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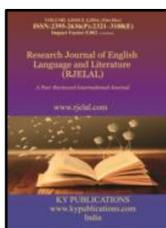
## OLD AGE, ILLNESS & DEATH IN THE POETRY OF KAMLA DAS

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### ABSTRACT

When any author grows old with the passage of time or suffers pangs, distress and illness in his life he pours these experiences in his work. The romantic poets like Shelly and Keats depicted their sufferings in their poetry. The poet like Browning , W.B. Yeats and others also expressed their views on old age and illness. Kamala Das a singer of feminine sensibility suffered a lot both mentally and physically and witnessed closely old age and illness in her life. She realistically presents the pathetic picture of old and ailing people, who are left alone by their loved ones. As death is an eternal truth, old age and illness before death is also an eternal truth and how to escape from its pangs is also an important theme of her poetry. The theme of old age, illness & death is scattered in her poem like, "The High Tide", "Words are Birds", "Annette", "The Last Act", "Autum Leaves", "Suicide", "The Morning Tree," "Death Brings No Loss," etc. The aim of present paper is to bring forth this aspect of Kamala Das' poetry and examine various poems related to it.

Key words – Old Age, distress, illness, body, pangs, death.

Kamala Das, the singer of feminine sensibility has dealt mainly the theme of love, lust & disillusionment in love along with many other themes in her poetry. Many of the poems of Kamla Das were just like her own autobiography in which we find her emotional attitude towards the torturous conditions at the old age and illness that every human being suffers from. In old age people suffer from many diseases. She followed a new modern trend in her poems, depicting the unavoidable suffering and helplessness in human life. At this stage even all kith and kin who loved the old man in earlier part of his life desert him. While in the past old people were looked after even by unknown people in the society but in modern times the attitude has changed a great deal and old and ailing people are singularly left alone. The poetess paints the conditions of such ailing, unsupported old people in "The High Tide."

" The poetess now turns her face away,  
who loves him

Without rhyme or reason. O what has  
happened,

What has happened

To the dancing girls, what has happened to  
the cringing

Crowd ? It's only the wind knocking at the  
door, the sea

is wild this morning. ...." (1)

Again in her poem "Words are Birds" we find the description of the degenerated physical condition of old age. Old age not only overpowers and crushes the body and its various organs but the spoken words and advice seem to lose effect. When we peep into the meaning of this poem we become aware of the helpless and pathetic condition of old people.

"Wings, tired

Hiding from the dust ?  
Dusk is upon my hair,  
Dusk in upon my skin ;  
When I lie down to sleep  
I am not sure  
That I shall see  
The blessed dawn again.” \_ (2)

In “Annette” she tells that the old age not only weakens the body but it also slowly and gradually evaporates the facial and physical beauty. The body becomes pale and the skin of all over face and hands and feet becomes full of wrinkles and the hair changes its colour from blackishness to whiteness like the chaff of dry wheat.

“Annette  
At the dresser  
Pale fingers over mirror – fields  
Reaping  
That wheat brown hair  
Beauty  
Falling as chaff in old mirrors  
While calendars  
In all  
The cities turn .....”(3)

A child who takes birth here in this world, grows young, adult and old man, at every stage of his life there is a staunch will to live for longer period. Even the idea of death makes his body shiver and all through his life a wave of fear runs through his mind. An old man dying of ‘Cerebral Thrombsis’ also thinks himself to be capable to escape from death for the time being. His near relatives attend him day and night hearing the thumping sound of his heart and console him that he will live for some more time. This wish of an old man has found place in the

“Cerebral Thrombsis”,  
“The rattle ground like oxcart wheels the gravel  
Of his throat. In the fluted heart of shells  
Doze the ballads of the sea. He was past  
Eighty, yet it was an adolescent  
Dream that prowled the dirtroads of his  
brain. His  
Relatives watched the shut safe of his  
face.”..... (4)

A realistic understanding of the psychology of an old man is brought out by Kamala Das in her poem “The Last Act.” When a man reaches at his old age he never takes himself as an old man. He tries to deceive himself, thinking that he is away from old age and can still enjoy youth. But very soon he realizes that his old age has chewed all his strength and then he accepts himself defeated. She remarks –

“..... He clung,  
To her, he buried his arrogant face  
Between her breasts, but a little later,  
sobbing  
Like a hurt child, he said, I am old.  
I am finished.  
I can not even make love.....”(5)

The fact that the young ones always want to get rid of every one who is old, whether he is a human being or animal is clearly revealed in her poem “Old Cattle.” Old man are sent to nursing homes while the old cattle are brutally taken to slaughter houses by man.

