

Identity Crisis in Kamala Das's Poems

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Kamala Suraiya Das's identity lay in the confessional mode, and the confessional mode unveiled her identity. A poetess par excellence, her poems echo her innermost ruminations, reveries and rantings. Her poems functioned as a quest for identity with reference to repressed gender, reticent sexuality and the marginalized self caught in the maze of male monopolistic chauvinism. Certain poems like "The Fancy-Dress Show" aimed at demarcating the distinction between the mask and the man. In "An Introduction", she explores not only her identity but also the distinctiveness of her writing as divorced from preconceived notions. "The Freaks" unlocks the woman from the imprisoned construct preset for her by Man. In "The Sunshine Cat" she glorifies the femininity of a woman as defined by sentimentality and as opposed to masculinity devoid of emotions, as being emotional has been conventionally associated with being effeminate. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" tunes the relegated to a spiritual pulse, dancing in abandon to assert themselves as they neither belong to this world nor that. The essay undertakes to analyze the subject of identity crisis with reference to each poem of Kamala Das.

An Introduction

"An Introduction" is Kamala Das's most famous poem in the confessional mode. Writing to her, always served as a sort of spiritual therapy: "If I had been a loved person, I wouldn't have become a writer. I would have been a happy human being." Kamala Das begins by self-assertion: I am what I am. The poetess claims that she is not interested in politics, but claims to know the names of all the people in power beginning from Nehru. She seems to state that these are involuntarily ingrained in her. By challenging us that she can repeat these as easily as days of the week, or the names of months she echoes that these politicians were caught in a repetitive cycle of time, irrespective of any individuality. They did not define time; rather time defined them. Subsequently, she comes down to her roots. She declares that by default she is an Indian. Other considerations follow this factor. She states that she is 'born in' Malabar; she does not say that she belongs to Malabar. She is far from regional prejudices. She first defines herself in terms of her nationality, and secondly by her colour. I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, And she is very proud to exclaim that she is 'very brown' banishing boundaries of Apartheid. She goes on to articulate that she speaks in three languages, writes in two and dreams in one; as though dreams require a medium. Kamala Das echoes that the medium is not as significant as the comfort level that one requires. The essence of one's thinking is the prerequisite to writing. Hence she implores with all-"critics, friends, visiting cousins" to leave her alone. Kamala Das, here, voices the main theme of Girish Karnad's "Broken Images"-the conflict between writing in one's regional language and utilizing a foreign language. The language that she speaks is essentially hers; the primary ideas are not a reflection but an individual impression. It is the distortions and queerness that makes it individual. And it is these imperfections that render it human. It is the language of her expression and emotion as it voices her joys, sorrows and hopes. It comes to her as cawing comes to the crows and roaring to the lions, and is therefore impulsive and instinctive. It is not the deaf, blind speech: though it has its own defects, it cannot be seen as her handicap. It is not unpredictable like the trees on storm or the clouds of rain. Neither does it

echo the "incoherent mutterings of the blazing fire." It possesses a coherence of its own: an emotional coherence.

She was child-like or innocent; and she knew that she grew up only because to the others, her size had grown. However, the emotional frame of mind was essentially the same. Married at the early age of sixteen, her husband confined her to a single room. She was ashamed of her femininity that came before time, and brought her to this predicament. This explains her claim that she was crushed by the weight of her breast and womb. She tries to overcome it by seeming tomboyish. As a result, she cuts her hair short and adorns boyish clothes. People criticize her and tell her to 'conform' to the various womanly roles. They accuse her of being schizophrenic; and 'a nympho'. They confuse her want of love and attention for insatiable sexual craving.

She explains her encounter with a man. She attributes him with not a proper noun, but a common noun-"every man" to reflect his universality. He defined himself by the "I", the supreme male ego. He is tightly compartmentalized as "the sword in its sheath". It portrays the power politics of the patriarchal society that we thrive in that is all about control. It is this "I" that stays long away without any restrictions, is free to laugh at his own will, succumbs to a woman only out of lust and later feels ashamed of his own weakness that lets himself lose to a woman. Towards the end of the poem, a role-reversal occurs as this "I" gradually transitions to the poetess herself. She pronounces how this "I" is also sinner and saint", beloved and betrayed. As the role-reversal occurs, the woman too becomes the "I" reaching the pinnacle of self-assertion.

Kamala Das's "The Freaks"

The word 'freak' has the following meanings:

1. A thing or occurrence that is markedly unusual or irregular
2. An abnormally formed organism, especially a person or animal regarded as a curiosity or monstrosity.
3. A sudden capricious turn of mind; a whim.

