

Kaleidoscopic Images: A Source of Self-revelation in Kamala Das' Poems

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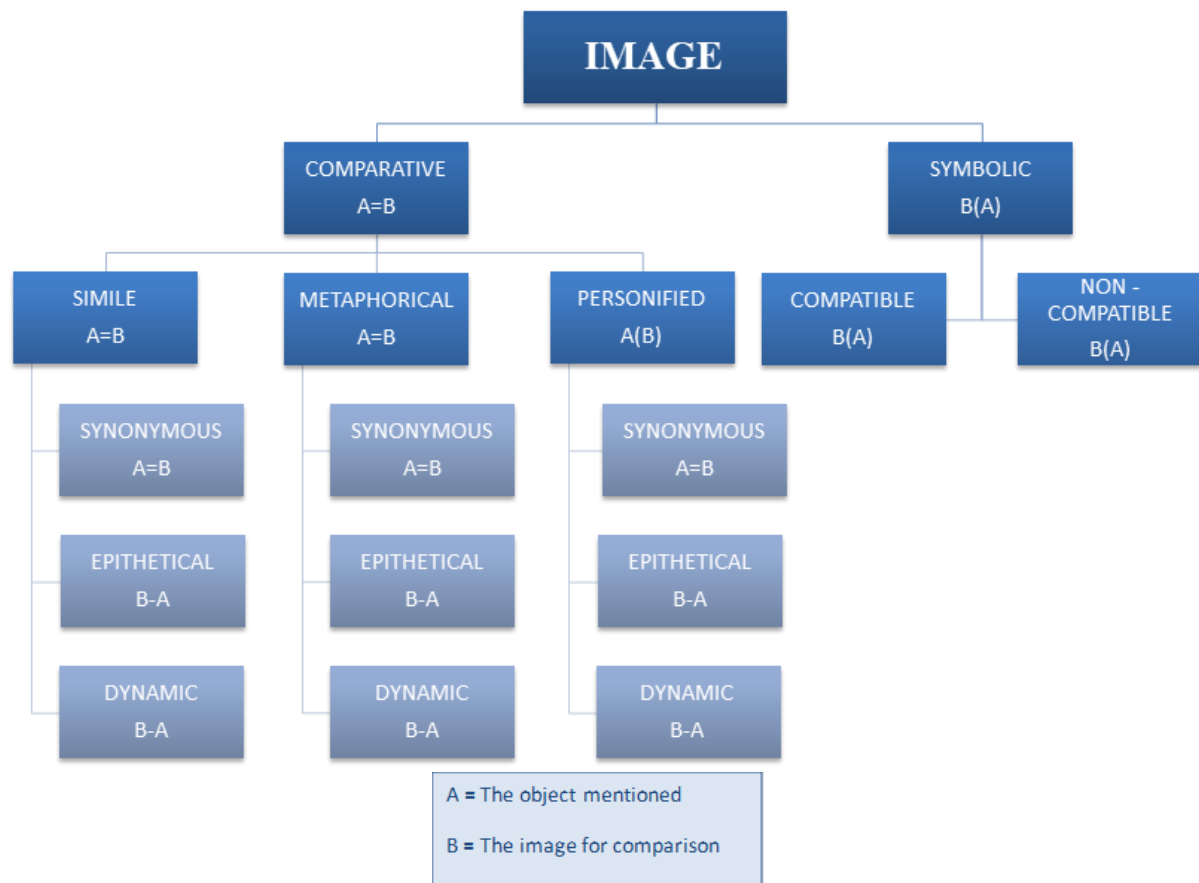
Abstract

As Wordsworth opines, “poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...”, it is quite conspicuous that our overwhelming state with umpteen psycho-synthetic shades dipped in poetic calibre, results in literary creation. In order to verbalize the notions and ideas, we have to fumble the appropriate words which may manifest the thoughts hidden in our mind. But often the words remain incapable to express the essence of the meaning which we desire to exhibit. If we aim to describe an emotion like ‘sorrow’, we deal only with its external consequences like dryness of skin, pale face, tears etc. while particular words cannot pour out the intensity of sadness in real sense. This incompetency of words leads us to create the images so that there may be not only the elaboration of the referential meaning but also the delineation of far deeper sense. In this reference, the poetry of Kamala Das, a potent new voice of postmodern era, can be scrutinized with its best outcome. She is particularly known for her fiery and frank notions with transparency in her poems and her self-revelation appears to be one of the main weapons in her poetic arsenal.

