



## FEMALE SLAVERY IN KAMALA DAS'S POETRY: A READING OF "THE OLD PLAY HOUSE"

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### Abstract

Since the last two decades, feminist writing has flourished globally. As a result of it, a vibrant and committed Feminist/Gender discourse has emerged to voice personal experience of those who are marginalized and oppressed in patriarchal society. Besides novels and short stories, poetry of the present literary area has also foregrounded the hitherto suppressed experiences of the female world.

In the post colonial period, the works of feminist writers in India have contributed substantially in creating a feminist consciousness in the society. Female writers in 1990s mirror a realistic picture of the contemporary urban Indian women. Among them Kamala Das also emerges as a dominant voice.

Kamala Das's poems demonstrate a kind of shift to assertive feminism. She is very candid. With poignancy, she communicates her feminine urges, and showcases the troubled existence of a woman in the patriarchal society. She delves deep into the woman psychology and discovers male hegemony as one of the obstacles to the salvation of women.

In our reading of Kamala Das's poem, 'The Old Playhouse', we make a foray to highlight female slavery as depicted through various symbols and images.

**Keywords:** Gender discourse, patriarchal society, confessional, slavery.

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### **Introduction:**

Anglo – Indian literature carries the female voice in various kinds and degrees. Here we meet Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu as well as Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, Arundhoti Roy, Monika Varma etc. – with their individual way of style and technique to ventilate their views of life.

Though the Indian Renaissance kindled the spirit of the discovery of self, yet Indian – English poetry was dominated by the male : their imagination and strategies. The few Sarojinis or Torus were emotional at filial and patriotic level.

It is only Kamala Das who dared to shake all the accepted norms of a well-established male-oriented society. Her habit of speaking frankly of her sex life illustrated her response in many occasions. This tells us that the reader reacts what is in his mind and not what is in the poem.

Kamala Das (b. 1934 d. 2009) wrote fluently and frequently both in Malayam and English. Her quality of disarming candidness and an uninhibited lust for life brings a comparison of hers with Sylvia Plath, Judith Wright and Anne Sexton – all well-known for their confessional poetry. Kamala Das has established herself as a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry by writing largely on love, sex, alienation and frustration. In some cases, her poetry looks like a kind of psychic strip-tease.

Though her output is not prodigious, Kamala Das is regarded as the finest Indian poetess writing in English to day. Her poetry is a kind of well-documented dissertation of her lived experience with an unkind variety. She records the experiences of intimations of isolation and turbulence, not of tranquility. She depicts the agonies and miseries of women who are just like slaves to patriarchal society, in moving words.

### **Statement of the Problem :**

Kamala Das's poetry coincides with the change in concept and style in her contemporary Indo-Anglian poetry. The new generation showed a shift from the focus on history, legend and myth to self revelation. Women writers in post-colonial India became expository, subjective and introspective in interpretation of life. Instead of the ideas of religion, tradition, nationalism and patriotism, search for root and identity became major preoccupation for the new poets.

Kamala Das's poetry justifies Helen Cixious, : "Every woman has known the torture of beginning to speak aloud...".<sup>1</sup> Her auto-biographical writings deal with man-woman relationship, woman's conjugal life and place in the patriarchal society. Most of her poems capture convincingly the trials, tribulations and foibles of the woman who is struggling to create a room of her own in our society. Her poems make an attempt at asserting womanhood and dignity, in a succinct way.

Her career as a poet tells the trajectory of her shift from emotional, domestic and conjugal issues to self-exploration, self-analysis and self-introspection. Kamala Das is confessional, candid, assertive and bold in her later poems.

Our paper is designed to explore the feminist sensibility and the plight of women in a male-dominated society, as reflected in her 'The Old Playhouse'.

### **Methodology :**

In our discussion of the topic, we use the analytical and interpretative methodology centered on the selected poem 'The Old Playhouse'. For this purpose, a critical study has been undertaken on the basis of same secondary sources. The materials from these sources are considered to be relevant to the topic.

### **Objectives :**

The proposed paper has been prepared, keeping the following objectives in view :

- 1) To examine the major traits of Kamala Das's poetry, on the basis of the given poem.
- 2) To trace out the elements of feminine sensibility.
- 3) To discuss the condition of slavery as revealed through various symbols and images.