Here, the first stands for the sexual act in the poem that is unnatural, simply for the reason that it is not natural(not arising out of love).

The second meaning can be attributed to the object of the act, the poetess herself, an eccentric.

The third implication is responsible for the poem itself as a whole, a sudden whim that results in the poetess' inspiration.

The man in question is described in terms of his unattractive attributes: his sun-burnt cheek, his dark mouth, the uneven teeth that gleam(implies that the person is most probably dark). The poetess begins the poem with "He talks" as he is the supreme authority as in "And God said..."The act of love also has patriarchy reigning supreme. His mouth is a dark cavern of hidden egoistic secrets. The cavern is also a passage for the poetess to reach her love's heart, that she fails to achieve. The teeth hanging from the roof of his mouth appear as uneven as stalactites. The word "stalactites" denotes lack of warmth.

As they endeavoured to pursue the goal of love, they trip over puddles of desire. Note that this is not owing to accident, as Kamala Das utilizes the word "Idly". The poetess means to iterate that if the person wanted to really love her, he would have succeeded. That is, if lethargy did not come as a hindrance.

Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers?

He touches her with his fingertips; he touches her superficially without the feeling of affection. It is nothing more than the skin's cravings. The poetess rhetorically poses a question as to who could have helped those lovers who treaded the path of love too long enough and still failed in the blossoming of love.

The heart is described as an "empty cistern". A cistern is meant for holding some liquid. Here the cistern is empty is incapable of holding love. Moreover, according to popular belief, to see an empty cistern foretells despairing change from happiness to sorrow. Therefore Kamala Das comprehends that the present is momentary and will eventually give away to despair. The cistern is rather filled with coiling snakes of silence that creep up on their very being. The snakes are symbolic of poison, and their coiling represents a maze from which the poetess has no escape. In her typical confessional mode, the poetess declares:

I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

The term "freaky" also applies to a person who is sexually adventurous. As an extension of this definition, the word can particularly refer to someone who is viewed as an extreme sex-addict, or for whom sex is a central focus of their lives. Therefore, the poetess puts on an air of being a nymphomaniac. She does not put it forth as an act of love, simply because she knows that she will never be loved back. She tries to 'save her face' from this basic impossibility that she attributes to men in general.

Kamala Das's "The Sunshine Cat"

In the poem "The Sunshine Cat", the poetess rants over the disillusionment in her yearning for love. The ones who took advantage of her emotional instability are termed as 'men' in general. This so-called community inevitably included her husband too. He turned out to be a mere objective observer without any emotional attachment. Being selfish he did not exhibit the slightest display of love. And, being cowardly he did not dare to give in sexually to her, for it would mark the relegation of his ego: his perspective of masculinity..He was a relentless onlooker to the extent of being insensitive for he watched her encounters with other men like a carnival affair. This is why Kamala Das employs the word 'band'.

She "clinged" on to this band of "cynics". The word "cling" is very significant, as one clings out of desperation, as in the phrase 'clinging onto dear life'. A cynic is a person who believes that only selfishness motivates human actions. Her life revolved around these egocentric people. Nevertheless, she "burrows" herself in the chest of these men. Note that the word "burrow" is generally used with reference to mongooses or rats that dig holes to hide themselves for security. For the poetess, this was a temporary refuge to render herself secure as long as it lasted. The hair on their chests were like "great-winged moths" that came like parasites between them. The lovers were younger than herself and told her that they could not love her, but could be 'kind' to her. The word 'kind' is utilized to connote condescension: a patronizing attitude on part of these superior lovers.

In Girish Karnad's "Nagamandala", Appanna locks Rani in the house, as he leaves for work. In the case of the poetess in the prescribed poem, the husband jails her in a room full of books. However, Kamala Das does not crave for intellectual company, but emotional companionship. She seeks solace in the streak of sunlight beneath the door. This is her ray of hope: her Sunshine Cat: the sunny impulse in her. Nevertheless, as her life approached its winter, her husband notices her while locking her, one day, that this streak had reduced to a thin line. The evening made him realize that she had mellowed down, partly due to age and partly owing to her despondency. The fire in her (evocative of the Sunshine Cat) had died away. Hence, she was of no use to any man; as though the sole purpose of the woman in a man's life was for sexual gratification.

