



IDENTITY AND CRAVE FOR LOVE IN KAMLA DAS'S SELECTED POEMS

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry offers a mirror to the writer's innermost feelings by uncovering emotions that elude even their own consciousness. According to a leading researcher in the field, 'The overarching theme of Kamala Das's poetry is identification, and the recurring motif is self-assertion, which recapitulates itself in different forms' (TYAGI, 2015). She crafts the persona of an Indian woman who confronts societal constraints with the unrestrained hope for love to sustain her existence. Thus, her writings articulate a visceral yearning for love that underpins her very being. This analysis explores how the interplay between identity and the craving for love shapes Kamla Das's poetry, tracing the development from untenable cultural and religious norms through varied manifestations of longing to a compelling poetic voice in circulation.

The corpus concentrates the examination on these two thematic facets, which manifest recurrently in her oeuvre to prompt a student-centered inquiry. Kamla Das was a prolific writer, producing poetry, autobiography, short stories, and children's fiction in both English and Malayalam. Omissions of detailed critiques that illustrate the various means by which she negotiates these issues remain subjects for eventual inclusion in a more extensive commentary. Preliminary notes in the corresponding memoir and letter files further delineate treatment boundaries.

Engaging with Kamla Das's work involves first situating the poet within her socio-cultural and literary milieu. An overview of the extant biographical and critical materials outlines the raw materials for subsequent thematic investigation. A thematic inventory identifies the major thematic and symbolic frameworks corresponding to the predominant concerns with identity and the quest for love. Detailed studies then trace identity issues that permeate the writing across cultural and gender parameters, followed by an examination of the obsessive dynamic surrounding love, linking the two analytical strands. These frames inform a separate consideration of the poet's symbol system, whose architecture and expressive capacities derive from the elemental thematic units, and then call upon selected linguistic and stylistic features that intensify the major concerns. A brief overview of the literary reception indicates the impact of Kamala Das's work within the Indian and expatriate literary communities,

amplified by the preceding commentaries. A comparative appraisal distinguishes Diehl's exploration of identity from contemporaneous engagements and analyses the thematic convergence and contrast with other major Indian poets writing in English to establish the distinctive nature of Kamla Das's identity and craving for love.

The delineated scope maintains emphasis on the findings outlined in the introduction, while acknowledging that the specific aspects of identity and the nuanced qualities of the craving for love pervade the entire poetic production. The comprehensive conclusions restate the principal tenor of the poet's engagement, showing how a sustained and ultimately viable negotiation between the two profound existential preoccupations comes to define the poetry.

OVERVIEW OF KAMLA DAS'S LIFE AND WORK

Kamla Das, known as Kamala Surayya after her conversion to Islam, was a major Indian English poet and *littérateur* with a charismatic oratorical persona. Her entrance into contemporary Indian English poetry was comparatively late, yet she assured herself a place of distinction during a period when women writers were emerging in the literary field of Indian English consistently and convincingly. History records that among the earliest figures to express feminine sensibility in an assertive and forthright voice were Ashapurna Devi (1909–95) in Bengali, then Anna Achmatova (1889–1966) and Sorley MacLean (1911–96), successors to the initial feminine writers such as Sappho and Charlotte Smith.

Female poets gradually began to articulate the agonies and irritations of life in a world dominated by a male-centred value system, disobeying the epigrammatic injunction of William Wordsworth to write 'with a man's head on a woman's body', and articulating themselves in a mesmeric and distinctive voice. Kamala Das, also known by her pen names Madhavikutty and Kamala Surayya, has succeeded in speaking out the agony of defenceless womanhood with a relentless candour of confession. Her voluminous output of poetry, short stories, travelogue, autobiography and so on strike at the very conscience of a hypocritical society that is imbued with a deep-rooted, despite clandestine, philogynist temperament.

❖ THEMES IN KAMLA DAS'S POETRY

The issues of identity and the crave for love are two crucial features of Kamla Das's poetry that help to assess her relevance within the Indian literary scene. This section reviews them together with a set of related themes, preparing the ground for a reading of selected works. The title directs the ongoing reflection throughout the analysis to the two guiding notions on which Kamla Das's voice rests.

❖ IDENTITY

The exploration of one's own identity stands as a central concern in Kamla Das's poetry, particularly in the context of Indian English literature. Her perception of the self may be read against the influence of the post-colonial historical experience, which arguably follows the disavowal of a clearly heartfelt Indian identity in the immediate aftermath of India's independence from British rule. The search takes different forms on the three levels of personal self, cultural being, and gender identity, and eventually culminates in a whole new linguistic approach characterised by exceptional linguistic ingenuity and

intensity. Western influences are clearly present, although Indian engravings originally place her within Indian English poetry in opposition to English verse.

