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Gender Prejudice and Marginalisation in Kamala Das' The Old Playhouse and Other Poems

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Abstract:

With Kamala Das' compositions, women's poetry takes an unexpectedly brave turn. She is the first Indian woman poet to use the tiniest pronoun, 'I,' to great effect. Kamala Das is a writer who focuses on female desires. Her poems express her unease as a sensitive woman navigating a male-dominated world. She has depicted her personal experience of growing up in a patriarchal culture. She has always fought to ensure that women have a place in society. The current study focuses on sex discrimination and women's marginalisation in patriarchal societies.

Keywords: Suppression, Identity, Gender discrimination, Patriarchy.

Feminism is the belief that all persons, regardless of gender, are equal. Feminism is a movement that promotes women's empowerment so that men and women are treated equally. It isn't about putting guys down or declaring them to be inferior. It is not based on the idea that women should have power over men; rather, it is based on the idea that women should have power over themselves.

Because it comes from the word "feminine," feminism is frequently misunderstood as a "women's movement." However, it is critical that we recognize that feminism is more than a women's movement; it is a "movement for all people" concerned with the freedom of both men and women. However, we must acknowledge that women have been the primary victims of patriarchy and toxic masculinity for many years. Feminism is an endeavour to eliminate the concepts of dominance and subordination, bringing both genders to an equal footing.

We in India had some wonderful feminist symbols in our culture and history even before the term feminism was coined. Draupadi, a woman born from the

fire, sought retribution for the humiliation she suffered in the Mahabharata. Durga Maa was created as an amalgamation of all the Gods to destroy evil. She is an incarnation of goddess Parvati. Sita fought for her independence and raised her two sons on her own in the Ramayana. Other women of great courage and power include Rani Lakshmi Bai and Chand Bibi.

"The Old Playhouse and Other Poems," Kamala Das' third collection of poems, was released in 1973 and contains 33 poems. However, fourteen of these poems are from an old collection called "Summer in Calcutta," and six are from "The Descendants." The poems reprinted from Summer in Calcutta are: "In Love", "Love", "Summer in Calcutta", "The Freaks", "An Introduction", "My Grandmother's House", "Forest Fire", "The Wild Bougainvillea", "Corridors", "A Relationship", "The Snobs", "I Shall Someday", "Drama", and "Loud Posters", and those taken from The Descendants are: "Convicts", "Composition", "The Suicide", "The Descendants", "Palam" and "Luminol". This new volume of poems thus, has only thirteen poems to be taken into account.

This volume dives into the poet's innermost thoughts. It tells us that love is a means to discovering and experiencing one's genuine self, that it is an outlet for the realisation of one's identity, and that the pangs and agonies linked with love are entities that cannot be eliminated in life. It is primarily aimed to 'you,' the husband, who used his subtle manoeuvres to obstruct her freedom of movement and activity. It expresses dissatisfaction with the limits of married life. It aims to circumvent the patriarchal forces in society's limits. The fire of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort, and male dominance are all sensed in it.

Kamala Das seeks a certain kind of liberty; liberty with a broader perspective; liberty that can be seen as complete or absolute. A freedom that allows you to explore love to its zenith or nadir without being bound by

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patriarchal restraints. However, she realises that none of these things are possible in human life.

In the poem, 'you' may be the husband, who wishes to curb the woman's natural freedom by taming the swallow. This husband's "monstrous ego" is chastised, and the poet is reduced to a minor figure. Her mind becomes 'an old playhouse with all the lights turned off' as a result of his egotism, and she feels the emptiness of natural merriment and intellectual capacity.

The following lines from "The Old Playhouse" demonstrate how she moves from liberty to incarceration:

"... you called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. 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."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 1)

It is clear from these lines that the woman protests against the patriarchal male domination. She protests against the male ego and assertion. Though loaded with discontent and disharmony, Kamala Das' portrayal of a man and woman relationship is one of a kind. This matrimonial arrangement screams exotica, and the reader is compelled to listen in awe. It transports us to the world of striptease and leaves us with traces of shocks thanks to her imposing artistic techniques.

