

CHAPTER TWO

Nature : A Recurrent Symbol

Nature in India is infinitely rich and varied in its beauty and appeal. India's climate makes its inhabitants warmly passionate and delicately sensuous. No wonder passionate intensity of feelings and delicate sensuousness are the hallmarks of Kamala Das's poetry in which nature figures insistently as both background and subject matter.

Crowned with the lofty mountain range of the Himalayas, India stands mighty, proud, in her regal beauty. The Vindhya, Satkura, the Western Ghat and the Eastern Ghat Hills add voluptuous touches to her beauty. Mighty rivers like the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, the Sindhu, the Godavari, the Krishna, etc. form her far-stretched green plains of emerald. There are thousand other smaller rivers and streams which glisten like ornaments in different parts of her body. The Deccan Plateau and the Thor - desert beyond Araballi Hills add new touches of beauty. Mighty Indian forests dress up her beautiful limbs. On all three sides, India is guarded by the blue Arabian sea, the mighty Indian Ocean and the stormy Bay of Bengal. One can only imagine but can never fully realise how such a geographical setting can enrich the seasons and their cycles in this terrain.

Flora and fauna of the different parts of India are gorgeously rich in varieties and colours. In all seasons Indian climes are heavy with the fragrance of sweet flowers. In the flowering seasons mighty plains, plateaus and hills of India are awash with colours. There are innumerable kinds of song birds singing in the court of Indian nature with different mellifluous tunes. The Indian sky displays an infinite range of moods and colours. This India is the inspiration for Kamala Das's nature poetry.

Kamala Das's response to the beauty of nature is typically Indian. Sorojini Naidu was largely care-ridden and anxious in her nature portrayals. But Das is

primarily carefree and spontaneous as evidenced by the pieces like "*Jaisurya*", "*The Ancient Mango Tree*", "*Rain*", "*The Blind Walk*", "*Old Cattle*", "*Of Calcutta*", etc.

In her poems Kamala Das expresses almost a Romantic feeling for nature in its Indian setting. Indian trees, flowers, fruits, gardens, fields, forests, hills, rivers even birds like crows, koels, pigeons, animals like elephants, horses, dogs, cows, cats, cattle, monkeys, turtles, mice, snakes, lizards and worms and insects like fireflies, scorpions (in "*Faded Epaulet on His shoulder*"), fat worms ("*Jaisurya*"), Maggots, white ants, toads (Stool), spiders, kraits, goose etc - all these come alive in Das's poetry with all their glistening colours and bewildering variety.

Das feels nature and nature is embodied in her self. Sometimes she loses herself in the midst of nature. She feels nature in the depth of her physical, mental, and spiritual being. Pregnant Das in her labour pains easily becomes the rain - soaked earth about to mother myriads of life :

For a while I too was earth
In me the seed was silent, waiting as
A baby does, for the womb's quite expulsion.
(*"Jaisurya"*, *The Descendants*, p.27).

Right from her girlhood, she feels her spirit embodied in nature. In this respect, she resembles Tagore who felt the pattering rains of Ashar on his senses, consciousness and being, spread out on the emerald of the rain-soaked field. When she loses her identity in nature, she approximates to the primitive; woman in her primordial character stands close to the earth. They are mothers, delighting in creating, making light of the attendant pains. Das's sense of oneness with nature borders on pantheism. She feels a sort of kinship with the rough - barked trees in the yard of their house. Standing knee-deep in mud, she feels ecstatic when she intuitively perceives her kinship with the ground around Nalapat House. Groaning in labour pains, she feels her closeness to mother

earth. Her feeling for the sea is quite deep and intimate. In a moment of depression, she treats the sea as her confidante :

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead, just dead.

("The Suicide", Collected Poems, Vol-I, p.72).

India is rich in colour and fragrance. India's hills and plains reverberate with the songs of birds and insects. In her basket Kamala Das has collected a good many flowers with which she is intimately acquainted. They are, the 'white and purple Bougainvillea' (*"Honour", Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 47*), the 'flowering shrubs', (*"Wood Ash", Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 49*) 'Lotuses and waterlilies', (*"Honour" , Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 47*) 'rose', 'parijat', 'gulmohor', etc. Indian seasons often touch the human senses and spirit with a very delicate sensuousness. Their seductive charm is hard to resist. But at the same time the seasons are quite capable of assuming a terrifying aspect. The hurricane speed of the storm is simply overwhelming. The sea beats upon the shore with a demon's frenzy. The summer in many parts of India proves a cruel tyrant. The flood and drought recur regularly. The swirl of dust engulfing the horizon in its mighty sweep proves a challenging experience in the arid plains and desert - stretches of India. Das observes and draws nature in all her moods. She experiences the devastating power of summer :

Summer's catchword was always,
always destruction; and this
year's, wrapping us like some
prickly mantle cried kill, kill
all that was". (*"Summer 1980", Collected Poems,
Vol. 1, p. 79.*)

Summer often denotes drought and destruction of life. It also comes richly

dressed up in scenic beauty. Summer colours the flowering shrubs with red, yellow etc. Gulmohors and Krishnachuras brighten the plains and the roadside views. Kamala Das's senses feasted on these riotous colours of summer landscapes in India. In *My Story* she describes. "I got married in the month of February. The mango trees were in brown bloom and the blue bees flew about humming in the sun. All the flowering trees were in bloom including the ancient Nirmatala which perfumed even the inner rooms with its spring". (*My Story*, p.76).

