

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A FEMINIST STUDY OF KAMALA DAS'S POEMS "AN INTRODUCTION" AND "THE SUNSHINE CAT"

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**Abstract:** The paper seeks to illustrate how Kamala Das quests for her individuality besides feminine identity that is being subordinated by male-dominated society. Das, a confessional poet like Sylvia Plath, releases her psychological or inner burden with openness and great conviction in quest for her own identity in her poems "An Introduction" and "The Sunshine Cat" taken from *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). Whatever revelations made by Das in her poems are all about her personal life and her own experiences. She rebels against the traditional gender role imposed on women, particularly on her by patriarchal society, of her time. The poems are about her pains, miseries and frustrations that have engulfed her throughout her life. In "An Introduction", Das depicts the politics and power of the nations controlled and dominated by only few people (men) while her advocacy of English language is highly discouraged by her critics. The poem "An Introduction" further depicts how early marriage leads her to traumatic frustration as her husband aberrantly satisfies his thirst for lust. So, she quests for true love rejecting such atypical love-making. In her poem "The Sunshine Cat", Das talks about the life of a persona, who is no other than Kamala Das, discloses her sexual life not only with her coward and selfish husband but also with other men leading her to disillusionment. Here, the claustrophobic domesticity molded by her husband leads her to chronic depression and enslavement. Moreover, the research paper unearths her revolt against established patriarchy for weakening her fundamental rights and self-identity.

**Keywords:** claustrophobic domesticity, feminine identity, individuality, patriarchal society, self-identity

**Introduction:** Kamala Surayya, popularly known as Kamala Das, was born in the year of 1934 at Punnayurkulam village situated in the southern Malabar of Kerala. Kamala Das, the Mother of Indian English Poetry, is not only a name of poetess rather a strong woman of distinguished voice. Das always comes forward for the cause of women and raises her voice against the female subjugation triggered by men. Das challenges the imposition of any traditional societal norms on

women by patriarchal society. She, as a strong woman, shows her dissent and responds against any social, political and educational discrimination imposed by men on women. Das cares neither about the people nor what they will think, as she debunks the social barrier and unequivocally embraces Islam in the year of 1999. For such bold step, she is highly criticized by the Indian citizens, especially by her harsh-critics. Das, a confessional poet like Sylvia Plath, releases her psychological or inner burden with openness and great conviction in quest for her own identity in her two well-known poems - "An Introduction" and "The Sunshine Cat" taken from *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). Das is an important bilingual writer in India who writes mainly in English and Malayalam. She has written poetry with autobiographical leitmotifs.

**"An Introduction" and Quest for Identity:** The title poem "An Introduction" is about her own introduction revealing her struggle as a woman faced in a patriarchal society. She has given a detailed account of her life that goes through countless tortures and troubles predominantly start from her childhood and go till her early adolescent. The poem "An Introduction" is about her quest for individuality besides feminine identity. Here, she highlights how she has been subordinated by the patriarchal society. Whatever revelations made by Das in the poem are all about her personal life and own experiences. She rebels against the traditional gender role imposed on her by patriarchal society of her time. The poem is about her pains, miseries and frustrations that have engulfed her throughout her life. In the beginning of the poem "An Introduction", Das talks about the power and politics of the nations controlled and dominated by only few people (men) while women are excluded from such political right. This is how democracy, which exists only in paper, is dying and far from the other section of the society. The poetess further depicts about her early marriage that leads her to traumatic frustration as her husband aberrantly satisfies his thirst for lust. Das further outlines how men are creating all kinds of tumult and confusion for women. They have dominated every sphere of the society and narrowing down the role of women. She has neither any regard nor has any interest in politics but she can list the names of male-politicians holding the power of the country and thinking themselves as the permanent rulers of the country while women are marginalized, not given the equal chance to participate in politics.

