

The Muted Voice: Marriage as a Continuum of Desire, Discontent and Despair in “The Old Playhouse” by Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

Earning the reputation of India’s best-known writer, Kamala Das is celebrated and remembered for her undaunted expression of the female psyche. She has ventured deep into the sensitive spaces of women’s psychology and voiced the complex nuances of thoughts and the tabooed feelings and sentiments hitherto denied to women. Popularly acclaimed as a confessional poet, she has boldly divulged the often restricted and unuttered aspects of carnal pleasure and pain both in and beyond the confines of conjugal life. The present paper focuses on her work, “The Old Playhouse” and is purposed to examine the conception of power that prevails in the male spouse in the domestic sphere of the Indian household. The study applies the lens of feminism and reveals the docility of the female body as an influence of societal and cultural norms in tune with patriarchy. The findings reveal the ongoing continuum of desire, dissatisfaction, and despair experienced by women in matrimony.

KEYWORDS

Confessional; Docility; Feminism; Patriarchy.

Introduction

Kamala Das is renowned as a poet of feminine yearnings. Her works mirror her apprehension as a vulnerable woman negotiating an androcentric society and she emerges as a daring voice for women’s cause. Das, as a poet of love and sex recurrently explores the supremacy of love and the enticement of the body. However, it is pertinent to note that Das wrote against a conventional and tabooed Indian society. She rendered the pathos of women shifting from submissive roles to self-discovery and asserting agency and autonomy. As often as not, she centres on sexual love during which her persona manifests itself in a temper of rebellion. Das also dwelled on the theme of body in her search for love and

acknowledged and accepted its exigency. In addition, her poetry portrays a predilection towards degeneration and death. Within these limited themes of marriage, love, and sex, she has created a niche for herself making a poet of poignant thought.

Literature Review

Monush R Marak, in his paper titled “A Feminist Study of Kamala Das’s Poem “The Old Playhouse” (2021) defines the work as “the voice of the unheard inner emotions of the woman who becomes the victim of silent oppression in the patriarchal society.” He concludes that the poem is a voice of one’s individuality and a quest for self-identity. In “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse”: Kamala Das’ New

Trials of Emancipation for Indian Women” (2018), Md. Tapu Rayhan & Nure Jannat describe the selected poems as weapons for fighting against both masculine pride and the traditionalist, conservative society. The authors infer that Das is a poet who illustrates her intimate issues to apprise Indian women to establish their identity and advance beyond the shadows of patriarchal hegemony. “Quest for Self in Kamala Das’ “The Old Playhouse” (2015) by Arya P A studies the poem as a search for love and the love for self. He indicates that the aim of Kamala Das as a poet is to signify “the predicament of contemporary women beset by the crisis of divided selves. She wants to bring harmony out of this existence.”

Marriage as Destiny

Simone de Beauvoir, in her influential book *The Second Sex* starts chapter five “The Married Women” with a striking statement thus: “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to by society” (p.415). Here the term ‘destiny’ implies that the very sustenance and existence of women after marriage is in control of men. “The Old Playhouse” begins with such recollection as:

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. (p. 69)

The poet captures the intentions of her husband to subjugate her in the name of love so that she fails to nurture her personal nature and professional growth eventually depriving her of agency. The above lines also highlight the socio-cultural framework that aligns with the patriarchal construct. Her destiny takes an unpredicted turn as the unstated dictum which is a prerequisite of the Indian

matrimonial alliance presumes that a married woman is expected to detach herself from her previous relationships and renounce the unlimited opportunities that promote her growth. Thus, the basic foundation of marriage for women is installed on forbearance and sacrifice which transforms her into a docile subject.

It is relevant to quote L Ayu Saraswati, who, in her book, *Scarred*, specifies the ‘docile perception’ as:

A perception is docile when it supports and does not challenge the dominant ideology. Docile perception makes us docile subjects...and further disempowers and is often injurious to the perceiving subject. It keeps us in our docile and gendered emotional habitus, and works to maintain the status quo. (p. 51)

The poet has entered wedlock with plenteous expectations and desires but is shocked by what awaits her. She recounts the egotistical attitude of the husband thus:

It was not to gather knowledge /
 Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn/
 What I was and by learning, to learn to grow, but every/
 Lesson you gave was about yourself. (p. 69)

Ayu Saraswati explains that:

When a person is docile, they do “not have to be externally policed,” because they have internalized the values of and are being controlled through dominant “discourses, practices, and institutions ... (p.52)

Despite her expectations, the poet seems to have accepted the conditions of a monotonous life imposed on her and has learned to abide by them in servitude without any resistance. The wife is drawn into the predicament of uxorial ‘duties’ and loses her will and rationality in due course. This is evident from the lines:

You called me wife,/

I was taught to break saccharine
 into your tea and/
 To offer at the right moment the
 vitamins. Cowering/
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate
 the magic loaf and/
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and
 reason, to all your/
 Questions I mumbled incoherent
 replies. (p.69)

Disregard of Conjugal Rights

Simone de Beauvoir, in the same chapter, "The Married Women" from *The Second Sex* further observes that:

Marriage has always been a very different thing for a man and for a woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women, as we have seen, have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality. (p. 415-416)

The disproportion of spousal relationship is reinforced in the following lines:

You were pleased/
 With my body's its weather, its shallow/
 Convulsions. You dribbled spittle
 into my mouth, you poured/
 Yourself into every nook and cranny,
 you embalmed/
 My poor lust with your bitter-sweet
 juices. (p.69)

The above stanza illustrates the sexual exploitation and apathy of the husband. He is content with her bodily responses and takes advantage of her sexual longing which is hardly acknowledged. His fulfilment precedes her preference. Her impulse yields to his pleasure. As Beauvoir puts it:

... since the sexual act is considered a *service* assigned to a woman, on which are based the advantages conceded to her, it is logical to ignore her personal preferences.

Marriage is intended to deny her a man's liberty; but as there is neither love nor individuality without liberty, she must renounce loving a specific individual in order to assure herself the life-long protection of some male. (p. 423)

The institutionalized patriarchal regime of a Subject-object relationship thrives here. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* points out the role of myths as favourable to men as it provides a rationale and also sanction to enslave women. The myth of equating her with nature is a sheer prejudice. She says that men do not have to bother about the physiological suffering of women because they are "intended by Nature". Beauvoir takes the example of how women are denied the right to sexual pleasure or how they are made to work hard.

Kate Millet, in her influential book *Sexual Politics*, defines politics as a power-structured relationship of dominance and subordination and notes that:

however muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power. (p. 24-25)

The same is apparent in the context of the poem. The husband is apathetic and too '*involved*' even to perceive her wish. He dominates her through hegemony. Her desire for true love is ignored and her long-dead lust is preserved so that she participates without reluctance. As a partner, she is literally reduced to a mere body/object.

The Waning of Her Individuality

The poet aspired for self-growth in her marital life but it resulted in nothing more than monotonousness and disillusionment. She is subject to attenuation and gradually deprived of her

agency. On the other hand, her husband gains precedence over her, and his aura permeates the home atmosphere. The lines below affirm this:

The summer begins to pall. I remember the ruder breezes/
Of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves. Your room is/
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows, always/
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath.

The Decadence

She is immersed in the dreariness of domestic chores, essentially to tend to her husband's well-being, and is left with no time to cater to her interests. She tolerates everything in silence and dismay. Her sexual life is also dissatisfying as it is devoid of love and reciprocation. Such a toxic lifestyle leads her into a state of melancholy and depression. She loses the vigour to live as she succumbs to her fate. She submits thus:

There is no more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old/
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique/
Is always the same. He serves his love in lethal doses (p. 69)

A mood of despair prevails and she yields to the potential of love for self and the hopelessness of the situation and

anticipates a permanent closure in the form of death. She concludes thus:

For love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted/
By its lonely face, and yet it must seek at last/
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors/
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water. (p.69)

One way to overcome this, as L Ayu Saraswati mentions is to shift from the "docile perception" (a perception that reflects the dominant thoughts of our culture) to a "defiant perception"- "a perception that rejects, resists, and rebels against the disciplined and dominant ways of perceiving". She assures us that we can reconstruct our interaction with pain and also defy patriarchy.

Conclusion

The poet is entrapped in a quagmire called 'marriage' and succumbs to the demands of marital life. She is met with disappointment and finally resigns with desperation. The poem conveys deep feminist concerns. Kamala Das has candidly unveiled the female desire and the callousness surrounding female sexuality. She brings to light the restricted gender roles enforced on women. Das has subtly articulated the necessity for women to have agency over their lives and not succumb silently.

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