It symbolically represents the frustrations of married life as well as the emotional bond between husband and wife. In this way, the woman who is suffering understands the flaw in married relationships. She depicts the trials of a lady who has lost her footing in the choppy sea of human life. Love and comfort are denied the persona. The husband is always relaxed, allowing her to act on his whims and caprices. In one of her poems, "The Stone Age," she expresses the disdain and pain of the woman in her heart in a traditionally feminine fashion. Observe the following lines:

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

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 51)

The realisation that love and matrimony are diametrically opposed drives Kamala Das' persona to seek a lover. Though the love affair excites her at first, it eventually leads to disillusionment. "The Stone Age," like "The Old Playhouse," explores the reality of a poetess receiving love from someone other than her husband. The husband of the woman-persona is depicted in this poem as a "old fat spider" that weaves "webs of bewilderment" about her and builds the dead dull Stony wall of domesticity, transforming her into a "bird of stone, a granite dove." The husband is a constant annoyance, an unwelcome intruder into the wife's head, which is haunted by other men. When her husband leaves, she drives along the coast and climbs "the forty steps to knock on another's door." The act of rebellion is powerfully depicted, the deed completed, independence declared, heightened by the onslaught of the mundane domesticity encircling her. The invigorating questions further energise the poetess:

"... 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
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 is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price."
(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 51)

The kind of liberty that we see in these lines is the kind of liberty that Kamala Das has yearned for. Kamala Das attempts to liberate the general lot of women folk by liberating herself in the majority of her poems. Her poetry speaks of women breaking free from the shackles of enslavement in a patriarchal world. She asserts complete personal liberty, particularly in terms of love and sex. Her personal life is a shining example of women's autonomy and independence. She strives to change the society's long-held traditions. She even abandons her own religion in order to maintain her independence. Men, she claims, are emotionally inadequate and incapable of caring passionately about concrete reality. As a result, she embraces a free womanhood and provides her woman character a free individualism. Das' poetry career has been a never-ending search for self. She oozes sensuality and a sensitive desire for sex. Such kind of feeling is examined by M K Naik in the following way: The most obvious

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feature of Kamala Das' poetry is the uninhibited frankness, with which she talks about sex referring non-chalantly to,

"the musk of sweat between the breast", "the warm Shock of menstrual blood" and even "my pubis" (qtd. in Naik: 208)

Here's a different kind of self-fulfillment protest. In the process, she contrasts her inner mindset and releases it. Her rejection of religious fundamentalism can be observed in the poem "The Inheritance." This poetry is harsh and sardonic without being cynical. It is concerned with religious intolerance and bigotry, whether it is in the name of Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism. "This ancient virus that we nurtured in the soul..." illustrates feminism of the past, an enthralling feminist narrative or how women were treated in the past and are regarded today.

Just like "Composition" and "The Suicide," "Blood" is the only new poem in the lengthier genre. There is a lot of restraint on the emotional outpouring here. It's written entirely in the style of an autobiographical sketch, and the poet's yearning for the old house and the great grandmother who formerly resided there is vividly conveyed. We must, however, ensure that she does not attempt to idealise the house or the individuals associated with it, nor does she attempt to delve into the history of a three-hundred-year period beyond what she is familiar with. We are now presented with a magnificent view of an ancient house with walls 'cracked and torn and moistened by the rains', moaning windows, fallen tiles, and rats scampering about. The grandmother is described with humour and detachment as someone who is "very simple," "religious," and proud of her "oldest blood." The old house, with its cracked and torn walls, may also represent a woman's loss of happiness and deteriorating dignity. The broken tiles depict Kamala Das's shattered hope and aspiration.

Apart from the pathos of her grandmother's memory, the poem is about the poet's perception of death. It has a solemn and solemn tone to it, as shown by the short and crisp lines. Even when Kamala Das writes of failure and emptiness, as well as the impending darkness, the poet's certain clarity of outline, serious nerve control, and poise of movement demonstrate that she is in command of herself in a period of profound reflection. The next lines effectively convey a pervasive and overwhelming sense of death and decay:

"I know the rats are running now
Across the darkened halls,
They do not fear the dead,
I know the while ants have reached my house
And have raised on walls Strange totems of burial.
At night, in stillness,
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death. The noise of rafters cracking
And the windows whine.
I have let you down
Old house, I seek forgiveness."
(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 16)

