

# A Quest for Female Identity in Kamala Das's Poetry

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Kamala Das appeared at a time when English poetry by Indian women had moved on from colonial and nationalist themes to personal experiences. Kamala Das's poetic output covers a wide panorama of themes, more realized settings and deeper feeling, intensity of emotion and speech, rich and full complexity of life. In a crisscross examination, Kamala's touchy and titillating feelings of loneliness and despair seem to larger than life philosophy and personality in fact after the soft and soothing strains of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu the offensive individualism of Kamala Das appears as a shock. Even in this made construct Kamala voices her feminine quest openly. The feminist stance of the Indian women is manifest in their pronouncement of their feminine female urges, feelings, experiences and viewpoints quite boldly and forcefully. But, their comportment is not as fanatic, uncompromising and bizarre as it has been in the West. What inflicts them with the pain is the sexualization and objectification by men. They have reacted against the men's essentialist description of feminine character. The new Indian women poets have realized the worth of being as body have tried to explore varied dimensions of their being as woman positioned in a patriarchal frame of reference. They have striven to come out of their identity crisis they have been facing. They are on the way to finding a space of their own in the world dominated by men. And they have been successful in their feminist struggle to a considerable extent.

**Key words:** Identity crisis, unequal treatment, psychological turmoil, emotional bonding, female psyche, marital prerogatives

## Introduction

In India, today, the woman is neither free nor dependent. She is lying between the two. However, the urge for identity and independence is present in the women-folk of the Indian society. The women should prefer pleasing themselves to pleasing others if they want to establish their identity. Silence and subordination has been shared experiences for colonial people in general and women in particular. It should be a matter of shame to all patriotic Indians that while we refer to our land as “Mother India”-mothers, sisters, girls and all others falling in the same generic category are mere subordinates. We seem to believe in two creeds of humanity- the masculine and the non masculine. The woman is seen as the ‘other’, the ‘lesser’ and the weaker in contrast to the male who is in every way ‘superior’. This attitude has been established and perpetuated from the very early times starting with the theory that Urvashi and the other beauties were created from the thigh of Vishnu, the Lord. This unfortunate belief has continued to be in existence up to the present day.

In every country and in all ages much has been written on the basic nature of women and there is no virtue or vice known to men which has not been ascribed to them. Right from temptress Eve to Mary in the West and goddesses to demons in India the highest and lowest stations have been assigned to women and the interminable controversy goes on. However, there is one vital difference between the past approaches and the present. In the past, the understanding of woman’s nature was more or less subjective, reflecting not so much the mind of woman as the character of the investigator himself. In the present time the findings are given at least a semblance of scientific study. There are definite masculine and feminine attributes and a male or a female who fails to manifest these in a proper measure is not true to his or her nature and thus is in danger of losing his or her identity. A woman who fails to conform to the tradition values is stigmatized as maladjusted and gives rise to an identity crisis. Her natural sphere of action is the

family, obedience to her husband, care of children and submission to certain sexual norms. Feminists play down the limitations in the role and temperament of women imposed on them by biology while emphasizing the inequitable subordinate status forced on them by society. There are four archetypes existing within the female psyche: the virgin, the mother, the companion to men, and the sibyl! Actually these are the roles a woman has to play in her life-she is a child, she grows up under certain conditions; favorable or unfavorable, she usually marries, has to lead domestic life and comes in contact with society. But the question of questions for the feminist is if she is something more than what the enacting of these roles shows her to be and if she suffers from a sense of futility and is dissatisfied and unhappy, does the cause lies in her character, in her exploitation by males, or in the scheme of things, the universe being as harsh to males as to female? Is her freedom circumscribed by her biological peculiarities or by unjust, unsympathetic and selfish patriarchy? Even when they waked romantically lyrical over them they never regarded them as equal to themselves. All important spheres of life were controlled and managed by men, women being relegated to the position of mere housewives. They were required to be good wives and mothers, whatever their failings of their husband might be. This anomaly was bound to be resisted. The industrial revolution ushered in changed outlook on life and raised the level of human consciousness. Women could not remain unaffected by these developments. Often the new circumstances forced them to raise their voice and demand better treatment from their masters. With growing awareness more and more women came forward to champion their cause. Some of their partial to women and blamed what they termed 'patriarchy' for all the evils, others were more moderate and found fault with the scheme of things which victimized both males and females.

