

# Poetics of Self-Definition and Resistance in Kamla Das

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**Abstract – Known for her confessional mode of writing, Kamla Das' (1934-2009) poetry offers an aesthetic of resistance to the phallogocentric codes and conventions. What sets her poetry apart from the other Indian women poets writing in English is the brutal honesty with which she handles the issue of women's search for subjectivity and autonomy in the face of patriarchal prohibitions. Her choice of a free poetic mode instead of regular metrical form suits her tone of anger and protest resulting from the marginalization of women. However while hitting out at the deeply entrenched patriarchal prejudices, she does not forget her own femininity. Das's individuality lies in evolving a new language of protest. The expression of resentment and hurt in her poetry takes various forms - right from light-hearted mockery of the oppressor to downright denunciation of the repressive social set up to trenchant poetic images to name just a few.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Her collections of poetry include Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Tonight This Savage This Savage Rite: The Love Poetry of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy (1979), Collected Poems (1984), Only the Soul Knows How To Sing (1996). Her autobiography My Story appeared in 1976.

Kamla Das primarily writes about her desire for and elusiveness of love, trap of matrimony, gender construction and discrimination, and nature, to name just a few prominent themes of her Poetry.

Commenting on her poetry, Rajiv Patke writes in An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English:

Her poetry may be narrow in focus, careless of decorum, unremitting in its intensity, remitting in its emotional abandon, lacking in irony. But there is no voice more direct in Indian poetry in English. It shatters more careful virtues into debris, offering simply the vulnerability of its own candour. Her iconoclasm has led to her work being misread as sensationalist, just as it has lent itself to the cause of feminism. (253-4)

This paper attempts to explore three poems—"An Introduction", "The Old Playhouse" and "Luminol"—from the perspective of a woman's search for selfhood in the face of patriarchal dominance and subjugation.

## "AN INTRODUCTION"

"An Introduction" first appeared in Summer in Calcutta and later in The Old Playhouse & Other Poems. In phallogocentric discourse women are mostly written about and are thus denied the right to self-expression. Therefore, women's texts attempt self-definition by refusing to accept their discriminatory portrayal by opinionated minds. A woman speaking about herself acquires agency, she gains a power to scribe herself.

The poem begins with a seemingly non-political statement: "I don't know politics". The very assertion about the ignorance of politics is not entirely devoid of politics as it highlights women's exclusion from power. Besides, this confession about lack of knowledge about politics is also important because this declaration very subtly enables her to introduce her gender. Next, she refers to her nationality, her complexion and her place of birth. The mention of her colour "very brown" with the other two details is deliberate and carries a hint of sarcasm because a woman is perceived on the basis of superficialities like colour of her skin.

These preliminary details are followed by patriarchal vetoes which lay down the dos and don'ts for her

I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,

English is not your mother-tongue. (141)

And thus, the poem transforms into a site of conflict between "I" and "they", between an independent subject and the lawgiver, whose prohibitions act as an irritant and the speaker's self-cries out for a respite from their nagging interference

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 is half English. half

Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.

It is as human as I am human, don't

You see? (141)

This is not just a post-colonial poet's defence of her hybrid language but an assertion of a woman's right to choose her own idiom, a style that captures her inner core, her essential femininity without which her writing will lose its individual quality. And it may be as disruptive as the pre-oedipal language as opposed to the phallic language of the symbolic. Here the stress is on expression of individuality: "its distortions, its queerness/All mine, mine alone." It is not only the appropriate textual medium for her but also a weapon of resistance. Its expression encapsulates her very self, her humanity, her femininity. It is as natural to her "as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions. The correspondence with crow's cawing and the lion's roaring alludes to the harshness and dreadful booming quality of her language.

Then she shifts her focus from her mind to body. Unlike other women writers, Kamla Das talks about her sexual maturity without inhibitions and articulates the agony of violence inflicted on her adolescent body:

I was child, and later they

Told me I grew, for I became tall. my limbs

swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. 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. (141)

Her own femininity becomes a burden for her: "The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank/Pitifully." The disgust born of her own femaleness motivates her to dress up like a man and erase her femaleness by wearing her hair short, a shirt and her brother's trousers. This was perceived as transgression, a lapse on her part to adhere to patriarchal norms, and a refusal to perform the assigned roles. No wonder, the patriarchal imperatives followed:

Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife. they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,

Belong, cried the categorizers...

Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better

Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to

Choose a name, a role. (142)

She not only refuses to comply with any of these but also quite daringly writes about female sexuality which is rare among many women poets. Talking about her love for a man, she writes:

In him ...the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me...the ocean's tireless

Waiting. (142)

Comparing herself with the ocean and the man with a river, she probably wants to suggest that a man can experience completeness, contentment and fulfilment only through a woman because a river's existence assumes meaning only in flowing into the ocean. Besides, by comparing herself with ocean and the man with a river, she indicates that she possesses more depth, expansiveness and bounty than him

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The poem, which began with an assertion of her individuality and uniqueness, tries to forge a link with all human beings towards the end. The scope of the poem widens from mere personal to the larger world, excluding none and encompassing all. All are accommodated and celebrated as their triumphs and tragedies are the same.