She treasures her antiquity placed here. She cherishes her former home to the point that pleasant memories and painful memories are mixed together. Her abandoning the house to its fate by ceasing to care for it reflects her desire for a place where she can live in liberty and freedom. Kamala Das compares herself to a Wordsworthian Skylark who never forgets her home, the ground. Because it is both a bird of the land and a bird of the heavens. Or Shelley's Skylark, who wishes to flee the world since it is full of cares; or Keats' Nightingale, who lives in a dream realm with no connection to reality. However, while having a minor mood or flavour associated with the aforementioned archetypal birds, a comparison research shows that Kamala Das is very down to earth and has an essence of truth to herself. Isolating herself from masculine dominance is the escapist she seeks. Her yearning is both humanitarian and feminine, and it falls under the feminist umbrella.

Her Nair ancestors are also represented through the house she shared with her grandmother and brother. She frequently ties her ancestry to a royal bloodline, as her grandmother once informed her as a child:

"That we had the oldest blood,
My brother and she and I,
The oldest blood in the world,
A blood thin and clear and fine
While in the veins of the always poor
And in the veins
Of the new-rich men."
(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, P. 16)
King Bruce's statements demonstrate that she has a close emotional link with her great grandmother:
"an inner core of identity to which she refers her

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name and aristocratic blood, her mother's family, life in the South and her youth in contrast to her Marriage."

(qtd. in King Bruce: 149)

Kamala Das is conscious of the two classes—the poor and the wealthy—but she comes off as sardonic anytime strong feelings arise in her. The poem opens with her reminiscences of her upbringing with her brother and grandmother, who are devoted to the old house as well as her romantic relationships. Reminiscences are a wellspring of true human emotions.

She describes her grandmother's personality, including her disposition and behaviour, as well as her affection for the deteriorating house. When she sees the damaged and decaying house, it hurts her just as much as seeing her elderly grandmother. As a result, she makes a commitment to her,

"When I grow old, I said,

And ver very rich
I shall rebuild the fallen walls
And make new this ancient house."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 16)

But later in the poem, we come across her honest confession and realisation:

"I had learnt by then
Most lessons of defeat
Had found out that to grow rich
Was a difficult feat."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 18)

This poem is unique in that Kamala Das feels the pulsing of the gap between her rural past and her urban present while remembering her ancestral home and village. Although her blood had received a stately flavor, the poet does not want her blood to be blamed for not keeping the promises made to her by her grandmother.

Her blood becomes an agency to recall her beautiful history, but it also holds the irony of fate that the same agency is unable to bring about desired changes. It also alluded to a female powerlessness in the face of a male-dominated culture. The house is mentioned twice in the poem, once from the grandmother's perspective and once from the poet's perspective. In the first description, the house is described as a sign of disintegration while also evoking strong feelings of affiliation and love for it.

Despite the fact that it produces a sense of death and becomes a sign of inseparable past in the second phase, she would never, ever blame her blood. Accepting her incapacity to retrieve and recapture the past while uploading its wonderful narrative has a touch of self-pity.

The poetess combines gravity and irreverence in her poem "Nani." The suicide of the poet's pregnant maid, who hanged herself in the privy while he was still a child, haunts her. 'The dark plump one, who bathed me near the well,' she added, and who hanged herself in the privy, represents her opinion in the following lines:

"A clumsy puppet, and when the window blew
Turning gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us, a comic Dance..."
(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 40)

The hanging body rotating softly on the rope appeared to the children to be doing a puppet show. Nani's body undulating when the window blew and moved to and fro, they thought, was only for their amusement. After a few years, the poetess inquires about the dead maid with her grandma. She acts as if she doesn't know what she's talking about, prompting the poetess to say:

"With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends thus with a query. It is this designed
Deafness that turns mortality into
Immortality, the definite into
The soft indefinite."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 40)

The grandma forgets about the incident with the passage of time, but the poet does not. We can also see that the poem finishes with a deep sense of tranquilly, accompanied by the term 'clotted peace' of the dead, but the paradox is that the imagery that emerges from the dead's calm does not belong to the dead's world, but to the living's. A person who is embarrassed cannot directly answer a question because he cannot confront the reality. In this regard, C. V. Venugopal makes the following point:

"The poetry of Kamala Das is full of questions that are rarely answered. They are queries about truth. But, truth, in general, is unbearable. And Kamala Das, the seeker after truth feels betrayed." (qtd. in Z.F. Molvi: 103)

