

## Poems of kamala das: An endless quest for identity and love

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### Abstract

Feminism in India had a very different kind of form, unlike the other countries of the world, here it was initiated by men and it was joined by women later on. It very well highlights the nature of Indian society, as it had been turned into ages ago just after the Indus Valley civilization. In the beginning women like Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai and later on followed by many more. But with the emergence of Kamala Das in the literary scenario of India, the idea of feminism took an altogether new form of expression, other than the social and sociological issues, she moved an inch ahead, she went to psychological in fact, physical level. The real quest for feminine identity begins with her only, the intensity of thoughts and boldness of expression she had, been missing earlier. The way she describes a woman and her psyche, is impossible for a man to do the same that too in an equally exquisite and interesting way. Kamala Das' poems can be called as an endless journey in the search of feminine identity, she boldly talks about each and every aspect related to an independent self that every woman possesses in her. Throughout her life, Das wrote on this regard and tried to establish the independent identity of a woman who has her own life to live other than the roles she plays for everybody who somehow belongs to her. Her poems also reveal the reality of men who designate themselves as responsible, social and cultural members of the society; and strike on the so-called cultural values our society has. Thus, Kamala Das' poems work as a mirror that shows the reality of our 'cultured' society.

**Keywords:** identity; society; culture; desire; other

### Introduction

Kamala Das was one of the pan-feminist writers our country ever had, she gave her life to the writings which represent many issues related to women in the country. Her poems are full of questions that can be asked from our patriarchal society. Although, some critics say that her writings were all autobiographical, and she describes the events from her life, she talks of her own thoughts and desires. But, anybody can easily realise that her thoughts, desires and incidents she countered with can be associated to the life of any other girl in the society. The social cultural identity of any girl or a woman is directly related to her persona. The person anybody has in his or her self, determines the social and cultural growth of that particular being. The values which are internalised by a woman, when she was a young girl, remains with her till the last breath she exhales as they become an inseparable part of her personality. These values only form the identity of that woman by shaping her as a being created by the male members of the society in order to follow the commands given to her. Kamala Das describes all these things through her poetry by revealing all the layers which men in our society use to cover their real selves.

While reading her poetry, we realise that the problems faced by her or the narrator of her poems are the problems which many other women face throughout their lifetime. The way she narrates all the events of her life is phenomenal because telling all the dark truths of your life to the whole world, needs an enormous amount of courage, and that can be witnessed in the writings of Kamala Das. This can be understood in the words of K. Satchidanandan which he uses to praise Das' autobiography *My Story*. He says, "I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's inner life in all its sad solitude, its desperate longing for real love and its desire for

transcendence, its tumult of colours and its turbulent Poetry." (Relocating xviii) This very statement made in the praise of the book says it all that how intensely it has been written and how honest the author is while documenting it. This autobiography brings many issues to the forth which were earlier neglected due to the lack of attention paid to them. Other than her autobiography, her poems also provide a perpetual voice to the issues related to identity of a woman in the society.

### Quest for Identity

Identity crisis is a major issue in Kamala Das' poems; she always craves for her identity as an individual, and there are a lot of instances in her poetry which suggest this. One of her famous poem "An Introduction" emphasises on it where she talks about her childhood and when she grew up, she was made to follow certain traits and behave in a particular way, by her family; she writes,

Then ... I wore a shirt and my  
 Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored  
 My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl  
 Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
 Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh, Belong, cried  
 the categorizers. Don't sit  
 On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.  
 Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better  
 Still, be Madhavikutty. (An Introduction 33-41)

Here, it can be easily seen that how drastically our families and the society force a girl to be a girl, or a woman to be a woman. She has no life of her own; she gets life to follow the commands, to behave in a way, as she is guided by the elders in the family, especially by the male members of the

family with a silent support by the females. She is advised to remain what she is or how she has been trained; coming out of that role is not advisable for her and it doesn't suit her being a woman. She should not even stand for her own self as if she will ever try to do this, she will find herself in a problematic situation. She should always remain a calm, obedient and caring being who thinks more about others and the least about her own comforts and ambitions. The role of cook, embroiderer and homemaker are for a woman and as the husband goes to work and earns for the family, it is her duty to serve him and be a puppet of his will. She has no right to enquire her husband about anything and she should not try to peep through the windows to see what is happening there outside the four walls of the house. She should be enthusiastic but only to ask the husband that how was his day on the workplace and if he needs something. In this way, she is being deprived of her individual identity, then what to talk about the social cultural identity. Throughout her life, a woman struggles to identify herself as an individual; she is always being taught that she needs to be dependent on the male members of the society. Our patriarchal society makes her believe that when she is a child, she needs the support of the father; when she becomes young, she needs a husband to protect and support her and to earn her a living; in the old age, she will be protected by the son. Among all these phases, the phase of youth is made the most critical and it is said that a woman cannot survive without a male on her side as the husband. Kamala Das faced the similar situation, when she grew sixteen her father fixed her marriage and when she met her fiancé for the first time that became so horrible instance and cruel experience for her that she could not resist herself to remember in the poem 'An Introduction', there she writes,

