

# Theme of self-exploration and individuality in “An Introduction” a poem by Kamala Das

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**Abstract:** It is always stated that man is a social being who lives in a society. But to be a part of a society is not always so easy and compatible for the individual. One is compelled by the self to live after one's own ways and likings and the society, on the other hand, that has certain norms and traditions forces one to conform for maintaining a healthy relation. The social sense predominates over the individual sense and the individual has to make many compromises to survive in the society. However, when the society becomes too stifling and suffocating, the individual then stands in opposition and revolts against it to claim the essence of the self. This very clash between the individual and the society furthers the human evolution.

Kamala Das is one such Indian English poet who voices the struggles of the individual, especially the woman in the male-dominated traditional Indian society in her poems. She herself as a woman, as a poet and the very persona in her poems challenge the society wherever they find it overpowering and crushing and try hard to define their existence in their own terms. She shows extreme courage and bravery to claim her true identity. The study here in this paper is aimed at showing the cries of the persona for self-exploration and self-awareness in Das's poem “An Introduction”.

**Keywords:** Individual, Society, Stifling, Essence, Self, Revolt, Self-exploration.

Kamala Das (1934–2009) is one of the leading Indian poets writing in English. Like other Indian writers, she is bilingual who wrote in English as well as in Malayalam. She wrote a number of poems all focussing her own life and the life of women in general in the transitional phase of Indian society. As a person, she had to go through different ups and downs which she reflects in her poetry. There is always a personal and autobiographical touch in her poetry. She is said to be unconventional for she deals with the subjects like love and sex too frankly and openly which are considered as taboo. She is a confessional poet who reveals her inner strifes and anguishes through her poems. For her, poetry means a powerful tool with which she can unburden her psyche.

“An Introduction” is her well-known poem. It was published in 1965 in her first volume of poetry *Summer in Calcutta*. As the title of the poem suggests, it gives an introduction to the realm of Kamala Das's poetry. It deals with the notion of the self, identity of the individual and concept of language and writing. The persona in the poem is the mouthpiece of the poet expressing her very pains and predicaments. Though written in a colloquial language, the poem is highly suggestive and it provides issues to ponder over the human condition. The poem seeks universal acclaim for focussing on the existence of women in male-dominated society which is the nature of all human societies across the globe.

The poem opens with the assertion by the persona that she has no knowledge about politics. Though she can recognise and recollect names of some popular politicians like Nehru. Her lack of knowledge and understanding of politics reflects that she has no hold over the institution of power and authority. It also shows that such domains are beyond the reach of women and are preoccupied by the men. The persona introduces herself as a brown Indian born in Malabar.

“I don't know politics but I know the names  
Of those in power ...”

Further, the persona deals with the question of language. Language as a tool to express oneself is also a social institution in itself. There is the issue of suitability and ease of the language for venting out what one thinks and feels. The persona finds English as a medium to express herself but she has to face the social rage and criticism. She finds it easy to express her joys, sorrows, hopes and dreams in English. She is forced to speak in a particular tongue by her relatives and critics. To rise against the societal bounds, one needs to be firm and strong in one's notion of the self. The persona acknowledges the language she uses as her own with all its faults and flaws.

“Don't write in English, they said, English is  
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like? The language I speak,  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness  
All mine, mine alone.

..... It voices my joys, my longings, my  
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing  
Is to crows or roaring to the lions,”

Another significant phase is the coming of puberty and this very biological change is shocking and confusing for the adolescent persona. It is very difficult for her to understand this dramatic change. She grows into a young maiden with grown up body but immature mind. She then comes across another determining but terrifying experience. She is married at a very young age to a man who is quite older comparatively. Marriage as another social institution and that is also at such a tender age proves to be disillusionment to the persona. When she undergoes the sexual intercourse, she feels betrayed by the institution of marriage as well as her female body which she finds a burden and cause for her suffering and suppression. She decides to get rid of her femininity by adopting the man's attires and habits. But her transformation disturbs the society that imposes its identity on the persona and dictates to behave in the socially accepted manner. She is forced to be fit in stereotype mould to be dumb and docile and totally insignificant. Society always appreciates the conformists. There are certain fixed roles and the individual is forced to be moulded accordingly. One's laughter and tears are also decided by the society. The inquisitives are taken to be a threat. There are the “categorisers” ready to put a label or in words of Prufrock, to turn the individual into a “formulated phrase”.

“.....Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook,  
Be a quarreller with the servants. Fit in. Oh!  
Belong, cried the categorisers.

Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better  
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to  
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games,  
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a  
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when  
Jilted in Love...”

In the later part of the poem, the persona is seen to be mature. Her encounter with a man and falling in love with him turns out to be very significant phase in the development of her notion of self-awareness. She calls him every man desiring a woman and herself every woman seeking love. It proves a great revelation to her about her own self as well as the lives of women in general. Now, her vision gets widened and she accepts her very femininity which earlier she was evading from. The persona rises from her immediate experience to the universal one identifying their similar lot. She also notices that she has the same urge to live as herself in her own way just like her male counterpart urges. She highlights the dual nature of social norms and traditions dealing with man and woman separately.

“..... 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 which are not yours. I too call myself I.”

In the concluding lines of the poem, the persona fully analyses her lot. She explores herself going through different phases. The repetitive use of first person pronoun “I” emphasizes the idea of selfhood. The persona with complete ripeness of her personality claims her own identity in her own terms. The ending of the poem with words “I too call myself I” is the very gist of the poem. The female persona asserts strongly that like her male counterparts, she has her own individuality. Though she is not perfect yet she is herself with some virtues as well as vices. She has a worthwhile individual existence.

Kamala Das in this poem deliberates over the notion of individual identity and the social identity. She also deals with the identity of a poet clamouring for giving vent to the biting experiences she undergoes during her quest for the truth and essence.

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