She has reasons enough to feel her oneness with nature. For : "During that summer while the gulmohurs burnt the edges of sky, he dressed my hair with scented white flowers plucking them from beneath my window". (*My Story*, p.102.).

The same sense of intimacy with nature finds expression in the poem *Nani* where she says that,

Before the summer's end
The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway
And the walls" (*"Nani"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1 p. 18.).

Sometimes Kamala Das universalises her senses so that they may assume the traits of nature herself. She projects herself into nature. She becomes a part of nature. She becomes the monsoon cloud heavy with mellow sympathy and ready to drench the thirsty, drought - stricken earth :

When every night my littlest child wakes and
Limpets to my side, I am heavy with unshed tears,
I am the grey black monsoon sky
Just before the rain. (*"The Time of Drought"*, *Collected Poems*,
Vol. I, p. 98.).

In *My Story* she describes the nature of rain in Bengal so as to humanize it :

In Bengal, the rain falls suddenly, with no warning, like the hysterical tears of a woman who herself does not know why she must suddenly burst into tears. (*My Story*, p. 64.)

In *Jaisurya*, she draws the picture of the Rainy season like a true naturalist. Truth is explored almost with the zeal of a scientist. She is not daunted by any unpleasantness in the process. The rainsoaked earth swollen with teeming life inside her dark womb matches well the image of a pregnant woman about to give birth to a child. The point of comparison as well as the things compared is stated with the candidness of a scientific observer :

It was again the time of rain and on
Every weeping tree, the lush moss spread like
Eczema, and from beneath the swashy
Earth the fat worms surfaced to explode
Under rain. ("*Jaisurya*", *The Descendants*, p. 27).

Here rather the emphasis is on the unpleasant aspect of the rainy season. Earthworms, insects, mushrooms start covering the beautiful face of nature as do rashes a human face.

In "*Another Birthday*" we have a penpicture of the fallen leaves and Autumn in its senescence :

Autumn has a loosened grip. Why hope to retain
The leaves that fall, to yellow on the ground and brown,
Or the ovate, velvet graces of the spring ? ("*Another Birthday*",
Collected Poems, Vol. 1 p. 42.)

Thus it appears that Kamala Das's canvas is much wider and her brush much bolder. Nature in all her elements and with all her furies and fineness lies sprawling across her works. She is sensitive to anything and everything in nature. From the minutest touch of a stone to the blinding flash of lightning, nothing escapes her notice.

In most of her poems, the dark natural settings easily become the symbols for her dark inner landscape such as 'coiling snakes' in "*The Freaks*", (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 11*) 'Sleek Crow', 'Carnivorous Plants' in "*In Love*". (*Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 76*). Nature for Kamala Das as for Sylvia Plath becomes ultimately a projection of her inner world. She follows the

Romantic practice of using the external world to body forth her values and visions. The sea was for her the one element in which she discovered the deepest reflection of her own melancholy and sense of isolation. The sea, the moon, the sun, water are the recurring symbols in her poems.

Kamala Das finds the reflection of her mind in the sky. Quite often she used to look at the sky. The sky changes its colour. Mercurial human feelings and moods have their counterparts in the everchanging views of the sky. In a bit of strained and extended figure of speech, Das seeks to find in the burning face of the sun a reflection of her beloved's lust for her. With the progress of the day and its final relapse into the night, both the lust and the sky change their hue and character :

Of what does the burning mouth
of sun, burning in today's
sky remind me ... oh, yes, his
Mouth, and his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust.
(*"In Love" Collected Poems, Vol. 1. p.76*).

If she humanizes nature, she also naturalizes man. Sometimes she approaches Nature like other modern poets to intellectualize her. In *The Suicide* she explores the sea with all the raw feel of a diver and explains it with the precision of an oceanographer :

While I enter deeper
With joy, I discover
The sea's hostile cold
Is after all skin deep.
The sea's inner chambers
are all very warm.
There must be a sun slumbering
At the vortex of the sea. (*"The Suicide" The Descendants, p.2*).

She also shows an inclination for the grotesque. The moonless night grows ominous with the cry of 'Bol Hari Bol' by the corpse bearers. The strange forlornness of her mind gets deepened by the forlornness of the night's sky echoing with the cry of hori-bol. Here it is the morbidity that lends a tang to her feelings.

Nature is frequently used by the Indians as a bouquet of sweetness. They love to decorate their persons and abodes with flowers or their fragrance. Girls use flowers to decorate their plaits. Indian rituals and worships make an abundant use of flowers. For flowers grow profusely all over India all the year round. Flowers embellish Indian life and literature in many ways. Kamala Das's poetry betrays her passion for flowers. She says in "*A Faded Epaulet on his Shoulder*" that :

I wore again
and again the parijat in my hair and rubbed
sandalwood on my breasts'.

(*"A Faded Epaulet on his shoulder"* **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p. 103).

Flowers often take on a symbolic significance. Our tenderest emotions are akin to flowers. A lover, for instance, may indicate the offer of her heart through a rose bud. A flower in the button-hole or on the locks denotes the mute affection coy enough not to speak otherwise. In Kamala Das's poem flowers function as the language of her heart and feelings:

Next morning from the young man, there was gift of roses which came in many hues, including two of a pale heliotrope which I fondled for a long while. The roses remained on my window-sill for three days. I wanted to see the man and thank him for the happiness his flowers had given me, but he did not appear again. (*My Story*, p.180.).