Keywords – Kamala Das, images, symbols, emotions, feminine exploitation, sterility, lust, self- revelation

De facto, the human mind is a collation of microcosm and macrocosm simultaneously and remains finding a harmony between the two. The things of internal world are not concrete and are therefore unable to be expressed in words. The human intellect with poetic talent unconsciously imbibes this harmony and whatever we try to express our feelings, becomes the language of our emotions. Therefore, the poet is interested in imposing the images in his work because they are sufficient to evince his experiences which he has undergone in his life. Now the fact is that the poetic talent blesses human beings with the capacity to relish the realistic reflections but it finds its culmination in the imaginative world where it can be evolved naturally. One can never represent the real thing as it is. The creation of an artist is three times away from reality because his mind is not a photo camera but it is a synthesizer of his feelings and emotions. In the process of creation, some deviations are essential and natural just to enrich the literary work with the poetic essence and aestheticism. Thus, an image is a synthesis of objective reality and subjective disposition, temperament or emotions. However, images can be classified into two categories-comparative and symbolic. In the first one, a comparison is manifested between the two objects of different kinds which have at least one point in common. It is noticeable here that one image remains present while the juxtaposing image is always non-present. Comparative image can be subdivided into three forms- simile, metaphor and personified images. In simile, two images are compared on the basis of their quality. It is a transparent image because both images are referred to equally. In metaphorical image, one image is overlapped by another image but those comparative images are treated as one and the same because of the absence of comparison words. Personified images are like allegories. But the allegory throws light on the behaviour of natural objects while in personification lifeless objects and abstract ideas are thought of as persons having life. In such images, we have to recognise the sense through their human actions that remains latent. Each of the three images can be related to the synonymous epithetical and dynamic facets. Synonymous images seem to equalise the different images. Epithetical images are based on adjectives and the dynamic images can be referred to as verb-based images that possess kinetic quality. When the poet begins to represent the images with symbolic interpretations, we can classify the second part of image - symbolic image. In it, the poet describes the non-present object without any indication of the present

image. For example, Shakespeare elaborates the ‘storm scene’ instead of manifesting the mental tensions of King Lear. Thus, the storm becomes the symbol of the mental dilemma of Lear. Actually, the poet does not pay attention to the basic image and in place of it, only symbolic images emerge. It can be introduced by the poet consciously and sometimes unconsciously, and unconscious images prove more interesting and important than conscious images. Symbolic images may be the result of physical as well as mental tensions. It has two kinds- compatible and incompatible. In a compatible image, the symbol is so appropriate and exact that it becomes clear to find out real meaning while an incompatible image does not seem to be so befitting. This can be comprehended through this diagram aptly-