❖ 2 THE CRAVE FOR LOVE

An intense craving for love equally marks the terrain of Kamla Das's work, which makes the quest for love one of the defining motivators of her voice. The strong feeling for a lifelong relationship expressed in far greater depth by Kamla Das than by most of her Indian English contemporaries regularly draws upon a plurality of broad or contradictory moods such as desire, belonging, longing, collapse, loss, indifference, and cruelty. As the trembling centre of her poetry, the tide of emotions suggested by the theme bestows upon the craving for love a particularly convincing urgency and scope when personality is exposed without reserve.

❖ EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY

Kamala Das's creative life reflects a crisis of identity recognizing a multiplicity of selves (TYAGI, 2015). The self is no longer a fixed entity, shaped by his or her own environment over a considerable passage of time. Rather it is fragmented and alienated from the environment it inhabits, fluid as a series of social roles, each constructed moment to moment in a continuous process of change, easily disrupted and always unstable (Raj Gargey, 2017). The need for identity becomes the eternal urge to become and at once the perpetual failure to be. It is in solving this contradiction that the poet's tales acquire their wealth and poignancy. Her plea is for hope. Her valediction is: Life is the only subject, death is a word. Whatever the masks of despair so penetratingly depict, they never submerge the underlining hope. The poems not only dramatize the struggle for selfhood but become, in themselves, a statement of the self engaging consciousness, framing, reshaping, searching with words for what the enduring self behind the complex transitivity of roles is

❖ THE QUEST FOR LOVE

As a theme, love finds centre stage in the poetry of Kamla Das. Kamla Das writes openly about desire and love, about the frustration to find it and the disillusionment when it turns into lust (TYAGI, 2015). The quest for love is the unifying thread of her poetry. The intense feeling of desire stays alive in almost all her poems, though it assumes different shapes and shades on the journey from 'An Introduction' to 'The Old Playhouse'. The journey includes poems like 'My Grandmother's House', 'The Dance of Eunuchs', 'A Hot Noon in Malabar', 'The Looking Glass', 'The Sunshine Cat', 'The Stone Age', 'I Know the Mask That I Wear', 'The Descendants', 'The Invitation', 'Song of the Pilgrim', 'The Old Playhouse', and several others. Broadly speaking, the theme of love in Kamla Das includes the intricate web of related themes such as sexual desire, disappointed lust, longing, love for God, maternal care, loss of parental love, and so on.

❖ FEMININE EXPERIENCE

The expression of feminine sensibility, not merely of love, is often recognized as a hallmark of Kamla Das's poetry. It defies the traditional ideal and image of women in Indian culture. Her poetry unveils the feminine mind in its intrigue, mystery, and challenge and portrays the exploration of a woman's mind and deep feelings. Kamla Das breaks the traditional restrictions and taboos imposed by society and confesses her frailties and failings. Defying the

feminine role of a secret receiver of love and tenderness, Kamla Das demands complete fulfillment of love. She voices the feminine heart in joy and sorrow, hope and despair.

Kamla Das is a rebel against all restraints imposed on woman by society, community, religion, and history. She wants to break these female bonds and desires to live life on her own terms. She rebels against society—both Indian and Western—religion, language, marriage relations, and woman's image. Her poetry is largely confessional and self-revealing, with a dollop of protest making it a personal form of art. A long-felt deprivation or suffering bursts forth with dramatic fervor and screams for the right of women. The quest for identity remains the main concern of Kamla Das.

❖ IDENTITY IN SELECTED POEMS

Kamala Das's poetry embraces the complex nature of identity, negotiating the self through cultural, sexual, and linguistic boundaries. Her poetic identity is constituted by multiple, sometimes contradictory, selves that are at once fragmented and unified. These identities are variously characterized as Indian, Malayalee, Catholic, and feminist (Raj Gargey, 2017). Das also uses images of the body to stress the insubstantiality of identity and the necessity of transforming every poetic "I" into a "we" that includes other selves. Her feminist critique unravels prevailing notions of nation and community and undermines family, religious precept, and roles defined by culture. Throughout her imperialist-induced exile in the domestic realm, Lady Macbeth remains a haunting reference, for it is as if the stage of consciousness has been usurped by a culturally unassimilated Other, and the lower strata of the psyche threaten to glide on without intellectually anticipating a higher reality. Kamala Das thinks she may well be a "counter-blast" against the neo-cultural filters that have kept other Indian poets from informing a society of the twenty-first century's futility in rejoining the Empire. In sustaining her girl's measurements as a secret and as a sign — "Tell me how can I put the foot of my virginity into a shoe of authority?" — Kamala Das struggles to translate identity and love. Appreciation of these realities through imitation and misreading of Western pragmatism's privileging of culture (TYAGI, 2015).

