

A DESPERATE CRAVING FOR IDENTITY IN THE MAJOR WORKS OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

A woman's existence is of paramount importance to the society; but unfortunately, this is rarely realized by the advocates of male chauvinism. A woman is destined to play certain defined roles as performing the domestic chores, reproduction, rearing up children and fulfilling the sexual desires of the male. In the process, she is discriminated, oppressed exploited and humiliated. Women suffer mainly due to the patriarchal psyche resulting in male chauvinism and the prevalent tendency to impose their power over women. Although feminist writers have tried to challenge the patriarchal norms and ideologies, this subjugation is still widespread and kind of legitimized in the Indian set up. The present paper brings to light the plight and predicament of women and their consequent pursuit for identity by observing external behaviours and depicting their internal journeys in the psychological realm of feminine sensibilities. It shows how women are torn between their individuality and their social obligations. The paper is a poignant account of how the cries of Indian women go unheard and her pain goes unfelt. It explores how the desires, aspirations and dreams of women come to an end when a woman gets married. The researchers wish to focus on the selected works of Kamala Das such as "An Introduction", "The Freaks", "The Dance of the Eunuchs", "The Forest Fire" and "The Sunshine Cat" to analyze and evaluate the predicament of women in the conventional Indian set up. It also aims at bringing out how the women feel cheated, frustrated and self-defeated- sometimes indulging in self-destruction and at other times taking recourse to rebellion. However, the question remains unanswered whether this rebellion really brings consolation or self-destruction? This riddle is expected to be unraveled by taking up the case of female protagonists as visualized and portrayed by Kamala Das, one of the most rebellious writers of the contemporary times.

KEYWORDS: External Behavior, Psychological Realm, Feminine Sensibilities, Patriarchal Psyche, Male- Chauvinism, Self-Destruction, Rebellion

QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Quest for identity is an ongoing process of understanding oneself and the surroundings. It is a byproduct of looking at one's real problems rather than self consciously trying to find identity as an end in itself without bothering for the issues that one faces. In fact, quest for identity is one of the major themes in Indian English Literature and one of the major concerns for women in every age- be it ancient or modern. The theme of identity is often expressed in Indian English literature so that the readers can intrigue themselves and relate to the characters and their emotions. It enables the readers to comprehend that a person's state of mind is full of grueling thoughts about who he/she is and what he/she wants to be. People can try to modify their identity as much as they want but that can never change. The Indian women are caught in the vortex of a soulless world of fading individuality.

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das beautifully depicts the gloom and cravings of fellow women in her writings. She protests against their subjugation and wants to liberate them from the pigeonholes of their colonized status. She portrays the female experiences, be it the trauma of an unhappy marriage or the desire less submission in sex or repulsive treatment at the hands of the male. The pursuit for love and identity is a recurrent theme of her poetry. She believes that women are not just sexual objects but as human as men and have their own sentiments and aspirations. Therefore, she describes her women characters in such a manner that they assume the special power and significant status. She presents them as true lovers, mothers, sisters and saints. She always tries to search the true identity and dignity of women. Her confessional poems such as 'The Prisoner' reveal her quest for essential woman:

*“As the convict studies
His prison’s geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love
For I must some day find
An escape from its snare.”*

Her open and frank treatment of female sexuality is without any sense of guilt and imparts special power to her writings. Love and sex in her poetry symbolise the fractured realities that she encounters in her actual life. She speaks for a woman who is in search of love. Kamala Das feels that a woman’s role as a daughter, a wife or a lover echoes the victimization in relationships. Therefore, she rebels against a deliberately formed concept of relationship. According to her, women are not at all promiscuous. The prevalent notion of male supremacy is brutally shaken by her who challenges the usual ideological discourse of sexism and love. She reveals her own victimization to the carnal desires of a young man. Her poem 'The Freaks' liberates the woman from the caged construct set for her by man and depicts a picture of love that is full of dirt and filth as the man ensconced in sexual intercourse turned his sun-stained

Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire.

'Puddles of desire' indicates her unfulfilled sexual desire as her heart remains 'an empty cistern' which is incapable of holding love. The cistern is rather filled with coiling snakes of silence that creep up on their very being.

The snakes are symbolic of poison and their coiling represents a maze from which the poetess has no escape. The teeth hanging from the roof of his mouth appear as uneven as stalactites depicting the lack of warmth in her relationship. As they endeavoured to pursue the goal of love, they trip over puddles of desire for if the person wanted to really love her, he would have succeeded and lethargy would not have obstructed their love making.

