



# ‘Artists’ in Kamala Das’ Short Stories A comparative study of ‘The Red Dusk’ and ‘The Flight’

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**Abstract:** This paper does a comparative study of the depiction of the artists in Kamala Das’ two short stories ‘The Red Dusk’ and ‘The Flight’ from a gendered perspective. The male and the female artists in the stories portray a different social dynamics in their respective capacities as artists. The artists in the short stories deploy art in ways that are influenced by gender. The paper tries to draw upon the gendered politics that underpins these short stories.

Kamala Das is a writer who is known for her complexity, depth and her broad spectrum of writing. She is considered to have change the face of Malayalam literature and to an extent Indian Writing in English as well with her unique voice that engendered feminist perspectives which was beginning to take shape in the Indian literary domain. The short story scene in Malayalam “acquired a vibrance, a dynamism, that surely was the contribution of a full-blown genius, and a very disturbed and disturbing genius at that.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper will compare Das’s portrayal of artists in her short stories ‘The Red Dusk’ and ‘The Flight’ on the axis of gender. ‘The Red Dusk’ depicts Louis, a lonesome washed out poet and a painter, in his old age; while ‘The Flight’ on the hand is story of a sculptor who finds her profession to grant her agency as she becomes the sole breadwinner of her household.

Louis’ flamboyant lifestyle in Calcutta when he was in his prime of his career is evident as he reminisces the past where he had “travelled in glittering motorcars...dined with the richest and most famous men...thrown parties”<sup>2</sup>. In his old age, Louis struggles with the memories of his vivacious life of the past of many lovers, admirers and fans. While Louis is depicted to have drawn his spirit from the urban city life, the female sculptor in ‘The Flight’ shares a different perspective towards cities. She considers the cities to be spiritually decadent and seeks a change of scenery for replenishing and rejuvenating her creative energy. “All who came to model for me in the city displayed the spiritual poverty of city creatures”,<sup>3</sup> she rues. The city for her becomes a site of rut and repetition and she resolves to settle in Kerala.

Louis is also seen to have travelled wide, for the story also mentions his stay in Paris when he was young along with his bosom alcoholic friend Sohan, who had accompanied him to Paris to study art. The female narrator of ‘The Flight’ on the other hand had to face slander and scandal from her social circle because her artistic pursuit as a sculptor required her to be in the presence of nude models. She ponders how though her art had brought her wealth, “those without any love of art spread scandals” because she “had to work looking at naked bodies.”

The female artist preferred the slow pace of the remote and rustic villages while Louis seem to have revelled in the dinner parties and socializing. Louis had married thrice and had extramarital affairs. He recalls how he had inflicted pain upon his wife through his occasional infidelity and how she wept when “the love letters of his beloved poetess came.”

The title ‘The Red Dusk’ is a reference to one of Louis’ painting of a Chinese woman in a red garment who wasn’t intended to be Chinese originally. The painting was made in Paris and christened ‘Red Dusk’ by his closest friend Sohan. The painting becomes a totem of love for Louis and there are cues in the text that suggests that Louis associates the painting to his late mother. The painting becomes a source of comfort and compassion during his time of despair:

There was love in those little eyes turned upwards. If the round, yellowish fingers of those hands embraced someone, would it hurt the shoulders? Could those red lips kiss with love?

“I have no one, I have no one.” How long did he sit there looking at her and speaking those words! Peace came creeping out of her and became his.(31-2)

The painting succored Louis at the time of his father's death, his wife's demise after her second delivery, and after his house burned down. He acknowledges the power the painting has over him:

On thinking about it, he realised that of all those women who were with him, none possessed that peculiar power—the power to set at rest a suffering mind. That was *Red Dusk*.(32)

Art for Louis becomes a solace to his loneliness in his old age. For the female artist in 'The Flight' her sculpting enables her in her domestic sphere, especially in her marriage. It empowers her as she finds herself elevated to a position of liberation from her position of vulnerability as a "plaything" for her "oversexed" husband. It modifies her identity drastically as she forges the role of the breadwinner in her familial institution owing to a paralytic attack that her spouse undergoes that renders him dependent and incapacitated in his role of the family provider. Prior, to the role reversal, the female sculptor harboured a state of insecurity as she conceived her role in the relationship to be that of a sexual provider for her partner. She muses:

I didn't have to make him happy by exposing him to a vision of beauty. No such obligation remained any more. I thought with pride: I'm free. I'm not a slave. I've become free from traditional duties.

The woman artist finds herself in a space of conflict eventually as she fosters her passion for sculpting. The conflict is situated both internally and externally. She develops distaste for her husband's dependency while at the same time embracing the stability and security the dependency she assumed that brought with it. "As I was the breadwinner I secretly despised his dependence and at the same time desired its permanence."(136). This ambivalent sentiment relays the inversion of the power dynamics in her marriage. Her desire for her husband's dependency stems from her need to assert herself and to preserve her emancipated status.

The external conflict arises as she catches her husband in an act of adultery with a young seventeen year old model. The young model, Sridevi was a rustic beauty who posed for many statues for long hours and the statues attained a "peculiar vitality, as though they had sucked her lifeblood"(134) in a way reminiscent of Poe's short story where the painter's wife loses life while her portrait garners a life-like semblance.<sup>4</sup> As her artistic space grows with vigour, her marital space is disrupted. Her site of creativity is intruded upon her husband her art takes profound shape.

There was only anger on his face—anger directed at me. I was surprised. This man had never entered my studio, and now he was commanding me to stop making statues (135).

For the female protagonist of 'The Flight', her creative space which was her site of resistance transforms into a site of threat as she pushes the threshold of her transgression. Her husband commits adultery with her work accomplice, thereby engaging in an act of mitigating her power. Subsequently, she responds by self-annihilation—she commits suicide.

It is pertinent to observe that while for Louis, his art is life affirming, for the female artist, it is ambivalent as it can also lead to her negation. Louis acknowledges himself to be a "sinner" as she recalls the string of hurtful things he had committed against his family—he was bitter towards his father for remarrying after his mother's death, he was persistently unkind towards his stepmother who consistently tried to win him over, he was violent towards his son and disloyal to his wife. For the woman in 'The Flight', her sculptor profession assuages her docile domestic role temporarily only for her to realize that: "Life so far has just been a dream. This flight alone is reality. This flight from the man I had loved once, and from the respectable prison of marital life" (136). The 'flight' here is flight from life; death ultimately is the absolute liberation from social roles prescribed by patriarchy. In the paper "The Subversion of Patriarchal Structures in the Plays of Girish Karnad", authored by Dr T.K Pius and Smitha Sankaranaryanan, a similar observation is made in the context of Chitralkha's suicide which is interpreted as "a means of rebellion in the male domineering society".<sup>5</sup>

#### Reference List

- [1] Harris, VC and Ummer, C K Mohamed: Translators' Preface: The Sandal Trees, Disha Books, 1995: p vii, Print
- [2] Das, Kamala, 'The Red Dusk': The Sandal Trees, Disha Books, 1995: p 27-34, Print
- [3] Das, Kamala, 'The Flight: The Sandal Trees, Disha Books, 1995: p 131-7, Print
- [4] Poe, Edgar Allen, The Oval Portrait, Harper Collins, 2014: p 10, Print.
- [5] Pius, PK and Sankaranarayanan, Smitha, "The Subversion of Patriarchal Structures in the Plays of Girish Karnad", Languages in India; Vol 19:1, Jan 2019: p 476, Web <http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2019/smithapatriarchalstructureskarnadplays.pdf>