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Self-assertion in Kamala Das' *The Old Play House* and *The Stone Age*

Younus Ahmad Lone: Phd. Research Scholar, Glocal University, Saharanpur U.P, India

Abstract:

Kamala Das is a well-known Indian woman writer who has made significant contributions to creating a place for women's identity in India. She tackled a highly delicate subject and spoke up against taboos that a male-dominated society had imposed. As a result, she has become the most divisive of all Indian female poets. She, on the other hand, never shied away from confronting the difficult subjects. She attempted to educate Indian women about their rights and wrote on nearly all of the challenges that women experience in India throughout their lives. The subject of this article is on the many challenges that women face in *The Old Playhouse* and *The Stone Age*.

Keywords: Self-assertion, male chauvinism, Lust Voyeurism, Patriarchy, Marital Discord.

According to feminism gender roles are pre-determined and women are trained to adjust into the roles. This indicates that roles of 'daughter' or 'mother' are not natural but social because women are trained to behave and think in a particular way that suits the role. So the discrimination that exists on the basis of gender is not natural but social. The social structures like the family, religion, education, knowledge systems and the arts reinforce the inequality. These structures are latent and appear less oppressive; therefore, these are effective in reinforcing male domination. Feminist theory is at work to unpack these ideological structures of dominance.

Mary Wollstonecraft stresses the issues of women in her important essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and she flatly rejects the notion that women are inferior to men. According to her, the "lack of education" was to blame for the imbalance in man-woman relationships. She believes that women and men should be treated equally. Women should endeavour to become their husbands' companions. She also advises that education be made obligatory in order to improve women's standing.

Wollstonecraft was the first to assert that gender norms are societal rather than biological. She blames cultural conditioning for women's love of fashion, romance, and beauty. Women have been trained to believe that these are the characteristics that define them as truly feminine. This is Wollstonecraft's most important contribution, demonstrating that femininity is social rather than innate, and that women have been assigned roles based on societal customs.

Men are capable of stereotyping and mystifying women, according to Simon de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949). Because of stereotyping and mystification, patriarchy is strengthened. She claimed that women are also to blame for their predicament since they passively accepted conventional roles. She also says that women are always portrayed as the antithesis of males, with men being the ideal, the usual, and women being the outliers. She raises concerns about women's status and gender roles in traditional societies.

The struggle for identification is at the heart of Kamala Das' poems. She sways between a sentimental past and a nightmare present during this self-assertion process. There are some parallels between the past and the present. The past represents stability, love, and freedom, whereas the present represents society's insecurity and enslavement. So she has something great to celebrate, but she also has a bad check in the present.

Das's personal agony and plight finds voice in the struggle between inherited values and acquired knowledge, and is an example of the confessional poet's attempt to heal the schism in personality in order to end the war of passion and reason, body and soul. In her early childhood she was very sentimental, she wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. The rift between her parents also left a very serious mark on her personality. Her mother's timidity, only created an illusion of domestic harmony. The society then plays a role to cut off her wings of emancipation by suggesting 'Fit in',

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"She turned rebellious and wore shirts, trousers,
Of her brother, cut her hair short and ignored
Her womanliness. And when she asked for love,
Not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door."(p.1)

Male chauvinism and subsection of woman has been a typical subject in Kamala Das's poetry. In her poetry, two aspects of love have been portrayed with clarity--- the real, fulfilling love and the carnal or commercial love. Her poetry depicts that mere carnal love is never fulfilling. Man may enjoy but the woman feels used in these desperate situations. From the wedding night of Kamala Das we get pathetic recollection of events where male chauvinism is shown to depict the true picture of male dominated society. She expresses in her autobiography:

"My house was emptied itself of people and I found myself
Alone with my husband who told me it was not his
Intention to see the Kathakali. Let us stay at home, he said
Pulling me to the bedroom... Then without warning he fell
On me surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack." (p.15)

The old Play House delves deep into the self of the poet. It gives us information about love which is essential in experiencing one's true self. It is mainly addressed to 'you', to the husband, who is responsible for hindering her freedom. It is sort of a plea against the constraints of married life. Through this poem we can get the crystallization of the issues of domesticity, the routine of list, artificial comfort and male domination.

The disharmony in marriage seems like a confinement in which the poetess is caught. She has lost all her value as woman in this life of confinement and suffocation. Let us observe the following lines:

"You penned to tame a swallow,
To hold her...
Pathways of the sky".(p.11)

In these lines, the female persona accuses her husband for domesticating her like a swallow after marriage in a well-planned manner. The suggestive imagery is used to show the disastrous effects of the mismatched marital relationship. The word 'sparrow' stands for the poetess who is captured by her cruel and heartless captor (husband) who denies her any freedom and identity. The following line from "The Old Playhouse" depicts the female imprisonment:

"... You call
Me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. 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." (p.11)

The discontent and fallacy of married life has been skilfully portrayed by Kamala Das. In a married life, husband holds the authority and makes her act according to his whims and caprices. The pathetic plight and anguish of the woman in her heart is expressed in one of her poems, "The Stone Age" As:

"Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, granite
Dove, you build around me a shabby drawing room,
And stroke my pitted face absent mindedly while
You read." (p.12)

When Kamala Das finds that matrimony and love are poles apart, she is prompted to search for a lover. Although love affair can be excited in the beginning yet it also leads to disillusionment in the end. "The Stone Age" Like "The Old Playhouse", deals with the reality of love being offered to the poetess by another man rather than by her husband. The husband is seen here as the perpetual intruder into the privacy of wife's mind. Due to the assault of the dull domesticity enveloping around her, we see the act defiance taking place. The poetess gets depressed and vehemently poses some questions:

"... Ask me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hands sways like a hooded
snake

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Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, filled, he stumps against my breasts,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love's
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its
price".(p.5)

These lines exhibit the kind of freedom that Kamala Das always longed for in her life. To take it further it is the freedom that every women aspires at. So, Kamala Das not only expresses her personal agony but also becomes a voice of all women in India who suffer domestic violence. In most of her poems, she tries hard to liberate the general lot of women folk by liberating herself. Her poems are about the emancipation of women and freedom from being slave at the hands of men in patriachal society. Her own personal life is a clear example of

women's identity and liberty. She tries to counter the age old customs in the society. She gives a free individuality to her woman persona.

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