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## Delineating the Traumatic, Lacerated Self of Kamala Das

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**Abstract:** The present article tries to capture the tumultuous elements of Kamala Das from her *déjà vu* and her poetry. It brings home the poetic self of Das wriggling in the vortex of claustrophobic world pushed forward by males in varying forms; yet she breaks down the peripheral boundary with her unorthodox words, images and symbols. She suffers from her identity crisis in a psychopathological state, and immediately stands on feet as a resurgent woman shaking off the traumatic self in a crystal canvas.

**Keywords:** claustrophobic state, traumatic self, nudity, lacerate.

“ ... every middle class bed is a cross on which the woman is crucified... men fall in lust , not love; woman crash in real self - destroying love, ... “

( *My Story* )

“ But they only wonder , tripping  
Idly over puddles of  
Desire....Can't this man with  
Nimble finger tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers ? ...

( *The Freaks* )

The poetry of Kamala Das traverses beyond the clichéd thoughts and embraces plethora of hidden areas of experience and complexity of feelings hitherto unexplored by other Indian women poets exercising in English. Her entire *oeuvre* makes a discovery of many levels of paradoxes through which the self passes in order to define, authenticate and validate its total involvement in the affairs of life. Her poems are the emphatic expressions of her feminine gestures that capture the luridness of male-constructed world. Das articulates her portrait of a tortured young woman with her real life experiences in a finely woven crystal canvas. Her poetry discloses the dilemmas and poignant situations encountered by her under the strain of her pining for love, sex and resultant ennui. She suffers from alienation and dislocation.

Marriage does deliver Kamala Das a sense of security and comfort, out of the gulf of loneliness. What she gets is only the force of love and sex by her husband. She turns only to be a prey of the male domination. One can underscore the traumatic experience of Kamala Das in her diary: "At a certain stage in my life I thought that my heart was situated between my thighs where warmth slowly grew whenever I was with love as though he had lit a sigree there and was blowing hard to let the flames rise. ... I was born in a family of frigid women. They were all so inhibited that was not told what would happen when a girl entered puberty. Then one day while the blood flowed between my thighs I wept out of fear, assuming that some internal organ had ruptured and that I was going to die. Nobody had ever told me of a woman's menstrual cycle and of her magical secretions, to prepare me for womanhood". Kamala Das very boldly draws out the secrets of her bed: "And at fifteen as a bride, wearing braces on my Teeth I saw a man's nudity for the first time and was shocked. It was so horribly menacing like a snake about to strike." Das penetrates into the pith of the politics of marriage, and considers it as a cruelty game: "Perhaps my marriage was meant to be a chastisement, a punishment to remove the kinks from my personality. My husband was to be the scourger. He was in that role very competent, very effective during the first years of our marriage."

When her marriage provides a rude jolt to her sensibility as a woman she utterly felt devastated. To prove herself as a resurgent woman she peels off of the long- drawn- out customs of patriarchy and cuts her hair short and dresses in male attire to shed away her womanliness. Still she is advised to,

... Dress in sarees , be girl  
Be wife, they said . Be embroider, be cook,  
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,  
Belong , cried the categorizers ...

( *An Introduction* )

In her mild negation of stereotypical roles , she attempts emphatically to establish her own identity and cordially finds it :

.... 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 ocean's tireless  
Waiting . Who are you , I ask each and everyone ,  
The answer is , it is I. Any where and ,  
Everywher , I see the one Who calls himself I  
In this world , he is tightly packed like the  
Sword in his sheath. It is I who drink lonely  
Drinks at twelve , midnight , in hotels of strange towns ,  
It is I who laugh , it is I who make love

And then , feel shame , it is I who lie dying  
 With a rattle in my throat . I am sinner ,  
 I am saint. I am the beloved and the  
 Betrayed . I have no joys that are not yours , no  
 Aches are not yours, I too call myself I .

( *An Introduction* )

Out of various disjunctive psychosomatic oppressions to seek her identity, Das often turns herself a victim and a crazy woman.

K. R. S. Iyengar rightly observes the poetry of Kamala Das: “Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself and again and again. Life is a cruel mocking bird, like the Dance of the Eunuchs:

Long braids flying , dark eyes flashing , they danced and  
 They danced , oh, they danced till they bled...  
 Some beat their drums ; others beat their sorry breasts  
 And waited , and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They  
 Were thin in limbs and dry ; like half-burnt logs from  
 Funeral pyres ...”

The ‘dance’ of the ‘eunuchs’ externalizes the inner traumatic aspect of Das’s self. The dominant note of the rottenness and infertility of the eunuchs evokes the same analogy as Das receives from her husband. She tries to assimilate the life-giving force of love within her vacant heart in both formats –carnal and metaphysical. But her husband bestows her only ‘skin-communicated thing called love’. He dribbled spittle into her mouth. Her lascivious husband delved deep into every pore of Das with his voracious hunger. In her wedlock and love , Das is completely found shorn of her identity in her claustrophobic narrow world--

... Her husband shut her

In every morning ; locked her in a room of books  
 With a streak of sunshine lying near the door , like  
 A yellow cat, to keep her company , but soon,  
 Winter came and one day while locking her in , he  
 Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a  
 Line , a hair-thin line, and in the evening when  
 He returned to take her out , she was a cold and  
 Half-dead woman , now of no use at all to men.