❖ SELF-PERCEPTION

Nurturing a powerful quest for self-knowledge whose signpost is the refusal to accept the conventions imposed by society, Kamala Das conveys an intensely personal vision of self-discovery (Raj Gargey, 2017). Whether asserting her individual identity or confronting the void encountered upon examining it, Kamala Das seeks an authentic self that remains elusive, as suggested by selections from the poems "My Grandmother's House" and "An Introduction," where she explores her perception of self and the fragmentation of identity.

"My Grandmother's House" charts the homeward retreat of a wanderer, whose search for fulfilment leads her back to the solitude of adolescence. Facing a deeply puzzling identity, the poem's first eight stanzas are filled with images presenting the search: "I was a tree swung upon, drenched in the colour of the year, leaf-cricket, laughter like a gluttoned small brook" (Das, 1965, p. 103). The tone shifts to the sad and longed-for precisions of childhood, while romantic natural images favour clarity and self-fulfilment: "My grandmother's house, in

the big strange street,” “a wild white goose amongst the blue hills,” and “the ease of doves” (p. 104). Farewell to childhood presages yet another search:

Everything is a symbol of my return: [...] Always the house flings open its arms; always the welcome of the hundred doors (pp. 103–4).

“An Introduction” juxtaposes dialect with English rhyme, and the intimate with the cold political, foregrounding the conflict between spontaneous autobiography and imposed convention. The poem, addressed to the “you” of the English reader, negotiates a cultural gulf in the most forthright way, rehearsing the poet’s self-perception and articulating the terms of the encounter with English. The thematic concern with self-identity, or the self’s relation to social environment, means that “An Introduction” speaks for figures displaced in their own cultural milieu (TYAGI, 2015). Negotiating gender, regional, political, erotic, place and culture-related affiliations for the female authorship of the poem, “An Introduction” defines an identity that the poet, both negotiating with and overthrowing English usage, claims has theological and mythological authority.

❖ CULTURAL IDENTITY

A majority seeks to assert their cultural identity even in situations where the group to which they belong is occupying a subordinate regional network. The writers belonging to the second or third generation of Indian origin settle abroad. There emerge two tendencies. One want to align themselves strongly with their culture to remain their link with the roots, and are frequently critical of the wear and tear of the western world. Kamala Das aligns herself strongly to India. Yet, some like Nissim Ezekiel want to reinvent Indian English poetry to keep the art local with all the challenges of the contemporary world. The poets emerging from India like Kamala Das want to glorify their motherland to whom they owe their life (Raj Gargey, 2017).

❖ GENDER IDENTITY

Kamala Das is acutely aware that a woman’s assertion of her sexuality is regarded as an insolent transgression of accepted norms that control women’s lives. Accordingly, she poses the untenable question, “What are woman so fiercely fighting for? / To please a man?” (Die Fledermaus, 62). The defiant tone exposes the inequality such norms establish; throughout the poem the woman’s speech is ironically overshadowed by violence, suggesting an erotic power that does not, in Kamala Das’s formulation, stem from feminine hysteria but from the mobilisation of desire. The anxiety apparent in the stress on the fifteenth night’s disappearance, for instance, reappears in “My Grandmother’s House” (1965): “There is a Ship / Within me, without me, / A bed of Water-lilies,” with “the classical double representation of the House as a safe and a penitentiary” (TYAGI, 2015). Elsewhere the “I” seems to be suspended in a steady state of agony, remaining “trapped in her own ‘reason’ and doubts”. Kamala Das’s voice cannot “believe any more in her own spell”. Her pregnant reiteration of “I watched the waves in the bliss of solitude” (An Introduction, 8) suggests both Braille and brailing, while the opposing patterns in the phrase “Cold water, / Cold fire” (Words, 32), the references to “cruelty / Without redress” (My Grandmother’s House, 5) and “Memories that bring a quick footfall of tears” (An Introduction, 17) move away from declamatory deserts and gravitate toward “very dramatic expression of an agonizing spirit,” a “theme of torturous remembrance” still under “the sign of Anarchy”. Meanwhile, “The Dance of

Eunuchs,” a sad but explicit account of a tragedy, and “The Looking Glass,” an ironic and relentless abuse of the male propensity to transmute woman into subjection, add realistic details to the agony. Most significant among those details is the implication of self-immanent power in woman’s dance, which transforms the entire poem into a “serious examination of the self”. The endogenous marvellous is present from the beginning, reinforced by the anguished refrain: “Isn’t that what love is for?” (The Best of Kamala Das, 109).

