Nostalgic Element in Kamala Das’s Poems *My Grandmother’s House* and *A Hot Noon in Malabar*

Dr. Monika  
Assistant Professor  
M.H.D.College for Women  
Odhan (Sirsa)

The present research paper has been attempted to explore the nostalgic element in the poetry of Kamala Das. The paper gives a lively description of her early life which Kamala Das spent at her grandmother’s house and her ancestral house at Malabar. After marriage, she was far from those houses and in a pensive mood she recalls that time and this fills her mind and heart with pleasant memories. With the death of her grandmother the unconditional and pure love by her grandmother also passed away. Now she is married and seeks love, then she remind her ancestral house at Malabar. In a nostalgic mood, she reminds all the incidents which she spent in that particular place.

Kamala Das, a unique voice in Indian English poetry, is the multi-layered dimensions of matter and manner in her poems make her a significant personality in feminist literature. She was born in 1934 in Malabar, Kerala. Her mother, Balamani Amma was a renowned poet in Malayalam. Kamala Das was trained in the traditional art of decoration, performing rituals at Nalapat house in Malabar. She went to a convent school in Calcutta. These traditional and literary knowledge at Nalapat house and modern and western knowledge at Calcutta—shaped the psyche of the growing child. She was married to Das at the age of fifteen, so that she could never adjust well married life inspite of her husband being kind and liberal to her. She was educated both in Kerala and Calcutta. It was during her long stay in Calcutta that she acquired proficiency in English. She started her poetic journey through *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965 which was followed by *The Descendants* in 1967 and the last one *The old playhouse and the other poems* in 1973. She was honoured by the Sahitya Academy for her work *Tanuppu* in Malayalam. Her poems first appeared in the Indian P.E.N. in 1965. She won the poetry prize of the Asian Anthology Volume in 1963 and was a frequent nominee for the Noble Prize. She wrote her autobiography in Malayalam which later published in English with the title *My Story*.

**Nostalgic element in Kamala Das poetry:**

Kamala Das is known for her confessional mode of writing, her treatment of love theme as a unique manner and a poetess of extreme feminine sensibility. She started to write poetry at that time when personal experiences took the place of colonial and nationalist themes in English poetry by Indian women. After the soft and soothing strains of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, the offensive individualism of Kamala Das appears as a shock. She is considered as a subjective poet and her poems are “products of uncontrolled emotions”. She was always in search for the perfect masculine being and each encounter with the male—the husband or the lover in discovering the meaning of true love and finally the frustration and disappointment resulting from the repeated failures of such experiments. To get relief from the frustration, she turns to her past memories where she
got ideal love as a child. She showed her nostalgic element in her poems *My Grandmother’s House* and *A Hot Noon in Malabar* which first appeared in *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965. Kamala Das’ past and the present are contrasted. The present time is in no way worth-living and the past is inspiring and the memory is worth-retaining. When she thinks of her past and her present life she thinks that how fast the time goes, today my grandmother is no more and I can’t see her again. Nostalgia means remembering our past or childhood. Indian poetess recalls her dead grandmother in the poem *My Grandmother’s House*. This poem takes the form of a confession comparing her present broken state with that of being unconditionally loved by her grandmother. An unconditional love expects nothing and expresses everything. In reality, the love of grandparents towards grandchildren is unconditional and incomparable.

Kamala Das belonged to a traditional Nair family and was married at the age of fifteen. After marriage, she remembers her childhood days which she spent at her grandmother’s house. With the death of her grandmother the house withdrew into silence. She recalls that she spent her childhood in that house where she received unconditional and pure love by her grandmother. She was the loving granddaughter and felt very close to her and also felt safe and happy. In a nostalgic mood, she reminds all the incidents which she spent in that particular place. But suddenly, she comes in the present and thought that now grandmother has passed away and that house has gone in silence where snakes moved on books racks. 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. There were many books at her grandmother’s house, but at that time Kamala Das was very young to read those books means at such initial stage she neither understand the importance of books nor the significance of the written material in those books. Her blood became cold like the moon because there was none to love her the way she wanted.

She understands that she cannot reclaim the past but she wants to go back home, look once again through its windows and bring back a handful of darkness – sad and painful memories, which she would have made her constant companion, to, keep as a reminder of her past happiness. Now when she is married and she usually thinks to go in her grandmother’s house and want to peep through the blind eyes of windows and listen the frozen air means all useless in material world, and now in a melancholic mood she only bring darkness and that darkness prevail in her life and put that her bedroom door like a brooding dog. The image of the window is a link between the past and the present. It signifies the desire of the poet for a nostalgic peep into her past and resurrects her dreams and desires. The moon is being an emblem of love. 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 impossibility. 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. She feels so proud of her grandmother and the house in such a way that she wants all the others know how
promising and satisfying was the atmosphere at the grandmother’s house. She enthusiastically remembers her childhood days and surprisingly tells her husband that can you imagine I live in such a house where I received so much love and feel proud because of that pious love. But now she has lost her way; she wants love; she begs love, that love which she naturally receives at her grandmother’s house, but now she wants the love with at least small change. The poet seems to speak in favour of extra-marital love when she says:

I who have lost  
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to  
Receiver love, at least in small change?

The pronoun ‘I’ here is very emphatic and also melancholic. It also echoes her inner reverberations that when her grandmother was alive she was rich with love and after her demise she became bankrupt and started begging at stranger’s door. She did not expect the equal amount of love that she received from her grandmother, from the society. So My Grandmother’s House presents a nostalgic picture of those days which Kamala Das spends in her grandmother’s house.

Kamala Das feels isolated and not satisfied with her present position that is the main reason that she generally remembers her past. She was successful in her career, but was really alone in her personal life. She remembers her past days which she spent at her old ancestral home in Malabar. This is peculiar description of a hot noon at Malabar and this fills her heart a mixture of happiness and pensive mood both. A Hot Noon in Malabar published in Summer in Calcutta expresses her nostalgic yearning for her happy childhood and for her family house in Malabar. She wishes that her childhood time could come back, and then she becomes emotional when she thinks about her ancestral house and her parents. She recalls every minute detail of that place which is far away from her present life. Beggars’ sharp voice, a man who came from hills with a parrot and it is supposed that the parrot will predict the future and bangle sellers who spread red, green and blue bangles on floor and these bangles were covered with dust; she reminds all these. The hot noon was suitable for brown Kurava girls to come to Malabar to carry on their livelihood. They used to read palms in lightening song voices. These hard working persons came from far away and their heels were totally cracked and when they struck their heels on the floor, it sounded grating. Kamala Das again thought that, that noon was for those strangers who tried to peep in the houses in a hope that somebody will buy their articles, but normally they distracted and doubted that whether they could convince the customer or not:

This is a noon for strangers who part  
The window drapes and peer in, their hot eyes  
Brimming with the sun, not seeing a thing in  
Shadowy rooms and turn away and look  
So yearningly at the brick ledged well.

They hardly spoke, but when they spoke, their voices seemed like jungle voices means very rough. In fact this hot noon belong to wild men, their wild thought and their wild love. Their wild feet stirred up the dust and all this happened in Kamala Das home at Malabar. But unfortunately, those days passed away and now she is far away and she only recalls those days in a nostalgic manner.
Kamala Das also makes an abundant use of the images of windows and doors in her poem *My Grandmother’s House* and *A Hot Noon at Malabar* where these symbolizes the poet’s connection to her inner self with the outer world.

**Works Cited:**