I don't know politics but I know the names  
Of those in power, and can repeat them like  
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru. (Das, p-7)

Kamala Das feels proud for being an Indian and a 'very brown' in colour contrasting to the Europeans. She further feels proud for being born in Malabar, Kerala. In her words, "I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar" (Das, p-7). She has mastery over three languages and can speak them like other Indians but write mainly in two languages: English and Malayalam. "I speak three languages, write in/ Two, dream in one" (Das, p-7). She is revealing her capability as a woman unlike other women who are clogged from speaking the language of others. The lines also mean that she, though a woman, is no lesser than her counter-part as far as ability and knowledge is concerned. She indirectly demands equal status like any man, questing for her individual identity. Her friends, critics, and visiting relatives, who feel jealous for her acumen, exceedingly discourage her not to write in English for its being a colonial language, not her mother tongue. They, having no logic behind such injunction, criticize her harshly for her advocacy of the English language. "Don't write in English, they said, English is/ Not your mother-tongue" (Das, p-7). Despite such criticism, she does not kneel down before their dissuasion, stands up strongly, and writes in both languages: English as well as Malayalam. Das desires to write in whatever language she feels though she is stopped from such liberty. So, she wants to be free from any clutches:

Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? (Das, p-7)

According to Kamala Das, no language can belong to any particular community, or country rather it belongs to everyone who learns it. She wants to live her life freely without any interference of anyone. She questions such incarceration and deflates any hegemonic myth created by men for women. She believes in the freedom of expression and defies anyone's interference in her life. She does not want to be caged like traditional housewives, rather wishing to fly like free birds. Language cannot be a barrier in one's expression as she wishes to speak in any language she likes, be it colonial, or other languages.

Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? The language I speak. (Das, p-7)

The language, which she uses, may be distorted and odd in nature but making mistake is a human nature. According to Das, it "Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses/ All mine, mine alone" (Das, p-7). Her language—half-English and half-Indian—appears to be

funny but that is her freedom. She finds her freedom in such imperfections or mistakes because no one is perfect in the world. Das finds her joys, reveals her desires, and hopes with such languages.

It voices my joys, my longings, my  
 Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing  
 Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it  
 Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is  
 Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and  
 Is aware. (Das, p-7)

In next part, as a confessional poetess, Das has confessed not only her inner turmoil but also the outer turmoil. She has objected the chauvinistic norms created by patriarchal society. She has talks about her own experiences related to home and the world. She remains unsatisfied with her husband, talking about her marriage, love and sexual life related to her private zone. She has grown up: "...I became tall, my limbs/ Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair" (Das, p-7). She gets married at the age of sixteen but fails to get pure love from her husband. She is treated only as an object of sexual pleasure byhim.

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
 Bedroom and closed the door (Das, p-7)

Her foolish husband has not tortured her physically but fails to provide her the love she is questing for. She feels beaten as her "...sad woman-body felt so beaten/ The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me./ I shrank Pitifully" (Das, p-7).Das does not find any pleasure during sexual intercourse with her insane husband. She slowly becomes bold and starts revoltingagainst her husband'ssupremacy in quest for her self-identity,showing her dissent against male-chauvinism.She is advised not to wear the dresses used by men,but she starts wearing shirts, trousers and cut her hair short,rejecting her womanliness. The patriarchal society encourages her to wear the typical dresses like *saree* in order to maintain her womanhood. In their words,

Be wife, they said.  
 Be embroiderer, be cook,  
 Be a quarreler with servants.  
 Fit in.

.....  
 Be Amy, or be Kamala.Or, better

Still, be Madhavikutty. (Das, p7-8)

