



Quest for Identity in Kamala Das' A Old Play House

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ABSTRACT:

Kamala Das, a well-known figure in English literature is the torch bearer of confessional women writing in India. She opened a new arena where the utmost feelings of a female- her dreams, hopes, love, lust, suffering, despair, anguish are openly expressed. Das expresses her need for love with frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context. This study is an analysis of Das' poem 'The Old Playhouse'. Quest for identity in a male dominated world is one of her recurring themes. In her poem she is struggling to find a voice in the patriarchal world. In 'The Old Playhouse', Das pictures a husband-wife relationship in which the husband creates a framework for the wife to fit in. In this poem poet gives the image of a woman who is struggling for identity and independence. This poem is an experiment in the search for love and the significance of the self. She rejects the patriarchal value system that is based on egoism, greed for power, expansionism, hero-cult, violence, war, mindless exploitation of man and nature.

Key words: Identity, relationship, patriarchal, despair

'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.

The possessive instinct of the man is stressed in the opening of the poem. The man (or better, the poetess’ husband) tried to tame a free bird that she was and subject her to sexual torture so that she should forget her happy seasons, old homes and her intrinsic value as a woman. But she had come to him not to learn of him but of herself and thereby ‘grow’ in a carefree atmosphere. He was pleased with her body’s response and its fragile convulsions. He made hectic love to her and overwhelmed her by his forceful physical contact. He rather over flooded the organs of her body by an energetic mating and dribbled his spittle into her mouth. He called her ‘wife’, who was taught to attend to her domestic duties ungrudgingly and look after him properly by supplying him tea, food and vitamins at the needed moments. She tried to adjust herself in accordance with his wishes but she lost her individuality in the process and became a mere dwarf under his disastrous male ego. She was totally reduced and annihilated in due course:

In her poem ‘An Introduction’ she says about the categorizers who want her to fit into a patriarchal framework.

—
Dress in sarees, be girl Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in.
Oh Belong cried the categorizers. (63)

Quest for identity in a male dominated world is one of her recurring themes. She is struggling to find a voice in the patriarchal world. She wants to make them understand that women too have sexuality, and it is not the monopoly to be controlled by men. Women have the right to express. She was trying to break the shackles of the age-old tradition of treating women as sheer commodities. Her voice is the voice of the new liberated Indian woman,—The lives of women in India, as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid point out, exist at the interface between caste and class inequality.

The Old Play House is characterised by an emotional intensity arising from a deep sense of betrayal, from the feeling that she has been damned to a life of imprisonment in a male- dominated world. The opening lines of the poem depict the plight of a married woman, chained to her husband’s house:

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. . . (32)

How can someone feel love when they are curtailed of all their freedom? Love is not gained by controlling others. Love can be fully expressed in a tension free atmosphere. So how can someone give love and intoxicate; and restrict their freedom. Kamala Das portrays the ideal Indian household scene where male controls female in the name of love.

Love is perhaps no more than a way of learning about one's self and its reward an insight not into another's being but really into one's own. Like the legendary youth Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image reflected in a fountain thinking it to be the nymph of the place and committed suicide, the poet too wishes for total freedom. In addition to sexual exploitation and betrayal the lack of love in man-woman relationship is an improvised form of male oppression. Loveless relationships are unbearable for women. It is more or less a burden to carry.

In *Writing the Female: A Study of Kamala Das* Prasantha Kumar says, Kamala Das conceives of the male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the women loses her identity. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry . . . Several poems of Das convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage . . . Their love is a disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. The life of Das's persona may be considered a tale of her experiments with love and the repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love. (34-35).

Kamala Das always felt terrified by the dreadful ego of her husband. She was meant to please her self-conceited husband against her wishes to preserve this relationship. It is in this process of unnatural appeasement she had lost her all individuality and self-respect. She was almost reduced to a dwarf and lost all her will to think and act in an independent manner. Being mentally disturbed, her responses and reactions were always illogical and inconsistent. She had lost all her identity as a dignified woman and felt totally dehumanized in this caged existence.

Kamala Das's marital life is disturbed due to the overpowering and egotistical nature of her husband. She is all alienated and frustrated in life because of the indifferent attitude of her husband. She is denied all the needs of a woman for self-growth and self-discovery. She is neglected by her husband who treats her as an object for the satisfaction of his lust only.

It was a period of winter in her life. For Kamala Das, life has come to a stand-still. All her romantic dreams of the marital life are shattered and she faces a complete vacuum in her life. There is no space for singing or dancing in her colourless and meaningless life. Her life is like an old playhouse filled with impenetrable darkness. She is all fed up with the stereotyped and mechanical technique of the love-making of her husband. He offers love in fatal doses which will ultimately kill his wife.

Her basic theme is the exploration of true love, man-woman relationship based on love and of the pains and pleasures of its realization. Every poem is a repeated experiment in this search. The strength of her poetry lies in its haunting ability to awaken our dormant human sympathies and our repressed passion for genuine human relationship. She conceives an ideal man-woman relationship that is based on love without lust, passion, and desire; and one for possession and sympathy without condescension.

Das is perhaps, the most feminine among the Indian woman poets writing in English. She has much to say about the pathos of a woman, emerging from a possessive role to the point of discovering and asserting the individual liberty and identity. She wrote all she had perceived, known and loved. To sum up, frankness, courage and honesty are the features that mark the poetry of Kamala Das.

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