
Quest for Self in Kamala Das' The Old Playhouse

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ABSTRACT:

Kamala Das, a well-known figure in English literature is the torch bearer of confessional women writing in India. She opened a new arena where the utmost feelings of a female- her dreams, hopes, love, lust, suffering, despair, anguish are openly expressed. Das expresses her need for love with frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context. This study is an analysis of Das' poem 'The Old Playhouse'. Quest for identity in a male dominated world is one of her recurring themes. In her poem she is struggling to find a voice in the patriarchal world. In 'The Old Playhouse', Das pictures a husband-wife relationship in which the husband creates a framework for the wife to fit in. In this poem poet gives the image of a woman who is struggling for identity and independence. This poem is an experiment in the search for love and the significance of the self. She rejects the patriarchal value system that is based on egoism, greed for power, expansionism, hero-cult, violence, war, mindless exploitation of man and nature.

Das developed a vigorous and poignant feminine confessional poetry, in which a common theme was the exploration of the man-woman relationship. In her poetry we hear the voice of the new woman defining herself and find a quest for self-identity. She openly revolts against the traditionally accepted womanhood concepts in the Indian society, which is so awkwardly full of detestable pretences and hypocrisies. She was against the norms of society which want female to fit into the traditional framework. It was with great surprise and shock that Das' poetry was received by the readers. The frankness with which she expressed her personal relationships and her disillusionment in love-life shocked the society. Her confessional mode of poetry received a lot of criticism from her family as well as from the trumpeters of conventional society.

In her poem 'An Introduction' she says about the categorizers who want her to fit into a patriarchal framework.

“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh
Belong cried the categorizers.”(63)

Quest for identity in a male dominated world is one of her recurring themes. She is struggling to find a voice in the patriarchal world. She wants to make them understand that women too have sexuality, and it is not the monopoly to be controlled by men. Women have the right to express. She was trying to break the shackles of the age-old tradition of treating women as sheer commodities. Her voice is the voice of the new liberated Indian woman, “The lives of women in India, as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid point out, exist at the interface between caste and class inequality. This is so because management and control of female

sexuality is the most important mechanism of controlling women, and maintaining and reproducing social inequality”

“The Old Play House” is characterised by an emotional intensity arising from a deep sense of betrayal, from the feeling that she has been damned to a life of imprisonment in a male-dominated world. The opening lines of the poem depict the plight of a married woman, chained to her husband’s house:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. . . (32)

How can someone feel love when they are curtailed of all their freedom? Love is not gained by controlling others. Love can be fully expressed in a tension free atmosphere. So how can someone give love and intoxicate; and restrict their freedom. Kamala Das portrays the ideal Indian household scene where male controls female in the name of love. Her husband is trying to tame her life according to his desire and in that process she loses her own self and identity. Wife is always depicted as a suppressed being, where her emotions and hopes, ambitions are surrendered at the will of her husband. The poet is not urging for sexual gratification through man but for self-realization through love. But alas! She has met only with disappointment.

It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
Lesson you gave was about yourself.(32)

The poet felt crushed. She gave herself up for her husband’s love. But what he gives in return is only knowledge about him. She performed all the duties of an obedient wife. He was pleased with her bodily responses. As she was given in marriage to a relative, when she was only a school girl, she was compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She complains about it in her poem “Of Calcutta”:

I was sent away, to protect a family’s
Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some
Abstraction, sent to another city to be
A relative’s wife. (*Collected Poems I* 56-60)

When she says that ‘you embalmed my poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices’ she acknowledges that she was happy with her husband in the beginning. But she feels fed up with the monotony and fixed pattern of her life. In her attempt to rediscover her ‘true self’, she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife. Thus she voices her protest against the male domination and the resultant humiliation:

. . . Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies . . . (*The Old Playhouse* 1)

The poet feels that her married life was reduced to a mere surrender to the male ego. The husband's monstrous ego kills all her reason and deprives her of her will and reason.

Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out.

Her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love. Instead of pure love her experience with her husband has been only one of lust. Her husband is ignorant about her feelings and is trying to imprison her in the suffocating atmosphere of the room which is lit by artificial lights. She doesn't have the freedom to feel the world outside. She is chained within the four walls. Here the husband wants to restrict his wife within the domestic sphere. But how can a caged bird sing.

The poet compares her mind to an old playhouse which is not lighted. It is full of darkness. The hot, choking atmosphere of her husband's house with its male-dominated setting has made her lose her zest for life. Her life has now become an old playhouse where, with all its lights put out, the enthusiasm for life has gone.

The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,
For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.(32)

Love is perhaps no more than a way of learning about one's self and its reward an insight not into another's being but really into one's own. Like the legendary youth Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image reflected in a fountain thinking it to be the nymph of the place and committed suicide, the poet too wishes for total freedom. In addition to sexual exploitation and betrayal the lack of love in man-woman relationship is an improvised form of male oppression. Loveless relationships are unbearable for women. It is more or less a burden to carry. In *Writing the Female: A Study of Kamala Das* Prasantha Kumar says, Kamala Das conceives of the male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the woman loses her identity. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry . . . Several poems of Das convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage . . . Their love is a disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. The life of Das's persona may be considered a tale of her experiments with love and the repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love. (34-35).

Kamala Das's aim as a poet is to underline the predicament of contemporary women beset by the crisis of divided selves. She wants to bring harmony out of this existence. Her poems are

remarkable because they reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, acute sense of isolation, fragmentation and loss of identity. Modern Indian woman's ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. She seems to have the combination in herself—wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. While her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love, she is also proud of her being the seducer, the collector especially of those men who pose as lady killers (Iyer 193-194).

Sreenivasa Iyengar in his *Indian Writing English Poetry* writes: “Kamala Das has a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man made world.” (677). In a letter to Devindra Kohli dated 10th December 1968, she admits that ‘she began to write poetry with the ignoble aim of wooing a man’. As a result love becomes the pervasive theme and it is through love that she endeavours to discover herself.

Her basic theme is the exploration of true love, man-woman relationship based on love and of the pains and pleasures of its realization. Every poem is a repeated experiment in this search. The strength of her poetry lies in its haunting ability to awaken our dormant human sympathies and our repressed passion for genuine human relationship. She conceives an ideal man-woman relationship that is based on love without lust, passion, and desire; and one for possession and sympathy without condescension.

Das is perhaps, the most feminine among the Indian woman poets writing in English. She has much to say about the pathos of a woman, emerging from a possessive role to the point of discovering and asserting the individual liberty and identity. She wrote all she had perceived, known and loved. To sum up, frankness, courage and honesty are the features that mark the poetry of Kamala Das.

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