Kamala Das's "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

The "Dance of the Eunuchs" is included in the collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). The poem is an eloquent expression of the barrenness of Kamala Das's loveless life and emblematic of the spiritual aridity of her being. The poetess utilizes the symbolism of the eunuchs who are the very insignia of sterility. The dance of the eunuchs far from being an aesthetic extravaganza is rather a spectacle that is looked down upon. The poetess begins by exclaiming that: "It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came."

Climate change is not a matter of concern for them, as they are always subjected to the cold-air and frigid responses. The anklets just jingle and jingle without any rhythm to it. They are indeed a spectacle with their 'flashing eyes' beneath the fiery gulmohar. The gulmohar is a beautiful tree that is juxtaposed against something deemed unpleasant.

To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals

Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling

They wore green tattoos on their face. They have to carve tattoos on their face, as the face of the eunuchs will be the only place that will be explored, that too, by disinterested eyes. Some were dark and some were fair. It is not mentioned whether they are good-looking or not, as they are not by default. The songs were harsh due to their coarse voices; and the songs melancholic. They sing of 'lovers dying' and 'unborn children'. Where, both lovers and children are remote possibilities for them. While some beat their drums, some beat their 'sorry breasts'. The breasts are 'sorry' either because they are very small or because they out of place according to gender. They wail and 'writhe' in vacant ecstasy. The elation is vacant reflecting the vacuum in their life and the hollowness of their existence.

Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from

Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness

Were in each of them

Far from being shapely, their limbs were gaunt devoid of life like half-burnt logs from the funeral pyre, that is at once a symbol of the death of Death. Not only were they overcome with drought, they were also rotten, as if in a state of decomposition. A thing tends to decompose due to lack of utility. They have no utility value, no function to perform in society, hence they rot. Crows as though foreboding some natural disaster stood still and kids watched 'wide-eyed' in shock, and not in awe. The eunuchs are termed 'poor creatures' in condescension. Their dance

,far from being rhythmic, is like going into convulsions, an inexplicable hysteria that scares the spectator.

The sky crackled and thundered. In T.S.Eliot's "The Wasteland" what the thunder stood for was hope. Rain generally is a symbol of fertility. The first rain always has the fresh smell of mud emanating from it. Here, however it stinks of dust ,and the urine of lizards and mice. Thus the poem ends without any ray of hope

Kamala Das's "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

Kamala Das recalls her ancestral house that was filled with the all-pervading presence of her grandmother. And this is why her grandmother's house is singular: Kamala Das received love there. When the poetess speaks of 'love' in particular, she ascertains that it is unconditional and selfless. With the death of the Grandmother, the house ceased being inhabited. It now became an isolated and remote entity, echoed by the phrase 'far away'. The poetess asserts that with the death of her grandmother, silence began to sink in the house. Kamala Das, at that juncture, was too small to read books, but emotional enough to comprehend the true feeling of love.

With the death of the Grandmother, her life that was hitherto filled only with emotions becomes numb. Her veins thus become cold rather than warm. It is as cold as the moon, the moon being an emblem of love. The worms on the books seem like snakes at that moment, in comparison to the size of the little girl; and in keeping with the eeriness of the situation. The poetess also implies that the deserted house is like a desert with reptiles crawling over. The poetess now longs to 'peer' at a house that was once her own. She has to peek through the 'blind eyes' of the windows as the windows are permanently closed. The air is frozen now, as contrasted to when the grandmother was alive-the surroundings were filled with the warmth of empathy. Kamala Das pleads with us to "listen" to the "frozen" air; that is an impossibility. Neither is the air a visual medium, nor can air cause any displacement because it is "frozen".

In wild despair, she longs to bring in an "armful of darkness". Note firstly, that it is not a 'handful' but an armful. Secondly, 'darkness' that generally has negative shades to it, has positive connotations here of a protective shadow. It also reflects the 'coziness' inside the house. This armful of darkness is her essence of nostalgia. With this piece of darkness, she can lie down for hours, like a brooding dog behind the door, lost in contemplation.

The speaker claims that in her quest for love she had now become wayward. The poetess speaks to her husband that she who is now thirsty for genuine love, received at one point in her life, absolute love in the form of her grandmother. Ironically she addresses her husband as "Darling", and talks of the lack of love in her life in the same breath and tone.

Her pursuit of love has driven her to the doors of strangers to receive love at least in the form of 'a tip'. Previously she was 'proud', as she did not have to compromise on her self-respect. Now she has to move in the labyrinth of chauvinistic cartel, and beg for love in the form of change.