In “Autumn Leaves” she remarks that just like in autumn season dry leaves fall from the trees, in the same way chest hair slowly disappear in old age. Naturally old age is one step towards death. The degrading state of the body is like Autumn season when the Nature itself becomes dry,

“This is a secret  
Once through his shirt  
I saw his chest  
And all that hair  
And, on that very night in my dream  
The autumn – winds blew down  
From the trees  
All their leaves  
And I lay on them  
I lay on those smoke – scented leaves.”-  
..... (6)

Frustrations, disappointment and hollowness in life is a cause in Kamala Das’ life which lead her think of death or rather commit suicide. This is very clear when we examine her poems “Suicide” and “The Morning Tree.” Her life is full of miseries sorrows, frustrations and disappointments. In her whole life she craved for love but received betrayal from

males. Therefore in "Suicide" she announces that if she could not get real love she will commit suicide.'

"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 ..... (7)

The sense of frustration and disappointment is also explicit in her poem "The Morning Tree" where she express her life through the allegory of a tree in front of her house which has no buds, no flowers no fruits and there is no hope. The poet hightens the effect of despair by repeating "no hope", thrice in the poem. This despair leads Kamala Das to think about death. She imagines death like a red flower on this morning tree.

"Morning tree, on your brown bony branch  
one day  
I shall see a sudden flower and know at  
once  
That my death is just a flower a red, red  
Morning flower ..... (8)

Here the metaphor of flower suggests that in this troublesome, sterile and lonely world death is pleasant and soothing like a flower because death brings an end to all the worries and miseries of this world.

The poem "Death Brings No Loss", indicated her fearlessness of death She compare death with a nightfall. It is just a temporary pause between evening and morning. The death of body will not bring any loss for her. Just like after night day and its activities are there in the same way in the next life the natural objects, people, relatives, friends and love will be received by her,

"Each night when darkness turns  
Me blind, I think of death,  
Understanding it to  
Be like night – fall, just a  
Temporary pause, which  
Brings no loss ; for what was  
Here before sun – down will  
Be here tomorrow when  
Light shall reveal it." ..... (9)

These lines remind us Shelley's famous message of hope which he gave in his revolutionary lyric "Ode to the West Wind," " If winter comes can spring be far behind ?"

It suggests that winter, night, sadness, darkness and death are followed by spring, day, happiness, light and life. This poem reveals that Kamala Das has a deep rooted faith in rebirth because she has described death as a temporary phase and she is hopeful to get all the worldly things in the next also. It means that she is well aware with the philosophy of Gita and particularly with this couplet of Gita in which Lord Krishna tells to Arjun,

वसांसि जीर्णानि यथा निहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।  
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णान्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥  
(गीता 2/22)

So long as man lives or his eyes can see, he suffer a lot in this world. One who has taken birth must grow old, face various diseases and illness and ultimately has to die one day. When a person comes to know this eternal truth he no more laments over these things and he goes beyond the vicitudes of life & death. Kamala Das in her poem "Advice to Fellow Swimmer" advices her fellowmen to learn how to swim & cross the life – stream and reach the other bank i.e. the freedom of soul. The essence of life is not barely the process of breathing continued for some months or years but true life consists in the attempt of seeking the final goal. This poem is a powerful lyric with a strong philosophical undercurrent. She considers life as an overflowing stream which ends up in the ocean i.e. the infinite, When you learn to swim

Do not enter a river that has no ocean  
To flow into one ignorant of destinations  
And knowing only the flowing as its  
destiny." ..... (10)

The obvious message is that one should have a goal "The Freedom of Soul" ahead and that one should not be tied down by the means of crossing the sea of life. She also wants to underscore the point that purposeless swimming leads to suffering and agitation. Perhaps she has in her mind the toiling masses around her who lead a meaningless life full of suffering. She wants to emphasise the fact that one's ultimate aim should be to overcome one's own self so that ultimately it will lead to an escape from suffering. This process is living the true life and

when the final goal is achieved : it is not the last moment of life and it is not death but a victory of life. What we call death, is consummation of body and evaporating physical strength and physical virtues. Thus this understanding of the life and death has matured in Kamala Das only through her experience of suffering and humiliation. Being a female such illustrated life brings liberation from the self that brings joy and peace as she says,

“go swim in the great blue sea  
Where the first tide you meet is your body,  
That familiar pest ;  
But if you learn to cross it  
You are safe, yes beyond it you are safe,  
For even sniking would make no difference  
than ..... .”(11)

To sum up, since the beginning of the universe, it is a fact that life is not eternal and everlasting but one day or the other liveliness in the body of every creature would be finished and such body would be converted into a corpse. Soul and body in every creature are separable and when we say that a man has died, it is the death of the body and the soul there from would be free the trap. Before the occurrence of death every creature is attacked by old age, diseases, pain and sufferings. Only creation people who have trained themselves spiritually realizing at the position of saints and acentics of high order might escape from such diseases and old age. Such saints meet their death at their will and the soul from their body very easily and consciously is freed from the body. For common people illness and old age are brought in the way of their life as a warning by the providence.

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