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Kamala Das is a poet with a keen interest in learning new things. Her inquisitive curiosity allows her to investigate her surroundings thoroughly. The poem "Gino" begins with a warning and apprehension. In it, a lover's kiss is contrasted to a Krait's bite, which 'fills the bloodstream with its poisonous essence.' She becomes love-aware as a result, as well as mindful of the sense of death that is also the essence of living. The urge to experience this poisoned love, possibly love outside of marriage, clashes with the difficulties of 'dislodging the inherited memory of a touch.' But, even if the problem is solved, the poet is haunted by visions of 'obscure hands,' 'wardboys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors/To the x-ray room's dark interior, 'of airplanes/Bursting red in the sky,' 'of fat/half-caste children, lovelier than Gods,' and 'Drinking wine in verandahs'. And then she realises that her dreams are false, and that the burden of her body becoming unsightly and filthy is more real:

"This body that I wear without joy, this body
Burdened with lenience, slander, toy, owned
By man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with
My darling's impersonal lust.

Or, it shall grow gross
And reach large proportions before its end."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 14)

The poet is clearly conjuring up her sense of disease, death, and decay of all things beautiful in the above lines. Another poem, the "Glass" draws attention to the vulnerability of love-experience as well as the body to disintegration. There is a deep sense of sadness when the poet says:

"I went to him for half an hour
As pure woman, pure misery
Fragile glass, breaking Crumbling...."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 21)

The poetess's uneasiness is expressed in this poem through a Freudian yearning for a missing father figure. She is seen travelling from man to man in quest of her actual home, yet there appears to be a sense of lost effort in the lengthy search. As a result, the poem "Glass" takes on a clinical tone as an attempt to locate him and the "misplaced" father who has suddenly appeared everywhere.

The poetess had compared herself to the inmate who analyses the geography of his confinement

with incredulity and hope in "The Prisoner." The following lines depict the situation:

"I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love, For I must someday find
An escape from its snare."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 29)

The word "trappings" is significant because it connotes both "the trappings of lust from which she must free herself in order to know true love" and "the soul's cry against its moral garb." Typically, the offender attempts to flee the prison just to return to his usual life. Mrs. Das is implying here that there is no absolute escape from the bonds of this life or from lust. After recovering from a long sickness, the poetess wrote "After the Illness." It introduces the themes of self-survival and the lover's love for her. Perhaps his love was stable because of his profoundly hidden spirit. The poem, "The Millionaires at Marine Drive" is both somber and meditative in tone, with its central theme being the woman's inextricable estrangement. The poetess is haunted by the warmth she received from her grandmother; the reason is that no guy has ever been able to give her such genuine love. The grandmother is depicted as a symbol of kindness and warmth, and she is contrasted with her as follows:

"... all the hands

The great brown thieving hands groped beneath my
Clothes, their fire was of an arsonist's,
Warmth was not their arm, they burnt my cities Down ..."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 53)

Her grandmother's touch was kind and caring. Kamala Das' aching heart has always been soothed by her patting and pampering. However, as we have seen, the touch of her husband and other men is not at all comforting. Their touch resembles the hands of 'steal,' which is illicit, petty, and illegal. Men's destructive incendiary weapons, such as groping her garments and burning her cities down, would thus demonstrate the destructive incendiary devices used by men to restrict and destroy feminine interests in society.

As a result, it's evident that there was no mental contact between her and her spouse. Above all, she desired a lovable 'identity' with him, but her circumstances only brought her the sorrow of growing old with a freedom she had never asked for. This poem powerfully depicts a transition in Kamala Das' approach to the love topic, as she

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shifts from the grandeur of physical love to a general dissatisfaction with the male character, who tries to belittle the kind of woman she is.

Kamala Das' poetry depicts the anguish of women who are rising from a situation of slavery and enslavement and attempting to create their identity and self. As a result, "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems," a collection of poems, portrays Indian women in a way that offends traditional male notions of decency and decorum. She imagines a new era for women poets, one in which they aspire to build new places, a new medium, and newer ways of communication, all while rejecting the dominant culture's traditional modes of poetic expression. This third collection of poetry, taken as a whole, is a blistering attack

and a defiant attitude against the male-dominated universe, and can legitimately be called a challenge to patriarchy.

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