I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the  
Betrayered. I have no joys which are not yours. no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (142)

### **"THE OLD PLAYHOUSE"**

If the poetic voice in "An Introduction" is being persistently pressurized to conform and fit in, the speaker in the "The Old Playhouse" is writing as one who has already been reduced to conformity. The poem appeared in Kamla Das's third poetic collection *The Old Playhouse & Other Poems*.

The poem expresses the anguish of a woman entrapped in a loveless marriage. She is locked in dull domesticity which has robbed her of her freedom, individuality and autonomy.

The speaker has been tied to matrimony and thus domesticated and tamed. The poem begins with a recollection of her liberty, and in this nostalgic longing for a lost world, lies a painful desire for release and also an awareness of the impossibility of such a release. She was a free spirit once, "a swallow" who flew through "the endless pathways of the sky". The metaphor of the bird is crucial because it relates her agony to the legend of Philomela and Procne who suffered the brutality of Tereus narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Cooped up in the cage of domesticity, she can now sing only about her pain and loss. The image of swallow is significant for one more reason. The metaphor connects her with nature and thus highlights the parallel between woman and nature as both are exploited in an identical manner because both possess reproductive power and both are considered property. Once accustomed to unhindered movement across the sky, she has not yet forgotten her freedom despite the best of efforts her oppressor. In spite of her confinement, she sings freely denouncing patriarchal power without any fear.

"You called me wife" connotes the idea of interpellation. Calling her wife is an act of assigning her a role; it is analogous to the act of subject formation. Once she has been given a name, she is supposed to adhere to her stipulated role.

Trapped in a loveless marriage, her life has been reduced to the drudgery of domesticity during the day, followed by the expression of her husband's lust at night:

You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured  
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed  
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. (144)

Despite his intimacy with "every nook and cranny" of her body, he knows only the surface, the exterior, not

the essence of the speaker, not her soul. She is colonized through matrimony and she is wrenched away from the world of untrammelled freedom to be thrown into the claustrophobic world of matrimony where she is required to shed her free will and where she is "taught to break saccharine into your tea and/To offer at the right moment the vitamins."

No wonder, for her, summer with all its association of bright cheerfulness, begins to "pall". The brightness of summer is supplanted by dreariness of autumn, by the "ruder breezes of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves."

It's a world which has not only schooled her into subservience but also choked her with suffocating artificiality of saccharine and vitamins. It's a world where the masculine breath of her husband's presence pervades the air. It is a world where: "Your room is/Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always/Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little."

It is a world where

...cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf  
and

Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all  
your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (144)

Domesticity clips her wings and leads to her loss of self. She finds herself to have been transformed into a dwarf by his monstrous ego. Pushed to the margin, she is not supposed to ask questions but only to "mumble incoherent replies". Quit unsurprisingly,

-There is

No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an  
old

Playhouse with all its lights put out. (145)

The metaphor of the old playhouse is very telling. An old playhouse devoid of lights cannot have any images on the screen. The speaker's consciousness has evacuated of her feelings and rendered blank like the screen where no images are being played out.

The allusion to Narcissus myth equates the husband with the youth of the Greek legend narrated by Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Narcissus did not respond to the love Echo, a mountain nymph, who pined for him and because of his indifference and cruelty, he was cursed by the gods after which

he fell in love with his own image in water. The gods wanted to make him feel how painful it is to love and not to be loved. The speaker's husband also suffers from self-love and thus cannot really reach out to her or grasp the depth of her emotions. Ironically, in the Greek myth, the gods intervened on behalf of Echo to crush Narcissus's ego whereas the speaker in the poem has no such hope.

The binaries of bird and bird-catcher, hunted and hunter, freedom and confinement, now and artificiality, summer and autumn, monster and dwarf Narcissus and Echo lend a rare suggestivity to the poem and at the same time underscore the idea of stifling domestic space and the speaker's longing to find a release from that.

### “LUMINOL”

At last, I will discuss a poem where the poet seems to be more interested in silence than words. “Luminol” was published in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. The brevity of the poem is deceptive as the poet has squeezed into little space all her heartfelt anguish and longing for relief. Though short-term, from her suffering. Exhausted both in body and mind, the speaker wants to enter into the realm of tranquilizing sleep with the help of Luminol, a sleeping pill. When she has sunk into the domain of sleep, she would be impervious to his lust. She calls him “Your ruthless one” (88). Howsoever, ruthless he may be. He cannot access what she calls “the mute arena of her soul” (88) - that realm of her essence which is inaccessible and unreachable. The pill will temporarily tranquilize her against the stifling world of patriarchy and through her sleep, she will wake up into a different zone where she will be able to have a sense of oneness with her soul as he can only access and assault her body. Sleep is the best route to access her real self, her essential femininity. This time she wants to explore that, not through words or reason but through oblivion.

### CONCLUSION

Hence, her genuine and strait forward contemplation over female psyche makes an inerascable impact in this particular genre.

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