( *The Sunshine Cat* )

When her husband shuts in a single room leaving ‘a hair-thin line ‘ of sunshine to console her solitariness , she is reduced *in toto* into a ‘cold’ , ‘half dead’ body , suffering humiliation at the hands of her callous husband, ‘ a ruthless watcher’ . Her long poem entitled *Composition* draws adroitly the casual attitude of her male partner:

I asked my husband ,  
 Am I hetero,  
 Am I lesbian ,  
 Or am I just plain frigid ?  
 He only laughed.

( *Composition* )

“ While her sensibility seems to be obsessively preoccupied with love and lust , it finds love invariably petering out into lust , and lust merely eating itself to the point of nausea :

his limbs like pale and  
 Carnivorous paints reaching  
 out for me ...

The neons wink , the harlots walk , swaying  
 Their wasted lips , the  
 Rich men dance with one another’s wives and  
 Eke out a shabby,  
 Secret ecstasy , and , poor old men lie  
 On wet pavements and  
 Cough , cough their lungs out ...

And , is he female who  
 After , love , smoothes out the bed sheets with  
 Finicky hands and plucks  
 From pillows strands of hair ? “

( K.R.S. Iyengar , *Indian Writing in English* )

To get pleasure both mental and physical , when Das’s feminine self veers round to the ‘cynics’ , the strangers out of wedlock , she receives only a betrayal , a shock that dissects her into pieces . The cynic in *The sunshine Cat* utter ,

... I do not love you , I can not love , it is not  
 In my nature to love , but I can be kind to you ...

This leads her to nervous break-down. The conflicting and wounded self of Das , after being failure in her attempt to search love outside nuptial bond, she in a disconcerted and destitute manner says in *Suicide-*

O sea , I am fed up  
 I want to be simple  
 I want to be loved  
 And  
 If love is not be had,

I want to be dead, just dead  
 While enter deeper,  
 With joy I discover  
 The sea's hostile cold  
 Is after all skin-deep.

There is an earnest urge of Kamala Das in her diary to possess a perfect man like Rama to provide her the quintessence of love: "In Ramayana there is the story of Ahalya who was cursed to turn into stone. After centuries of waiting, Rama's touch brought her back to life. Is there to be a Rama for me? Or am I to turn a statue of stone till the end of the world? "

The tired , disturbed self of Das is showcased in a psychopathological state in the poem *Conflagration* ,

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried  
 Beneath a man ? It's time again to come alive,  
 The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame.

Das questions her being a woman and the very dogma of happiness after she gets married. There is an emphatic undercurrence of hysterical rupture in the above quoted lines as Juliet Mitchel opines: "Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarch capitalism. It is simultaneously what woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity. Within patriarchal discourse. "(*Femininity, Narrative, and Psychoanalysis*, reprinted in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed., David Lodge)

Moreover, Kamala Das brings home the discourse of body politics to assert the suspension of a female identity cowed down by its counterpart male .*The Looking Glass* with its striking feature of essential physicality puts an extra fervor on this aspect. The poet speaker stands nude in front of the 'looking glass' to make it prominent how weak and freak her limbs look in comparison to the male's,

Stand nude before the glass with him  
 So that he sees himself the stronger one  
 And believes it so , and you so much more  
 Softer, younger, lovelier ....

( *The Looking Glass*)

Das's poet speaker inflates the male ego by her female nudity ; and thus she begs love from him. But her feminine self never gets replete with the adequate amount of love from her lover. She suffers dejection at the hands of these callous males. Her heart remains --

An empty cistern, waiting

Through long hours , fills itself  
With coiling snakes of silence ....

( *The Freaks*)

The recurrent use of ‘snake’ in her works incorporates the symbol of ‘ phallus’ that becomes the overwhelming mark of male hegemony over the female body .The trope of nudity and physical exposure can be stressed in the works of the American confessional poet Sylvia Plath. In her *Lady Lazarus*, Plath speaks out,

... Unwrap me hand and foot --  
The big strip- tease.  
Gentleman , ladies  
These are my hands  
My knees.

The experience of nakedness from the explicit revelation of personal experience and psychological specificity shows the angst of the poet. In her poems, Das explains her unhappy feelings of love in terms of her personal psychology. Bruce King aptly remarks: “In Das’s poetry the distance between the poet and poetry is collapsed.”

The poetry of Kamala Das is well acclaimed as strip- tease, where the readers notice the peeling off of layers of the lacerated poetic self of Das. She secures a rank among the confessional poets such as Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman. With her undaunted spirit and courage she records through her poetry the subjugation of male’s hegemony over females in a loveless world .The compass of Das is well-structured by the males in the forms of father , husband, lovers and ‘cynics’ . “A recent poem ‘A Widow’s Lament’, pins the self in a sharp image:

My man , my sons, forming the axis  
While I , wife and mother  
insignificant as a fly  
climbed the glass panes of their eyes.”

(Mehrotra A. K. , ed. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*)

But it is only through her poetry and her personal kinks , she shatters the hackneyed roles to redefine herself and her world. She appears in a new avatar with her shocking images and taboos in her works.

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