Having heard a daughter’s testimonial at first hand, Kamala Das knows the sexual burdens of bruised women. The final image of “The Looking Glass” describes a female figure that is “sulky, needy, / Humming the song of the demon-lover scattered from the wounds” (The Best of Kamala Das, 358). Through the catharsis of her poetry, Kamala Das understands woman’s problem with marriage generally: “I’m a kidnapper, I’m a housebreaker, a trespasser, a thief, and I’ve come to steal your soul” (The Best of Kamala Das, 360). “Mother” reinforces the message. The storm also represents the rampant failure of the patriarchal system but must not be mistaken for anxiety. Kamala Das’s poetry “carries the dignity, and anguish, of brutalized womanhood” (Raj Gargey, 2017) ; it advocates “for a feminine identity”. Though the critical wilderness common to women writers persists, the distribution of Kamala Das’s poetry suggests that, in 1965, “the volume of verse most capable of eroding the silence of the wilderness” and delivering its full freight more than a decade early would rise from fertile Indian terrain.

❖ THE CRAVE FOR LOVE

The predominant theme in Kamla Das’s poetry is love in all its varieties — physical, emotional, fulfilment, emptiness, desire, frustration, loss — and the craving for it. Her poetry explores the myriad ways in which love illuminates or darkens an individual’s life, ranging from the intensely romantic to the cynically erotic (TYAGI, 2015). It is one of the basic human needs and all her life, irrespective of circumstances, she has yearned for the warmth of love. From early childhood she has experienced flawed affection, from neglect because of her parents’ immaturity to passion and disappointment in love affairs, to the bland beatitude of married life. Yet many of the poems of her early phase convey a yearning for love and acceptance, apostrophizing a variety of revered or absent objects — “my mother” (“My Mother at Sixty-Six”); “me” (“The Sunshine Cat”); “grandfather” (“Old Playhouse”); “you” (“Sister of My Heart”) — and, more simply, “Love” (“Love”). Classic examples of the ego-poet’s craving include “An Introduction,” “The Old Playhouse” and the sequence “The Looking Glass.”

This theme dominates the opening and closing poems of *The Old Playhouse* and likewise the last two pieces of *Summer in Calcutta*. A lonely female speaker moves through an urban landscape at twilight, searching for meaningful human contact:

❖ LOVE AS A CENTRAL THEME

Love occupies a critical position in Kamla Das's poetry and emerges as the central theme of her poetic vision. Fervently craving love, she turns away from her conventional home and chases love from “the doors of strangers,” each time with pride and “without compromising her self-respect” (TYAGI, 2015). Love to her is a primal, vital force that demands an audacious, even reckless pursuit and a passionate exploration. It takes absolute precedence over all other concerns, to

the extent that city, caste, family, and homeland become insignificant allusions standing remote from the massive demand of love. By contrast with the tone of involvement and aspiration characterizing her quest for love, other themes such as the treatment of sex, authority, and death serve largely as complementary or peripheral motifs. The climate of attraction and repulsion generated by the theme of love provides the background for the often upsetting treatment of these obverse elements of the emotional picture.

❖ DESIRE AND LONGING

Desire and longings are recurring themes in Kamla Das's poems. Longing for love, marriages, physical intimacy, and spiritual satisfaction, Kamla Das attempts to satisfy all and none simultaneously. Longing for a former lover is expressed in poems such as the three-line poem "My mother at the age of three taught me" where the speaker, having lived alone much against her mother's wishes, reminisces about her lover. There is a sense of ambivalence in many of her poems in so far as the entering and structuring of bodily and sexual desire, and the contribution of that desire to the reshaping of the trope of love (TYAGI, 2015). The continuum between 'love' on the one hand and 'lust' or 'sex' on the other is played with, challenged, underscored, and subverted throughout Kamla Das's poetry. Often, lust and sex become a site of emotional warmth or comfort, found in an embrace, in a body, somewhere between inevitable encounter and something possibly transformed to love. In "Epilogue," therefore, the ordinary physical act of sex between a man and a woman becomes an epiphanic moment where the speaker articulates that for her, difference cannot exist in a vacuum but must be felt.

❖ NATURE AND LOVE

Kamla Das employs nature imagery to evoke feeling and express the self in many poems. She writes about love, desire, and life's pain in a bold and honest voice that has re-energized Indian writing in English. Nature serves as a powerful symbol of love and lust, enabling her to delve into the feminine experience with a frankness that is disarming and unprotected (TYAGI, 2015). Her poetry explores the selfhood and identity of her poetic persona through the multifaceted symbol of nature. For Das, nature is ultimately inseparable from the poetic persona; it is intimately involved in the pursuit of love and, closely linked, of identity.

