

Exploring Women's Identity in Kamala Das' Poem – 'The Old Playhouse'

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Abstract

Kamala Das is an Anglo-Indian poet who shot to the limelight for her unabashed portrayal of women's identity and sexuality in her poems, at a time when women writers writing such topics were considered taboo in India. Das used various literary techniques and devices to portray the urgency of an Indian woman for freedom. This paper samples one of her best-known poems – 'The Old Playhouse' and attempts to depict the ills of patriarchal Indian society and also provide an insight into the macro-level implications it offers, of our culture and norms.

Key Words: *Women's Identity, Patriarchal Indian Society, Masculine, Feminine, Gender Roles, Hegemony, Sexuality*

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We live in a land of irony. We worship goddesses and female deities and shout slogans to our '*Bharat Mata*', yet it is no myth that Indian women today are raped, brutalized, subjugated, silenced, and killed in the name of honor. This is the type of society that is our Patriarchal India-Men superior to women. The same social construct, which Kamala Das, a Malabar-born poet endeavored to oppose with vehemence and venom. Her poetry was a bold and feisty depiction of feminine identity and sexuality at a time when women poets were stereotyped to write about girly fantasies of eternal, bloodless, and unrequited love.

'The Old Playhouse' is one such poem by Kamala Das that attempts to put the relationship between the masculine and feminine world under a lens. It charts the contemplations of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage to an overbearing man. The title of the poem is significant. A playhouse is a miniature rendition of a house for children to play in. The girl-child uses dolls as their children, tenderly nurturing and cooking while their 'husbands' are at work, for boys would much prefer to play with toy cars or guns. Thus, the playhouse reinforces traditional gender roles and maintains the hegemony of a man over a woman. Hence, it becomes a microcosm for a much larger concept, symbolizing the traditional patriarchal society, as a whole. It is these dichotomous conventions of the qualities ascribed to men and women, that Das meddles with.

Das's poem is laden with rich, heavy, and no-holds-barred metaphors and imagery, as she opens with these lines:

"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." (1-5)

The bird's flight is paralleled by the wife's urgency for freedom, however, she is unable to break away as her husband tries to cage her and domesticate her so that she would forget her instinctual wish for flight. He expects her to serve him routinely and eternally, pouring saccharine tablets into his tea and giving him his vitamins. Rebelling against the etiquette of 'never kiss and tell', Das explicitly describes sexuality between the two partners:

"You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices" (10-12).

It is crystal clear that the love-making is devoid of any spiritual connection and passion and the man simply wallows in lust for her. His horrific form dwarfs her in comparison, as she writes:

"Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf" (14-16)

The tedium of his omnipresence is also brought out in the following lines:

"All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat..." (22-23)

It is also evident that the playhouse has lost all its inherent meanings and innocence as she laments:

".....There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out." (23-26)

Das alludes to Greek mythology towards the end of the poem, referring to her husband as Narcissus and the wife to the nymph Echo. Narcissus is well known to have rejected Echo's true love and therefore was doomed to fall in love with his reflection in the water, at which he stared to death. Das uses this comparison to describe her husband's love for himself and she even sardonically spits this in the following lines:

"I came to you but to learn

What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every

The lesson you gave was about yourself" (6-8).

Das writes her poem in free verse using just one stanza and a confessional tone. This form and her frequent repetition of ideas express her urgency to fly with her thoughts feverishly alive to instill in us the intensity of her feelings. The autobiographical style conveys universality to her poem as well as reveals it to be her own experience also, as she was subject to patriarchal domination in her household, being married off early and only fit to be a mother only when she had her third child born. Therefore, literature became a vent for her contained emotions, becoming a choral voice for Indian womanhood, fervidly calling for equality and harmony between the two sexes - an issue that was rife during her times and sadly enough, despite all the technological and ideological advancements, continues to be alive, even to this day.

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