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Kamala Das: Tragedy of Contrast between Childhood and Adulthood

Ismet Jerin Khan*

Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh.

*Correspondence: ismet.jerin.khan@gmail.com (Ismet Jerin Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh).

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to focus on Kamala Das's vision of her secure and happy childhood and her frustrating adulthood exploring her poems critically. Her innocent past is juxtaposed with her sexually experienced present life in many of her poems. Her nostalgia is enrooted in her exhaustion from the current situation of life. Her loneliness and dissatisfaction compel her to fall back on her childhood memories which provide her with momentary relief but at the same time make her present predicament more pathetic. It seems that her nostalgia for childhood is the outcome of her realization of lovelessness of this cruel world of adulthood. In a very confessional tone, Mrs. Das describes the autobiographical elements of her personal life in her poems. Her ancestral house, Nalapat House, and her grandmother are one of the central themes of her poems. She compares the selfless unconditional true love of her grandmother to the sexual selfish lust of her life partner in her poems. The vivid picture of her childhood incidents in her nostalgic poem is actually a retreat for her which helps her to get some relief from her present tortured self.

Keywords: Childhood, Ancestral home, Love, Adulthood, Marriage, Betrayal, Contrast, and Grandmother.

INTRODUCTION:

Bruce King commenting on Kamala Das's Poems rightly observes: "There is a dualism in her writing, --- The dualism results from the fall from childhood innocence into the adult world of sexuality, marriage and life among strangers, especially an uncaring husband" (Modern Indian Poetry in English, P. 149-150). Kamala D., a bilingual Poet, was born on 31 March 1934 near Trissur district in Kerala. Her mother was Balamaniyyamma, a famous Poet of Malayalam religious poem and her father was V.M. Nair who was a managing director of the Mathrubhumi group. She used to live with Nalapat House, at her ancestral home, in Malabar with her father, mother, grandmother and grand uncle, Narayana Menon. She lived in Nalapat House in Kerala with her loving grandmother from whom she received pure and unconditional love. Though born in Malabar

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she was brought up in Calcutta and later on shifted to Mumbai and Delhi and eventually she absorbed the pulse of whole India. She was forced to be married at the age of fifteen with Madhava Das, a banker at Reserve Bank of India. Her marriage was a total failure as her husband was insensible to the tender feelings of an adolescent girl like Kamala. Her marriage was an arranged one against her wish. In this regard she says:

"My life had been planned and its course chartered by my parents and relatives. I was to be victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children" (My Story, P. 81)

Kamala Das could not defy the social pressure of rules and regulations on her and had comply to the decisions taken by her guardians as in the orthodox Indian

society a daughter in a burden which should be dispatched (married) as soon as possible. Her husband who had extra marital love affairs 'with another lady' and habituated to have sexual relationship with the maid servants turned her life into a hell. She writes:

"Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, granite,
Dove, (The Stone Age, Selected Poem, P. 78)

After marriage she lost her freedom and will power. Mr. Das was emotionally barren but physically lustful so his behaviour with his wife was brutal. She writes in her autobiography about her first night after marriage:

"Then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality at the attack" (My Story, P. 84)

The Poetry of Das is largely labelled as confessional in tone as it frankly pours out the inner feelings and experiences of the poetess. She is categorised with the poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. The study of her poems brings out a dichotomy between her happy, serene and peaceful past and her dissatisfied, miserable present (Alsaed, 2022). She pathetically says:

"Tragedy of life is not death but growth, the child growing into adult" (SP, P. 59)

She spent her childhood in Malabar in a rural set up with her family at Nalapat House. Her childhood memory is a recurrent theme and subject in many of her poems which are juxtaposed to the pathetic present condition of her life resulting in intensified pathos and sorrows (Khan and Akter, 2021). She mournfully recalls her happy childhood in the poem, 'The Suicide':

'I had a house in Malabar
And a pale-green pond
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months (SP. P. 41)

She recalls this memory when she is contemplating suicide out of utter frustration in life. Out of helplessness she cries out.

