un involvement and shrinking away from the pressure of painful memories given the poem its cherished beauty - After that, Love become a swivel-door When one went out, another came in.

The process of selection and rejection as seen in the poem is vital for the poet's existence. The conflict is expressed through - All I remember is the first beautiful fact All I want to forget is that beautiful fact.

The poet further reassures herself that...It will be all right if I don't remember The last of the days together...She finds a solution to her problems by forgetting her painful experience and assuring herself that ...:It will be all right, it will be all right It will be all right between the world and me.

The stanza length remains uniform in the first three stanzas. Each of the first three stanzas is of 4 lines. The fourth stanza is shorter, only of 2 lines and again the lines in the fifth increase to 4. The largest stanza contains 6 lines. The only constant feature is the repetition of the couplets ... It will be all right, it will me all right...It will be all right between the world and me....and It will be all right if I don't remember The last of the days together. . .

The ellipses indicate the silence after a pause and also pinpoint the poet's suffering. The repetition of the phrase followed by ellipses suggests here both the pains and joys of living the last of the days together. This is perhaps the most expressive device for communicating the real sense of suffering.

Before the occurrence of the phrase in stanza 7, the poet suggests various alternatives to make things better between herself and the world. She assures herself through the above lines while she weighs the pros and cons of the solution. The final couplet is again a reassurance and an ultimate decision regarding her problem. There is no congruence between line, sentence and stanza. The largest stanza constitutes 6 lines while the smaller ones are of 2 each. The sentence length also varies greatly. The maximum number of words in a sentence is 20 and the minimum is 7. The average sentence length is 13.65 words per sentence.

There is end line punctuation in 18 out of 56 lines. Here is mid-line punctuation in 8 and both mid-line and end-line in 9 lines. One line is incomplete at the end marked with 3 dots and the following line too has no formal beginning as if recreating the scenes of the past days, poet is missing the link somewhere. The midline punctuation and gap suggest abruptness of thought and perhaps gaps on her memory.

The word length measured in terms of syllables shows the distribution of monosyllabic, disyllabic, trisyllabic, tetrasyllabic and pentasyllabic words. There is preponderance of monosyllabic words as is evident from the table given below. This shows the poet's skill to communicate through monosyllabic words, as well as indicate her condensed style, bereft of all figurativeness and flourish, the poignancy and sincerity of feeling is conveyed by the dominant use of monosyllabic words.

The lectionary agent i.e., the speaker is the poet herself. She addresses the great sea of her 'Memory' she qualifies it as 'moody sea'. Just as sea is everyday story and swelling at others, resembling her own state— pleasant and unpleasant memories alternate to produce this turmoil in her mind. The staccato

rhythm of the phrase- it will be all right... with its stressed syllables conveys the sense of a conviction painfully reached. Sensitivity has made her abnormal and do's and don'ts of her psyche and the social expectations are at variance.

The poet, in order to overcome her problem, suggests that. It will all right when I learn to paint my mouth like a clown's... Stand near my husband to make a proud pair...It will be all right if I join clubs And flirt a little over telephone. It will be all right, it will be all right I am the type that endures. .. The syntax of the lines above contains parallel structures with several co-selections of syntax and lexis as well as different lexis at the end of similar structures. This arm of redundant and superfluous expression conveys the nature of her obsession. She gets stuck with the some mode while numerous others are available in the language and the lexical variation and emphasizes only the limited choice that is available to her. The poet's need to express herself superabundantly on matters which affect her deeply gets reflected in these parallel structures.

Kamala Das revealed her tendency to discount the use of many words and rely on just one word or phrase for the maximum effect. The habit of diving away with words is also manifested in her use of ellipses. For instance in stanza 8 and 9 there are ellipses in the end and in the beginning of the line respectively. The ellipses indicate silence after a pause, and becomes a linguistic means of conveying the poet's suffering as something that transcends words... It will be all right if I don't remember The last of the days together ...Over market-square the poor crows...With raucous cries flailed the skyThe ellipses suggest here both the pains and joys of loving the last of the days spent together with the lover.

The personal pronoun 'I', 'me', 'my' repeated till the stanza 8 indicate her preoccupation with her problem. She is also thinking about a third person, apart from her 'Memory' and herself-pronoun 'our' indicates the presence of that person in her thought. The gender of the third person however remains unknown till we come across the linguistic clue 'him'. It further throws light on the poet's involvement with a male. This person is not necessarily her husband and there the poet uses 'him' instead of 'husband' as she had done earlier. Their relationship evidently has no tint of emotional involvement

At the lover's side this is illustrated in the lines ... It is physical thing, he said suddenly. The poet is lost in the memories of those last days spent together with her lover and those moments were perhaps the most exciting and lively. The emotions of both hate and love are seen to be expressed at different phases of the poets' and her lover's relationship. This can be conveniently concluded from ... Our bodies after love-making ... Turned away, rejecting...Our words began to sound ... Like clatter of swords in fight. Their rejection of one another is illustrated as opposed to the expression of love and emotional entanglement expressed in the lines ... We kissed and we loved, all in a furyFor another short hour or two ... We went all warm and wild and lovely .

