



## EXPLORING WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN KAMALA DAS POEM "THE OLD PLAY HOUSE"

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### ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is an Anglo – Indian poet who to the limelight for her unabashed portrayal women's identity and sexuality in her poems, at a time when women literatures writing such topics were considered a taboo in India. Das used various literary techniques and devices to portray the urgency of an Indian woman for freedom. This paper samples one of her best known poems – 'The Old Playhouse' and attempts to depict the ills of patriarchal Indian society and also provide an insight into the macro - level implications it offers, of our own culture and norms. Kamala Das belongs to the first generation of modern English poets who evolved a new poetics for themselves and made a new start both in theme and technique around the 1960s.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchal Society, Protest, Feminine Identity, violation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kamala das occupies a position of considerable importance in Post Independence Indian Writing in English. Ever since the publication of *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965, her first volume of poetry in English, she has wielded great influence as a leading poet constituting the modern trend of Indian poetry in English. Kamala Das is beyond doubt the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indian Poetry in English. As a confessional poet, she displays feminist ethos in her poems. Kamala Das, born in Kerala in 1934, is a bilingual writer. She writes in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty.

Kamala das is essentially a poet of love. With a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context, she expresses her need for love. She is an iconoclast challenging, with clenched fist,

established tradition and convention. She is a feminist blazing a new trail of emancipation for Indian woman. She is a confessional poet speaking out her intimate private experiences with astonishing honesty and brutal frankness'.

Kamala Das belongs to the first generation of modern English poets who evolved a new poetics for themselves and made a new start both in theme and technique around the 1960s. The first phase of Indo-Anglican poetry ended in the 1950s. To the poets of this period the spirit of modernism was almost alien. Their main preoccupation was the spirit of nationalism and the war of independence, partition of country. It was only in the sixties that things began to take a new dimension where a new generation of young poets took control of the Indo-Anglican poetic realm. Kamala Das is one of the most powerful voices of this post-colonial era. In

Kamala Das's poetry we find the best expression of feminine sensibility, its suppression in a male dominated society. So her poetry is confessional and auto-biographical to a great extent, but at times she universalizes what is personal.

While reviewers of Das's early poetry praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Scholars such as DevindraKohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar find powerful feminist imagery in Das' poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship to their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are offered in traditional Indian society.

#### **A Critical Interpretation of Exploring Women's Identity in Kamala Das "The Old Play House"**

"The Old Playhouse" is one of the finest lyrics of Kamala Das. The female protagonist tries to explore the culture of true love in this poem. She expresses her protagonist tries to explore the nature of true love in this poem. She expresses her protest against male – chauvinism. The protest is conveyed in a powerful conversational idiom. In The Old Playhouse the poet comes down heavily upon love that tries to seek fruition through the fulfillment of the skin's lazy hungers". She makes a scathing attack on the social exploitation the female by the male for the appeasement of his carnal appetites.

The poem "The Old Play House" deals with the theme of frustration in love. There seems to be and an ambiguous and deliberate play upon the word "you" meaning either the husband or "another Person" in keeping with woman – persona's liberated spirit. The expression "of yet another man" is probably an endorsement of the extramarital relation the woman persona seeks –

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 everyLesson you gave was about  
yourself.

What she is after is not the knowledge "Of yet another man" but the awareness of herself through other man. The man to whom she uncovers her

bosom differs not in the least from her knowledge about other men. In no way is he free from the carnal hungers and domineering ego of the male. She gets frustrated at her and also at his sole and whole concern with her " body's response, its weather, its usual shallow/ convulsions".

'The Old Playhouse' is one such poem of Kamala Das that attempts to put the relationship between the masculine and feminine world under a lens. It charts the contemplations of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage to an overbearing man.

The title of the poem is significant. A playhouse is a miniature rendition of a house for children to play in. The girl – child uses dolls as their own children, tenderly nurturing and cooking while their ' husbands' are at work, for boys would much prefer to play with toy cars or guns. Thus, the playhouse reinforces traditional gender roles and maintains hegemony of a man over woman. Hence, it becomes a microcosm for a much larger concept, symbolizing the traditional patriarchal society, as a whole. It is these dichotomous conventions of the qualities for men and women that Das meddles with.

Das' poem is laden with rich, heavy and no – holds – barred metaphors' and imagery, as she opens with these lines. The woman – persona has been a "shallow "with Inborn "Urge to fly". Once she walks into the trap of lust set by man, she is tamed to forget the "urge to fly" and is rid of her freedom:

"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".

The Woman – Persona's own passionate self that is not satisfied is beautifully brought out by the symbol, swallow. Like the swallow experiencing the seasons of the year with its corresponding smoothes and roughs, she also experiences the varying intensifies of sexual awareness in contrast with these man:

The summer  
Begins to pail. I remember the ruder  
breezes  
Of the fall and the smoke from burning  
leaves

The poet persona's unhappy love is an experience which she recalls with a bitter taste.