Das also highlights the inborn passivity of the male and yet it ends with the assertion "I am freak". This reveals the identity crisis of every Indian woman who flaunts 'a grand, flamboyant lust'. Kamala Das explodes the myth of male supremacy proliferated by patriarchy and very boldly exhibits that to be born as a woman is to lose the capacity to go beyond those places that are already determined by patriarchy. Therefore, she decides to empower herself as a woman. She minces no word in recording her innate desire to consume all sorts of experiences in this world:

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
 To take in with greed, like a forest fire that
 Consumes and with each killing gains a wilder,
 Brighter charm, all that comes my way.
 A little later, the fury of passions gets the most of her:
 My eyes lick at you like flames, my nerves
 Consume (‘Forest Fire’)

She, in no way, refuses to acknowledge the doctrines of bravery in masculine terms. A woman's quest for identity is again echoed when she says:

"Getting a man to love you is easy
 Only be honest about your wants as
 Woman." (The Looking Glass)

Kamala Das does not portray how a man loves a woman; she rather suggests in 'The Looking Glass' how a woman can gain the love of a man:

Stand nude before the glass with him
 So that he sees himself the stronger one
 And believes it so, and you so much more
 Softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your
 Admiration.

This, in no way shows the supremacy of the female; it rather depicts the search for identity in a female mind. Surrendering is an image in the poetry of Kamala Das. The line "Gift him what makes you woman" shows the image of surrender by a woman. A woman desirous of lust seldom succeeds. Getting a man to love is easy but afterward without the man, it is a living without life.

The distinctiveness of Kamala Suraiya Das's identity lies in the confessional mode and the confessional mode uncovers her identity. Her innermost feelings are reverberated in her poems which in turn reveal her unquenchable thirst for identity with respect to her repressed self which is artistically trapped in the labyrinth of male chauvinism.

In "An Introduction", Das searches not only her identity but also the uniqueness of her writing as divorced from predetermined concepts. She says: "If I had been a loved person, I wouldn't have become a writer. I would have been a happy human being." She declares that she is not interested in politics but claims to know the names of all the people in power 'beginning with Nehru'. She affirms that these are involuntarily embedded in her. By asserting that she can repeat these as easily as days of the week or the names of months, she resonates that these politicians were caught in a repetitive cycle of time, irrespective of any distinctiveness. They did not characterize time; rather time defined them.

She was innocent; and she knew that she grew up only because to the others, her size had grown. However, the emotional frame of mind was essentially the same. Married at the early age of sixteen, her husband confined her to a single room. She was ashamed of her femininity that came before time and brought her to this predicament. That is the reason she was crushed by the weight of her breast and womb. She tries to overcome it by changing her appearance- cuts her hair short and wears boyish clothes. People criticize her and tell her to 'conform' to the various womanly roles. They accuse her of being schizophrenic. They confuse her want of love and attention for insatiable sexual craving.

She also describes her encounter with a man. She qualifies him with not a proper noun but a common noun-"every man" to reflect his universality. He defined himself by the "I", the supreme male ego. He is tightly compartmentalized as "the sword in its sheath" thereby exhibiting the power politics of the patriarchal society in which we all thrive. It is this "I" that stays long away without any restrictions, is free to laugh at his own will, succumbs to a woman only out of lust and later feels ashamed of his own weakness that lets himself lose to a woman. Towards the end of the poem, a role-reversal occurs as this "I" gradually transitions to the poetess herself. She pronounces how this "I" is also sinner and saint, beloved and betrayed. As the role-reversal occurs, the woman too becomes the "I" reaching the apex of self-assertion.

"The Sunshine Cat" describes the femininity of a woman as defined by sentimentality and as opposed to masculinity which is devoid of emotions. In this poem, the poetess fumes over the disappointment in her love life. The ones who took advantage of her emotional instability are termed as 'men' in general which inevitably included her husband too. He turned out to be a mere objective observer without any emotional attachment. Being selfish, he did not exhibit the slightest display of love. And, being cowardly he did not dare to give in sexually to her as it would mark the demotion of his ego-his perspective of masculinity. He was a persistent onlooker to the extent of being insensitive for he watched her encounters with other men like a carnival affair. This is why Kamala Das employs the word 'band'. She "clinged" on to this band of "cynics." The word "cling" is very significant because one clings only out of desperation. Thus, her life revolved around the egocentric people. Nevertheless, she "burrows" herself in the chest of these men suggesting a temporary refuge for the poetess to render herself secure as long as it lasted. The hair on their chests was like "great-winged moths" that came like parasites between them. The lovers were younger than the poetess and told her that they could not love her but could be 'kind' to her- an unbecoming attitude on part of these superior lovers as signified by the word 'kind'.