The poet, from stanza 13 onwards has nothing particular to say about any of the persons she got involved with. Through she stresses that she had numerous love affairs, evident through ... 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... Yet, she is unable to wipe off from her mind the memories of her first and only love ... All I remember is the first beautiful face ... All I want to forget is that beautiful face.

The poet once again takes a firm decision to set things right between her and the 'world'. This can be gathered from the repetition of the couplet in the penultimate stanza of the poem ... It will be all right if I don't remember...The last of the days together...And finally in the ultimate stanza, the poet draws assurance once again that... It will be all right, it will be all right It will be all right between the world and me. 'World' here obviously cannot be taken as of geographical existence. This word implies to the world – the planet, the human race, the society and especially the people whom the poet is concerned with. The whole 'world' cannot be the cause of poet's disturbance as it is too great and poet is only a single individual among the billions. However, this might explain the poet's feeling of loneliness and solitude which she expresses by keeping her self on one side and the whole 'world' on another.

The poem thus unfolds slowly the cause of the poet's restlessness and her frustration. In the first 7 stanzas the poet considers the do's and stanza 8 there are self suggested don'ts. She once again revives in the sea of her memories the last of the days together. Positive and negative markers suggest means of compromising with the world when finally her major problem gains recognition in stanza 15 – the poet is unable to forget 'that beautiful fact'. She once again reaffirms her confidence in... It will be all right if

I don't remember...The last of the days together...One again she is convinced that ...It will be all right between the world and me.

The poem has a prominent confessional tone. The pronoun 'I' has been used 14 times, 'my' 6 times 'me' 3 times. Moreover, the poet relates and evaluates her personal experience using 'our', 'we' and 'I'. She is chiefly engrossed in evaluating and trying to do something so very 'right' so that all her problems cease to frighten and disturb her. The variation of pattern of stanza length might help to resolve the poet's state of mind. The pattern has uniform points. But only at one point the crest is suddenly raised. This perhaps indicates that while weighing certain options, the poet is suddenly disturbed overcoming the disturbance caused she once again reaffirms her decision and her regained confidence in her ways and plans.

The poet, it seems, is endowed with abundance of feelings. The intensity of passion animates her diction though by the same token, she sometime repeats a word or a phrase twice or thrice. A few examples from the poem may provide a clearer insight ... It will be all right, it will be all right...It will be all right between the world and me... (2 times) It will be all right...(7 times) ... I only lost, Lost all, lost even What I never had. ('lost' repeated 3 times) that I loved, and was much loved... 'loved' repeated 2 times...End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free. ... ('substitute' repeated 2 times) Then I lost count, for always in my arms Was a substitute for a substitute. ('substitute' repeated 2 times)

A close scrutiny of the diction of the poem reveals yet some more facts about the tone of the poem. The utter disgust of the poet is obvious in the very tone of the lines which finally culminate in the word 'endures' It also refers back to the poet's continuous suffering and portrays her simultaneously as one who will outlive all her pains and complexities. The poet's bid to forget all is expressed by the single counter 'oh' and her rejection of the lot by the words 'nameless' and 'faceless'. The words transmit her sense of fatigue and exhaustion as also the futility of remembering them.

The abrupt instruction of the image of crows over the market square - 'flailing the sky with raucous cries' breaks the spell of the refrain 'it will be all right'. The flailing crows mark the end of the day when all birds return to roost. The market square is often the busiest spot of the locality and more so the

meeting place of familiar faced. The noise and disturbance from outside does not affect the lovers. They seem to take little notice of this and it is 'after love-making' that they realize each other's dejection.

It is interesting to note how the poet has used deviant phrases and words in her poem. The unusual collections can be grouped as follows:

Norm	Deviant
Great – Blue sea, Caribbean sea, Red sea, Against my knee, My shoulder, My heart Be my love, Be my wife, Be my companion Two hours, three hours freedom was our Only dream, Freedom was our Only wish	Great moody sea Against my Shore, Be my tomb. Short hour Freedom was Our last Strange toy

Conclusion:

Kamala Das used various word classes sufficiently well to produce the desired tone and feeling of conflict and confusion. There are more verbs than nouns and this can be well judged as yearning for more action than objects of desire. This in a way illustrates that the poet believes in both the categories – minus and plus, however do not vary largely in number. Thus the poet is indecisive, rather indifferent towards assessment of issues involved. She is deeply concerned only with setting things 'right' between herself and the world. All these form an assortment of lively juxtapositions, each of which can be interpreted fairly easily. These unusual patterns are sufficiently poetic to blend in with the powerful

emotions that Kamala Das, is trying to present before the reader as she deals with the conflict between submissiveness and rebellion against the male-oriented universe.

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