Thus, assimilation and simulation of emotions are the desired result of a poet and the images are the robust link for transmuting the emotions. In the best pieces of literature, we can find the network of umpteen images which endeavour to express the convictions and sentiments of the poet in toto. Kamala Das is an iconoclast as well as an innovator of an honest-to-goodness articulation to feminine sensibility in all its diverse demonstrations. She universalises the personal. Ab initio, her bitter experiences of the life prove to be the best teacher for ripening and maturing for literary calibre. They become the sources of stimuli in being perceiver, feeler and thinker. Dexterously, she converts the emotions into complex images and ideas in her artistic creations intending to pour out the authentic flavour of feelings and experience. If we go through her works, and analyse them, we find that she is least interested in carnal comforts of this ego-centred, desire prompted and lust seeking world of patriarchy. Her habit of self-analysis breaks the shackles of feminine hesitation, awe and veneration. Consequently, her feelings, emotions, personal experiences, emerging thoughts as well as naked affliction are beautifully clad in affluent poetic robe with the assistance of umpteen appropriate images. She has used the images of corpus, burial, cremation, natural phenomena and many others in order to highlight unfulfilled love, lusts, agony, rebel, futility, inner vacuity, melancholy and even death wish. K. R. S. Iyengar aptly comments- “The images are icy, stony, steely, dark- “settle time like a paper weight” or “dies with metallic sighs” or “the night, dark cloaked like a procuress” and are meant perhaps to insulate the true self from the surface life”. (677). In order to convey her convictions in toto, Kamala Das manifests her spontaneous gush of emotions on the screen of images in almost every poem. In her ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’, we can discern easily the tattered existence of her own personality through various symbols and images. Dancing eunuchs can be witnessed commonly in

India but in the poem, each and every word appears to reflect utter chaos, sterility, inner rottenness and vacuity. In the very beginning, she conjures up the atmosphere of dried, tortured, barren and bizarre inner world which is the utmost effect of summer heat-

“It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling...Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They danced, oh, they danced till they bled...” (7)

Their enthusiastic dance even in so ‘hot’ atmosphere denotes contradictory images which deepen the sense of the theme. Then, she refers to the epithetical image, ‘fiery gulmohar’ in which object occupies its adjective and dexterously reveals the intensity of scorching heat which cannot be lessened even by the ‘Jasmine in their hair’. The repetition of the words ‘they danced’ possesses the dynamic image which juxtaposes the acuteness of inner neutrality and trauma with this ecstatic movements of dance. Such imagery seems enough to reveal all the depressions, deep-rooted woe, nothingness of life and inexpressible feelings of eunuchs who belong to neither gender and thus endure a peculiar irony of fate. The epithetical image of ‘sorry breasts’ again indicates the infertility and futility of the eunuchs because their being will always be incomplete and their emotions will never be fulfilled throughout the life. Such undercurrent of pathos conspicuously appears in the theme of their melancholy songs of ‘lovers dying and of children left unborn’. Again, through the epithetical image of ‘vacant ecstasy’, she convincingly highlights that joyless state of their hearts because the apparent jovial, rhythmical actions are mere ‘convulsions’, not passionate dancing movement. The comparative image of ‘half-burnt logs from funeral pyres’ can portray the wretched and poignant picture of eunuchs at its apex. The symbolic image of funeral pyre and cremation ground also reveal the attenuation of real love and incompleteness of longings perfectly.

“They
Were thin in limbs and dry, life half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and rottenness
Were in each of them.” (7)

A common conception of inadequacy, asepticism and jejuneness prevails with the continuous images of “dust in attics and the urine of lizards and mice.” (7) Now if we analyse minutely, we can peep out that whole description of dancing eunuchs symbolises the innermost anguish and unquenched penchant of the poetess to be wooed with real passion. Das finds objective correlative in their grotesque dance as she has herself experienced the gulf between turbulence of amorous ‘drought and rottenness’ and the tortures during intercourse. De facto, her collage of accurate images in umpteen poems continues to reveal her inmost feelings of repulsion and abhorrence towards patriarchal dominance. In her opinion, if a man is easily victimised by the sense-organs, he is no better than a beast and proves to be a carcass of carnalism. Such a person cannot be expected to anticipate the emotiology and robust intellectual notions even of his life partner. Such aversion is depicted through vivid images of trepidation as well as vileness. In this way, various compatible and incompatible images disclose the deep-rooted repulsion as well as melancholy with frustrating thoughts in a sarcastic cadence. It can be discerned conspicuously through the plethora of images. She clarifies that a lover who neglects the emotional affinity of his beloved and concentrates only in erotic pleasure, possesses a ‘pock-marked face’ and is ‘filthy snob’ (The Testing of Sirens) (32); his mouth is a ‘dark-cavern where stalactites of uneven teeth gleam’ (The Freaks) (9); his lips are ‘like petals drying at the edges, the burnt cheeks and the dry grass of your hair’ (The Sea Shore) (27); he is “old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment” (The Stone Age) (78). Simultaneously, the feminine anatomy or physique is nothing but the image of sexual exploitation and harassment. The metaphorical image of