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
 Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me But  
 my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
 The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I  
 shrank pitifully. (An Introduction 27-32)

This incident tells us about what male members of the society thinks of females, a man treating his own wife or would-be wife in so ill-mannered way, describes everything. A man just cares for his own carnal desires without realising that the woman he is with, is also a human being who has feelings in her; she has some expectations from the husband that he will be caring and loving to her, but all these beliefs shatter with this kind of treatment. When a person does not care of his partner's individual identity and treats her as a beast of burden, it reminds us of Simone de Beauvoir who writes in her book *The Second Sex* that men have always cast women in the role of 'other', existing only in relation to male identity, but women recognize the full autonomy of the other (male) without destroying their sense of self. The basic feminine self is connected to the world; the basic sense of masculine self is separate. She further writes, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman." (*The Second sex* 160) Perhaps, keeping this in her mind Kamala Das decided to surrender, as K. Satchidanandan writes,

Gradually Kamala overcame her self-pity, decided to yield to the man's carnal hungers and be a typical middle-class housewife, a child-beater, vegetable-

monger, garment-washer, hanging her husband's underwear with pride to dry in the balcony 'like some kind of a national flag'." (Relocating My Story xv)

But the independent and creative essence that she had within her, motivated her to write the autobiography and the collection of poems, which gave her the identity in the society that an individual craves for. But on the other hand, she continuously kept on searching for the true love she had always desired to find. This search or desperate urge to find real love is clearly visible in her poems.

### Urge to Find Real Love

Kamala Das had a big family which has her grandparents, her parents, many aunts and a loving brother. But she spent most of her childhood with her parents and her brother, and there she was in want of love as she tells us in her autobiography *My Story*;

My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends. Out of such an arid union were born the first two children, my brother and I, bearing the burden of swarthy skin and ordinary features.

We must have disappointed our parents a great deal. They did not tell us so, but in every gesture and in every word it was evident. (*My Story* 4-5)

The lines above say it all that how Das feels about the 'amount of love' she was getting from her parents. But the time she spent with her grandparents, she remembers with a sense of joy and happiness. Especially, the love she got from her maternal grandmother was the golden time of her childhood, rather of her entire life. The days she spent at Nalapat House, were the happiest days of her life, which she recollects in many of her poems. One of those poems is 'My Grandmother's House' where she writes,

Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost  
 My way and beg now at strangers' doors to  
 Receive love, at least in small change?  
 (My Grandmother's House 14-16)

Here, Kamala Das repent for those lost times when she was with her grandmother who used to love her a lot that too unconditionally. She was then proud and loved but that love is now lost and she is begging for love on the doors of strangers. The love she now gets is selfish and demands something in change. She talks about the love of her husband that demands physical intimacy and gender supremacy, and this kind of love can never fulfil the urge for real love. In another poem 'The Freaks' she talks about the situation her husband and she are in that whenever they make love, she never responds to the husband, she has now become a freak who does not feel anything and 'only flaunts at times to save her face'. In the poem 'The Sunshine Cat' Kamala Das writes about the lady in the poem, perhaps Kamala Das herself, who had physical relations with a few men, who never cared for her. They say that it is not in their nature to love, but they can be 'kind' to her. Then she talks about her husband who used to lock her in a room of books, she is all alone there except having the sunshine cat for

company.

With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like A yellow cat to keep her company, but soon Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a

Line, a half-thin line, and in the evening when He returned to take her out, she was a cold and

Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men. (The Sunshine Cat 16-22)

These lines show that Men always think of women as an entity, and not as an individual identity. A man always thinks that he is giving back enough in lieu of what he gets from his life partner. He gives her financial and social security, he makes love to her. But, he never thinks that the love he is giving to his wife is not that unconditional love that she urges for. In fact, it is only selfish love which cares more of his self and less of the being associated with him as his life partner or his better-half. But as the time passes, he realises that those worldly things were never enough for her without the real love of her husband. He always thought of her as a servant to the needs of his own, but now it is too late to realise it as the woman now has no energy and enthusiasm left in her to feel the warmth of any sort of kind gestures. She is now of no use to any man, not even to her husband, she is now a cold and half dead woman who finds herself unable to respond to any kind of emotion or to enjoy the goodness of life.

### Conclusion

One can easily say about Kamala Das' poetry that it hunts for the real love that every being living on earth deserves to get. Except for the true unconditional love that she received from her grandmother, she craved for real love she deserved to possess for being a human, who is surrounded by many other human beings who were supposed to love her. The true love she wanted to receive from her husband was always missing. This urge for real love led her to the quest for identity which made her think whether she can survive in this world without the support which she needed. This quest for identity is clearly visible in many of her poems and it transformed her into a changed personality, who created a place of her own in the society full of so-called social and cultured men, having different face to show to the world and the one which may said to be their real face. The boldness of her thoughts and their fearless expression make her stand out among the feminist writers of India.

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