Kamala Das alludes to Greek mythology towards the end of the poem, referring her husband to Narcissus and the wife to the nymph Echo. Narcissus is well known to have rejected Echo's true love and therefore was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection in the water, at which he stared to death. Das uses this comparison to describe her husband's love for his ownself and she even sardonically spits this in the following lines:

"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"

The bird's flight is parallel to the wife's urgency for freedom, however she is unable to break away as her husband tries to cage her and domesticate her, so that she would forget her instinctual wish for flight. He expects her to serve him routinely and eternally, of pouring saccharine tablets into his tea and giving him his vitamins. Rebelling against the etiquette of *'never kiss and tell'*, Kamala Das explicitly describes sexuality between the two partners:

"You dribbled spittle in my mouth, you  
poured  
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you  
embalmed  
My poor lust with your bitter – sweet  
juices,

It is crystal clear that the love – making is devoid of any spiritual connection and passion and the man simply swallows in lust of her. His horrific form dwarfs her in comparisons, as she writes –

"Covering"  
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.

She is very conscious of the domineering male ego. The strong man he is, he fulfills of love in excessive and strong doses which may please him but not her and hence lethal to her. It is man's selfish love that seeks fruition through woman without the expectations of reciprocal emotional and psychological responses from his partner. Kamala Das has no good word for the male. Time and again her experience has always been a depressing judgment of men being absolutely self – oriented in their relation with her.

Once a free bird in the bright world of Nature with the *"urge to fly"* in the *"endless/pathways of the sky"*, and enjoying the *"ruder breezes/ of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves,"* she is now confined to his room *"lit by artificial lights"*, and her sense of freedom is stifled in this largely male – dominated married life.

An atmosphere of male – dominated sexual – experience is created by employment of physical images like *"body's response'*, *"shallow / convulsions"*, *"dribbled spittle into my mouth"*, *"Poured / yourself into every nook and cranny"*, and *"bitter – sweet juices"*. *"The images underline the female protagonist's distaste for the male lust and it appears that she has been rather unwillingly, subjected to the tedium of carnal hunger"*. The female psyche is only a dumb animal written driven to be sacrificed on the altar of the lust – centered male supremacy.

The tedium of his omnipresence is also brought out in the following lines –

"All pervasive is the male scent of your  
breath. The cut flowers  
In the vases have begun to smell of human  
sweat...."

It is also evident that the playhouse has lost all its inherent meanings and innocence as the laments –

" ..... There is  
No more singing, no, more dance, my mind  
is an old  
Playhouse with all its lights out".

The oft – repeated sexual indulgences with her man leave her a disappointed playgoer in an old playhouse – a playhouse frequented to witness the play put up many a time with now newness or freshness : There is / No more singing no more

dance, my mind is an old / playhouse with all its light put out. "A total sublime, spiritual experience she seeks with such purity and a power as to have the "will to shatter the mirrors and kind night to erase the water".

While commenting on the concluding lines of the poem, Arlene R.K. Zide observes: "The power and implicit sadness or the lat verse are bound up in the essential truths it presents us. Her explorations' of love are self explorations'; love is "*Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted/ by its own lonely face ...*" She had come to him, husband/ lover, to learn what she was, to find her own real self, but what she found was only the strong man, with his age – old techniques of serving love in lethal doses, serving himself upto swallow whole. In the end, the female persona "*will the mirrors to shatter*", must seek freedom in order not to die as an individual from those lethal doses of male ego, in order not to remain an Old/ playhouse with all its lights put out".

#### Conclusion

While commenting on the concluding of the poem "*The OldPlay House*" Kamala das writes her poem in free verse using just one stanza a confessional tone. This form and her frequent repetition of ideas express her urgency to fly with her own thoughts feverishly alive to instill in us the intensity of her feelings. The autobiographical style conveys universality to her poems as well as its reveals it to be her own experience also, as she was subject to patriarchal domination in her household, being married of early and only fit to be a mother only when she had her third child born. Therefore, literature become a vent for her contained emotions, becoming a choral voice for the Indian womanhood, fervidly calling for equality between two sexes – an issues which was rife during her times and sadly enough, despite all the technological and ideological advancements, still continues to be alive, even to this day.

As a feminist, Kamala Das leads an attack on the convention – ridden society that stuns poetry in which "one can touch flesh and visualize the bare unromanticised core on the man – woman relationship". She is called poet of the 'body' for she is the first Indian woman to speak frankly about sex. Man – woman relationship is no forbidden fruit to

her. She comes " to terms with man – woman relationship to blunt, bitter and concrete terms, where the man still pussyfoot around in metaphor metaphysics and round – aboutation". As an iconoclast she is against the conventional concept of lover concerned with purely physical gratification.

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