In the poem "The Sunshine Cat," her identification of the self with the luxuriant power of nature is complete and unquestioned. The dominant image of the poem is, of course, the cat. Kamala Das's words stretch the metaphor to emphasize not only the sensuousness suggested by the cat but also its power and freedom. She also seeks to link the power of the cat with the energy of the sun. The sun which is so relentless that she can finally "barely bear the sun's flame," she yet acknowledges is inseparable from her feline self: "but / the cat is in love with the sunshine".

Similarly, "I Have Heard...Too Late" and "A Hot Noon in Malabar" use the figurative power of nature to convey feeling to the speaker's beloved, who appears in "The Sunshine Cat" as the impersonal nature of the sun and the feline world. The poem commemorates an intense feeling of love and desire. The poems "The Stone Age" and "The Dance of Eunuchs" incorporate images of nature which emphasize the poet's contact and identification with it, stressing

its symbolic role in the expression of the self. By contrast, her later works “An Introduction” and “The Freaks” use nature metaphorically to signal the dangers hidden within the identity the poetess finds herself assuming.

❖ DOMESTIC SPACES

The private domain forms the backdrop against which much of Kamla Das's poetry takes shape. While various works delve into the world at large, her poems unfold within the confines of home, the sanctuary of life's denouements. The domestic sphere emerges as a copyrighted zone within which Kamla Das can assert, discover, or relinquish her sense of self—offering room to examine the condition of a woman amid the pulsing dynamics of a broken society.

Various poems establish home as the setting of unresolved tensions, portraying personal and societal fractures reflected in the domestic interior. The inside similarly appears as a compartment for salutes and inscriptions, multilayered narratives, self-mediation, and containment (TYAGI, 2015).

The home, with its various resonances, shines a distinctive light on Kamla Das's quest to define a space for the self amid the fractured binaries of identity and separation, menace and beauty, capturing a spectral, morbid, anxious longing for selfhood which no consummation seems to fulfill.

❖ NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Unlike some of the other notable women poets who have relied heavily on passionate and melancholic rhyme scheme to convey the soul of their work, Kamala Das takes a different route. In poetry, the two primary voices available to the author are first-person narration and third-person narration. Each gives the speaker and the reader a different perspective by which to perceive the story. First-person narration both deepens and widens the scope of the reader's experience; the emotions are that of a single perspective and the reader understands and construes the affairs of the poetry as the narrator they are reading. Conversely, third-person narration distances the reader from the experiences of the poet through exclusive perception, eliminating the narrator as a character and forcing the reader to view them as another of the poem's constructs instead of the usual custom of the poet themselves. Kamala Das engages several of her poems through the use of conversational and confessional verse and first-person narration — ranging from innately personal such as “The Old Play House,” “The Looking Glass,” and “My Mother at Sixty-Six” to fictional such as “An Introduction,” “Dance of Eunuchs,” and “Forgive Me, Father” — and ranges a number of others as the chief narrator but written in third person, not as herself but the characters portrayed in poems ranging from “My Grandmother's House,” “The Fruit Lady,” “A Word,” and “A Hot Noon in Malabar” to “Enchantment” and “The Sunshine Cat.” The strategic use of first-person narration keeps her personal poems as singular and unsolicited expressions and her fictional poems from appearing as facile or ranting due to a lack of a narrative vehicle, although several have argued that the third-person narration limits the emotional power of the works, thus mitigating their impact (TYAGI, 2015) ; (Raj Gargey, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Kamla Das's poetry charts the quest for love alongside the nameless desire for selfhood. The existential void left by a loss—or absence—of identity is countered by a craving for love. She fashions verse around the self-taking subject

and the subject's desire for love. Through a dynamic interface between the self and the other, each category is continually renegotiated across a range of poetic voices. A search for selfhood and the pursuit of love, among her many competing daily demands, become the resonant refrain.

The poems revolve around a female perspective informed by a personal history. They probe the unequal relationship between the speaker's sense of selfhood and the expectations and experiences of romantic/emotional relationships, the traumas of social/economic imbalance, and the vexed cultural relations between East and West. In Das, the poetic persona continuously renegotiates and reframes a classical tension that begins with the question: Who am I? In *The Old Playhouse* (2001), the markers of subject formation—the fragmented body, the nomadism of tongues, the play with alterity—undo representation, revealing the subject as a complex interface rather than a fixed presence.

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