In this poem, the husband jails her in a room full of books. However, what Kamala Das longs for is not intellectual company but emotional camaraderie. Her only ray of hope is the streak of sunlight beneath the doort: the sunny

impulse in her. Nevertheless, as her life approached its winter, her husband notices one day while locking her, that this streak had reduced to a thin line. The evening made him realize that she had mellowed down, to some extent, due to age and partially because of her despondency. The spark in her had died away. Hence, she was of no use to any man indicating that the sole purpose of the woman in a man's life was sexual gratification.

“The Dance of the Eunuchs” tunes the downgraded to a spiritual pulse, dancing in abundance to affirm that they neither belong to this world nor that. The poem exposes the emptiness of Das's loveless life and is symbolic of the spiritual aridity of her being. She utilizes the imagery of the eunuchs- the very emblem of sterility. The poem, far from being an aesthetic extravaganza, is rather a spectacle that is looked down upon.

Das starts the poem by exclaiming that: "It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came." Climate change is not a matter of concern for them, as they are always subjected to the cold air and frigid responses. The anklets just jingle and jingle without any rhythm to it. They are indeed a spectacle with their 'flashing eyes' beneath the fiery gulmohar. The gulmohar is a beautiful tree that is juxtaposed against something deemed unpleasant.

To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals

Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling.....

There were green tattoos on their face.

They have to carve tattoos on their face, as the face of the eunuchs will be the only place that will be explored, that too, by disinterested eyes. Some were dark and some were fair. The songs were harsh due to their coarse voices; they sing of 'lovers dying' and 'unborn children' and it is a fact that for them, both lovers and children are remote possibilities. While some beat their drums, some beat their 'sorry breasts'. The breasts are 'sorry' either because they are very small or because they out of place according to gender. They wail and 'writhe' in vacant ecstasy. The elation is vacant reflecting the vacuum in their life and the hollowness of their existence.

Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from

Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness

Were in each of them

Far from being shapely, their limbs were lean devoid of life like half-burnt logs from the funeral pyre-aptly symbolic of the death of Death. Not only were they overcome with drought, they were also rotten, as if in a state of decomposition. A thing tends to decompose due to lack of utility. They have no utility, no function to perform in society, hence they rot. Crows as though foreboding some natural disaster stood still and kids watched 'wide-eyed' in shock and not in awe. The eunuchs are termed 'poor creatures' in condescension. Their dance, far from being rhythmic, is like going into convulsions, an inexplicable hysteria that scares the spectator.

In addition to all this, the paper brings out the sweet memories of Das' ancestral house that was filled with the all-pervading presence of her grandmother. It was here that the poetess received unconditional and selfless love. With the death of her Grandmother, the house ceased to be inhabited. It now became an isolated and remote entity as is reflected by the phrase 'far away'. Das asserts that with the death of her grandmother, silence began to sink in the house. The poetess, at that point in time, was too small to read books but emotional enough to realize the true feeling of love.

With the death of the Grandmother, her life that was earlier filled only with emotions becomes numb. Her veins become cold rather than warm. It is as cold as the moon, the moon being an emblem of love. The worms on the books seem like snakes at that moment, in comparison to the size of the little girl and in keeping with the eccentricity of the situation. The poetess now longs to 'peer' at a house that was once her own. She has to peek through the 'blind eyes' of the windows as the windows are permanently closed. The air is frozen now, in contrast to when the grandmother was alive-the surroundings were filled with the warmth of empathy.

Das claims that in her search for real love, she had now become wayward. She tells her husband that she who is now desirous of genuine love, received at one point in her life, absolute love in the form of her grandmother. It is quite ironic that she addresses her husband as "Darling", and talks of the lack of love in her life in the same breath and tone.

Her pursuit of love has driven her to the doors of strangers to receive love at least in the form of 'a tip'. Previously she was 'proud', as she did not have to compromise on her self-respect. Now she has to move in the maze of chauvinistic union and beg for love in the form of change.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, Kamala Das presents a realistic portrayal of her own hopes, aspirations, frustrations and rantings in her poems. Her open and candid treatment to the female sexuality without any sense of guilt or shame makes her a bold and daring poetess. She makes no attempt to conceal the sensuality of the human form; her works celebrate their joyous potential while acknowledging the concurrent dangers. She urges the women to give their men 'what makes you a woman'. She leaves no stone unturned to expose the subjugation suffered by all women in patriarchal society and also reveals that it is not only she who is in quest for true love but every Indian woman has the same fate. Her negative and dismissive image of a man in her mind as an instrument of corruption, a symbol of corrosion and the demolisher of the female chastity, is not hers alone but holds true for every Indian Woman.

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