### **Discussion of the Topic :**

The importance of Kamala Das as a poet with rare feminine sensibility is beyond question. She is deeply concerned with the substantial issues of the womenfolk in India. Her 'The Old Playhouse' is an example of it. Through this poem Kamala Das wants to speak "with fierce and unsparing honesty about the difficulties of being a woman and a wife in a time and for a culture which had trained women to long tradition of silence".<sup>2</sup> The desire to start a new life and achieve success despite the trials and tribulations in life is the implied meaning of the whole poem.

The poem is spoken by a woman, and thus it gives the poet a scope to observe and pass judgment thereafter. 'The Old Playhouse' is narrated in first person. Thereby, it takes the form of a monologue of the other. It describes, through metaphors and images, the sad plight of a woman, highlighting how she loses her freedom by dwindling into a 'wife'. It is the 'male-ego' that turns her mind into 'Old Playhouse'. The poem reflects the psychic darkness of a woman, by using symbols and images chosen from experienced life.

The poem presents a binary opposition between the pre-marriage stage and the post-marriage stage of women. The target of attack is male-ego, which, according to the poet, is a technique :

"The strong man's technique is

Always the same. He serves his love in lethal doses ..."

Kamala Das does not consider marriage as fulfillment of love, rather it is a process of slavery. In the midst of all modern amenities and luxuries, a woman after marriage feels lonely and disappointed. Such loneliness and disappointment in the poet also indicate that they are 'part of a larger-than-life personality obsessive in its awareness of its self, yet creating a drama of selfhood'<sup>3</sup>. To stage this drama, the mind of a woman is used through the metaphor 'playhouse'.

The metaphor of 'swallow' in the poem suggests the bruised and battered womankind in Indian society. Man is described as a tactician, whose 'taming' denotes the circumscribed limits of a woman leading to her disappointment.

The poet's (woman in the poem) quest for selfhood or identity is shattered. Though she perceives male's assistance to realize her self, ironically she has been exploited physically and psychologically. The 'magic loaf' provided by her lover makes the woman lose her 'will and reason'.

Kamala Das's use of select images in the poem obliquely encompasses her attitude to phallogocentric discourse and male-chauvinism :

"I ate the magic loaf and become a dwarf."...

" All pervasive is the male scent of your breath."...

.....You embalmed

My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices"...

Marriage makes the speaker in 'The Old Playhouse' gather the knowledge of 'yet another', not her own. Before marriage, she had been a 'swallow' that 'fled up to sky'. Now the male enjoys his summer of love; but it is a raw reason for her. She longs for the home left behind. "There is no more singing, no more a dance." She is so subdued that she has lost her will and reason. The male-ego has started training her in such a way that 'she learns to grow' in the midst of all-pervasive 'male-scent'. The daily routines in her husband's family, the 'air-conditioner', 'its weather' are ways of trickery of the male who turns her into 'cut flowers in the vases'. They try to 'tame' and 'hold' her in such a manner that she starts forgetting her own nature. She discovers that husband, whom she considered sharer of her thoughts and feelings, is actually pleased with her 'body's response' and the 'usual shallow convulsions'.

Male love is like Narcissus; it is one-sided. It covers the lady beneath his monstrous ego. The irony in the statement "you called me wife' is a half-hidden slap on the male-dominated way of justification of marriage. The images like "bitter-sweet juices", "Playhouse with all its light put out". "Dribbled spittle into my mouth" etc. are meant perhaps to isolate the true self from the surface life.

Kamala Das's words in the poem reveal the working of her mind. The use of verbs "dribble", "cower" in strong consonantal form indicates the masculine oppression on the comparatively tender sensibility. The helplessness of the married woman is very clear when she says :

" ..... To all your

Question I mumbled incoherent replies."

### **Conclusion :**

Kamala Das maps out a new world of feminine space in her poetry. Her poetry records her quest for love in and outside marriage, disillusionment in love and marriage, painful growth of girl, wife and mother into womanhood. She looks, as an ironist, at the pachydermus world with her characteristic cynicism. Her mode of stating single facts of life is ironic. Her promiscuous self-exposure makes us consider her a poet of decadence. She is a victim of the inadequacies of her life. In many situations, she fails to control even over her art.

Kamala Das possesses a rare power to analyse male-female relationship from the points-of-view of sexual reality. It is her innovative way of treatment of love and marriage.

Yet, Kamala Das miserably lacks one basic quality as an Indian female poet : her projection of life is not based on mutual love, understanding and sympathy. Female slavery can be done away with love and responsibility between husband and wife. For full-realisation of life, mutual cooperation and understanding are essential.

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