They further prohibit her not to “...sit on walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows” (Das, p-7). She revolts against such male bigotry, finding her own identity in the society. For such endeavour, she is defined as a ‘schizophrenia’ or ‘Nympho.’ In the following sentences, she reveals her thirst for love like every man: “I met a man, loved him. Call/Him not by any name, he is every man/ Who wants a woman, just as I am every/ Woman who seeks love. / In him . . . the hungry haste/ Of rivers, in me . . . the oceans’ tireless/ Waiting” (Das, p-8). Then she asks about the identity of the man (name not mentioned): “Who are you, I ask each and everyone” (Das, p-8). He replies with the pronoun ‘I’: “The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and, /Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I” (Das, p-8). Here, ‘I’ stands for male-ego that gives men ultimate freedom to do whatever he wants to do. This ego leads a man to drink at twelve (midnight) as well as helps him to laugh and love a woman whenever he wants. The ego of ‘I’ dies only if the person dies which can be compared with the death of woman. At the end, she finds that he has also failed to bestow her true love like her husband. Finally, she also starts finding herself with the ego of ‘I’ like men. And she, like them, calls herself a sinner, saint, beloved and betrayed. She, having same pains and joys like men, puts herself to their position.

I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (Das, p-8)

**“The Sunshine Cat” and Quest for Identity:** In her poem *The Sunshine Cat*, Kamala Das talks about a persona who is probably no other than Das herself. The persona depicts about her married-life being spent with her selfish and coward husband. She has loved her with all her heart in the hope that her husband will return his opposite love to her but that does not happen. He is a coward and selfish husband using her as a sexual object just to gratify his physical need. He neither loves her nor uses her the way a husband must use in the bed. He uses her as a commodity to be used and thrown away. The jealous husband keenly observes her and prohibits her to be looked by any men. His behavior is much comparable with the husband of Robert Browning’s last duchess. Therefore, she, out of desperation for love, goes beyond her

husband's claustrophobic domesticity and engages herself with other men as sexual partners. She, better to say, engages herself into extra-marital love affairs in quest for true love but that too fails and leads her to complete disillusionment.

They did this to her, the men who know her, the man  
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish  
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor  
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band (Das, p-29)

They, not exceptional to her husband, appear to be selfish like her husband. They have failed to fulfill her desire for true love leading her to disappointment. She tries her best to create some genuine feeling among her lovers but in return, she has failed to get it.

...clinging to their chests where  
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her  
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget  
To forget, oh, to forget, and, they said, each of  
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not  
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you. (Das, p-29)

The lovers of the persona, who are younger to her, have failed to fulfill and provide the real satisfaction. Such failed-quest ultimately leads her to disappointment and shedding tears. It also snatches away her sound sleep, as she spends sleepless nights. She starts weeping in such a way that the tears can help her to build walls and the walls can hold her like a prisoner.

For sleep had lost its use.  
I shall build walls with tears,  
She said, walls to shut me in. (Das, 29)

In the last part, the persona reveals the cruelty made by her husband to her. He uses to lock her every morning in a room having numbers of books and unlocks her when he returns home in the evening. She has only one companion in her locked room and that is "a streak of sunshine" (Das, p-29) falling at the door of the locked-room. The ray of the sunshine, the poetess's only companion, appears to be like "a yellow cat to keep her company" (Das, p-29) but it loses its brightness due to cloudy sky as time passes and winter makes its entry. The sun's ray starts reducing to thin line like hair.

...But soon  
 Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he  
 Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a  
 Line, a half-thin line. (Das, 29)

Finally, the poetess becomes so pinched due to chronic depression and hopelessness. She becomes "...a cold and/ Half dead woman" (Das, 29). Therefore, she no longer remains an object of sexual desire to men: "now of no use at all to men." (Das, 29)

**Conclusions:** Kamala Das has truthfully illustrated her individual subaltern anguish and seclusion in the poems "An Introduction" and "The Sunshine Cat." But this is a common anguish faced by almost every woman in India. She has tried to create the space for such women who are being dominated, marginalized and colonized by men in home and the world. So, the research paper unearths her revolt against established patriarchal norms that weaken the fundamental rights and self-identity of women. Das, who raises her voice against male supremacy, proves any typical 'gender' role as a socially constructed phenomenon. For her, 'gender' is not a biological rather a psychological phenomenon created by our patriarchal society. French feminist Simone De Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* says that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman ...; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ... which is described as feminine" (267). We can conclude with the words of J. W. Scott: "'Man' and 'woman' are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendental meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions." (49)

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