woman's heart as 'an empty cistern' (The Freaks) is appropriate to go into the depth of heart-rending inner shrieks of the poetess herself as her penchant for love, a delicate emotion, remains always in crisis. She confesses, "I was in love with a husband, who did not want love and it was a sweet torment to lie with my face buried against his feet while he slept, mine was a crushed love, a beautiful and futile emotion." (41). In another poem, 'The Sea Shore', she pours out the whole gamut of highly suggestive symbolical images profoundly in order to depict the emerging emotions in words-

"On some evening, I drive past the cremation ground
And seem to hear the crunch of bones in those Vulgar
Mouths of fire, or at times I see the smoke, in strands,
Slow stretch and rise, like serpents, satiated,
Slow, content and, the only face I remember
Then is yours..." (27)

How deftly the poetess evinces through symbolical images that the lover's face emerging through the smoke of cremation ground, resembles the lord of Death (*Yama*) who slays love in embryo. Here the fine collage of images is stunning yet commendable. The fire of funeral pyre is personified because of its 'crunch of bones in Vulgar Mouth'. Again, the smoke is compared with 'snake' because of its gaiety and appearance. In a nutshell, all these comparative images signify lust, corruption, affliction, agony and annihilation too. The poetess confesses literally that after getting married at the early age of sixteen, she underwent bitter experiences of marital life. To her, delicate feeling of love proves to be a mirage only. She remains pining for love that conquers all (*amor vincit omnia*). But such love requires the pious amalgamation of hearts and minds between the lover and the beloved. She realises if love lacks harmony of emotional integration, the relation remains 'tripping idly over puddles of desire' as is referred to in 'The Freaks'. Here she boldly admits the satiety of 'skin's hungers' as well as the lacuna of love's spiritual nourishment. The metaphoric comparative image of 'puddles of desire' suggests not only the sole concentration on lustful complacency but also the neutrality for manna of love. Both 'minds' endeavour to reach at love's culmination but due to lack of sentimental warmth and lethargy in arousing the feelings, they remain maundering. The images of 'stalactites' and 'tripping idly' clarify such meaning to a great extent. Then she compares unquenched feminine 'heart' with an 'empty cistern' that may be referred to as traditional image as to see an empty cistern was believed an ill omen enough to convert happiness into sorrow. The poet seems aware of the hypothesis that her momentary pleasure will give way to utter despondency-

"The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence." (9)

How wonderfully the personified image of 'coiling snakes of silence' for the fulfilment of heart's voidness, bespeaks dominating labyrinth from which she has no escape. All these compatible and incompatible images depict the poignant predicament of female persona adeptly. Her poems containing the confessional essence are hued with such functional images through which her emotions can be developed properly. In the poem 'In Love', the epithet 'burning' for the 'mouth' of lover denotes the sense of erotic heat as well as the burnt remnant of delicate pious desires. When she imposes the simile of 'pale and carnivorous plants' for the lustful limbs of the lover, she successfully reveals his sole motto of utilising her physique lewdly-

“... and his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust.” (11)

Although it is authentic commitment of her own carnal and mental tortures yet her conceptions generalise women's crisis of identity. Her use of abstract and concrete images thrills and compels us to comprehend the deep-rooted, unnoticed penchant of women. In 'The Looking Glass', she exposes the heinous aspect of patriarchal society through bold concrete image-

“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.” (54)

Such images of anatomy mount to the level of distortion in expression and inspire the readers to read between the lines and to fumble her sense and intention. We can recapitulate that the shrill cry of her innermost conscience gets sarcastic tone with melancholy and frustrating thoughts and is uttered with the assistance of various images. Thus, they cater to the readers with the amalgamative tastes of emotions.

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