The quest of identity often occurs as a theme in several of kamala Das's poems which stresses the need for discovering the true self. Kamala Das suffers badly from identity crisis. She is displeased with the kind of social conditioning and gender stereotyping a woman is given since

childhood. Kamala Das feels that it is the gender discrimination and certain predetermined and male defined roles imposed on the girls that construct her feminine identity. The poem “An Introduction” Kamala Das portrays herself as a liberated modern woman. She resents the fact that society was trying to fit her into their way of thinking. Kamala Das always tried to find the meaning of her existence, she tells about such a bigoted gender based ‘categorization’ prevailing in convention ridden Indian society. The poem “An Introduction” is concerned with the question of human identity. In the poem “An Introduction” voices with a feminine sensibility and without inhibitions, her inner disquiet, tension and disorder within. Rejecting bitterly to be a type-cast into a particular role or to be a reduced to a single fixed image, she craves for the freedom which only the creative artist can claim. The poetess defense against patriarchal dictation of not to write in English, presents a passionate defense not only for writing in English but also for writing in Indian English-the English one is comfortable with and in which she writes. Kamala das craves for artistic and personal freedom of expression in the matter of language, form, subject and style as language parameter is a kind of cage which makes one unable to express true emotions and feelings, one needs to choose a language for expression of self and in this way one’s own choice for self expression and self attainment. Kamala das poetry shows cases of the acute emotional struggle of a woman who abandons her passive role to discover and assert her individual liberty and identity.

The poem “The Looking Glass” is but an externalization of her humiliations and frustrations, the woman in the poem, is every woman that seeks love, the man, is every man that wants a woman to satisfy his lust. The lyric is a looking-glass, a mirror, which presents a true, realistic image of the lustful relationship between every man and every woman, and the frustrations which inevitably follow such a relationship, at least for the woman. Thus the “The Looking Glass” is a mirror which faithfully images a man’s ego, and the humiliating lot of woman in a male dominated society. Social conventions have chalked out their role for them, and they must

passively accept it. Kamala Das herself was called upon to play such a role in a bond which she could not untie, and lifelong frustration was the consequence

Das records her lurch and botchery, her despair and discomfiture in majority of her poems. In “Dance of the Eunuchs”, the opening poem of *Summer in Calcutta*, provides a concrete hint to the identity crisis that her feminine and poetic self encounters, the crisis emerging from the sense of persecution and inadequacy. Kamala Das seems to have found an objective correlative in the eunuchs who represent a sheer contrast between the outwardly pretence of passion and joy, and the inwardly vacuity of emotion, love and passion. The sense of sterility and loss of sensation symbolized by the eunuchs is reflective of suppressed desire and unfulfilled love of a woman in the poetess. The warmth that the eunuchs exhibit is only ostentatious and highly ironic. They also represent an identity crisis as regards the gender role, even in the poetess.

Another poem “The Stone Age” brings forth her suffocated self under the domination of male. Kamala hardly ever perceives the tender feeling of love in what is called lovemaking. The husband is here depicted as an old fat spider weaving “webs of bewilderment” around her, and erecting stony walls of domesticity. The husband is a constant source of annoyance, an unwelcome intruder into the privacy of the wife’s mind which is haunted by other man.

“You turn me into a bird of stone, A granite dove,

You build round me a shabby drawing room And strike my face

absentmindedly while you Read. (The Best of Kamala Das, 97-98)

In the poem “The Old Playhouse” poetess personal predicament is aired out. The poetess who was free as a swallow has now been domesticated with all her wings severed. The poetess desired to discover a meaning, a perfect fulfillment through love, but her husband broke her

completely by thrusting household responsibilities on her shoulders and by creating barricaded for her in her life. He asserted his marital prerogatives, curtailed her freedom totally and showed masculine power to her. Consequently the poetess became a dwarf under the heavy weight of his lustful masculinity and monstrous ego. The poetess lost her own identity as a human being because of her feeling of slavery to his wishes and whims.

In the poem “The Sunshine cat” Kamala Das speaks of the injustice meted out to women where again the dominant motif is suffering. Kamala Das believes that the society is hostile to women and that they are humiliated in all possible ways. The poem directly highlights the miseries of a forlorn woman. The men treated her very badly- the man she loved did not reciprocate her feelings and he was basically ‘selfish’ and ‘coward’, the husband, who neither ‘loved’ her nor ‘used’ her properly but who was a ruthless watcher of her (Kamala’s) sexual act with other men. In the poem “The sunshine cat” – This kind of confession would certainly shock the prudes who regard Kamala Das as a shameless, brazen woman who speaks about her husband in disparaging terms and who makes no secret of her efforts to please the other man with whom she had been sleeping. But Kamala Das has written about her personal experience in this frank manner under the pressure of her own feelings and also because the poetess knows that there are many women in this country who are tyrannized over by their husband and who turn to other men for emotional as well as for sexual satisfaction. We should look at this poem as one of angry protest against male domination of women in this country; and we should therefore, praise Kamala Das for her boldness and daring manner indirectly advocating the rights of women.

Kamala Das strove to establish her identity as an Indian woman through her poems; and she is in fact, tried also to impart an identity to Indian women as a neglected class of Indian society. Thus her poetry signals the advent of new phenomena in Indo-Anglican poetry. Kamala Das may be said to have ushered a kind of new morality according to which the time-honored virtues of timidity, submissiveness, chastity and dependence on men to be thrown overboard. According to

this morality, women must gather the courage to demolish the concept of male domination and men's egotistical superiority. An attempt has been made to explain the feminist voice to liberate the women from the bondage of slavery in a male dominated society.

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