"O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved

If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead" (SP, P. 40)

The remote city life has made her life complex and mechanical. It is mental torment for her to behave in an artificial manner all the time:

"I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman" (Suicide, SP, P. 42)

It is a natural and common psychology of human being that when they feel cornered and helpless they take the shelter of happy memories of past which soothe their mind. Mrs. Das does the same. Bijay Kumar Das says in this connection: "Very often it is noted she leans heavily on her memory (and her grandmother and her old house come alive) from thereon she leaps on to a new subject in the poem. Thus, the past she recounts may be seen as a symbol of old human ties. Placed alongside with the present where she is searching for love, the past recalled throws light on the contemporary values." (P. 47).

K. Das throughout her whole life longed for compassion which she found only in her grandmother who supported her even after her marriage. In the poem "My Grandmother's House" She recalls the house where she once used to live with her grandmother:

"There is a house now far away where once
I received love ... That woman died" (SP, P.13)

The grandmother's death leaves her all alone and robbed her of the capacity to feel. Addressing her husband out of desperation she says:

"You cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved ... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change" (SP, P.13)

She feels completely lost and impoverished in life because of the utter absence of love in life. Her affectionate grandmother is mentioned in her fictional autobiography 'My Story' in this way:

"My grandmother was worried about the dusk-
iness of my skin and rubbed raw turmeric on

Tuesdays and Fridays all over my body before the oil bath. She oiled my hair and washed it carefully with a viscid shampoo made out of the tender leaves of the hibiscus. It was fashionable then to have curly hair and naturally she took pride in showing it off to our relatives who praised my thick tresses but mumbles unkind things about my color” (MS; P. 35)

This is how her grandmother adored her and gave confidence on her beauty. Even after her disastrous marriage when she suffered from neurosis it was her grandmother who nursed her back to normal state:

“..... In the care of my grandmother, I forgot my miserable honeymoon days and became healthy once more” (MS, P. 87)

Mrs. Das’s search for genuine love and passion compels her to realize the value of her original home where they lived happily together. Her pathetic realization of losing the connecting thread with her ancestral home unleashes the bundle of sorrows for her.

O.J. Thomas rightly comments:

“When she thinks of her freedom and life without checks, the memory of that house at Nalapat comes back to her as a soothing thought. She dreams of that house and thinks of going there and listening to the frozen air and bringing an armful of darkness to lie behind her bedroom like a ‘brooding dog’ probably to keep a watch on her. The very thought of that house at Malabar created a sort of energy in her and an inspiration to live and love” (The Quest; P. 28)

Kamala Das’s settled and secured position in her paternal house was dismantled by her marriage with her insensitive husband. This new relationship put her in a stranded situation which inevitably overshadowed her whole existence. Her husband failed to provide her with love, care and sympathy that she wanted. Her innocent childhood was destroyed with a rough manoeuvre of her husband:

“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” (“An Introduction”, SP, P.5)

She was denied love and treated as a sex object. She lost her identity as an individual and slowly degenerated into a puppet only to perform her domestic duties as a housewife:

“You called me wife

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins.
Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loat &
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all
your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies” (The Old Playhouse, SP, p. 69)

Her craving for true love makes her vindictive in a novel way. Her longing remains unfulfilled; her sufferings prompt her to seek refuge in the arms of men:

“The did this to her, the men who knew her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests
where

New hair sprouted like great-winged moths,
burrowing her

Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget”
(The Sunshine Cat, SP, p. 23)

Mr. Madhava Das, her husband, treated her as a sex doll and ignored her mind completely. Her private experience has compelled her to be rebellious against the stereotyped idea of women. In her writings she echoes the pathetic condition of women. She advocates the view that women are imprisoned in the narrow walls of domesticity which is basically male-centred. Marriage is another institution which works as an authoritative power to exploit women. Her poetical works explicitly picturises and condemns loveless sex. She deals with the problems of women especially in India where the female body is controlled through various socio-political measures, allowing very little or no space for her expression of identity. In marriage women face many types of brutalities which are never exposed or taken seriously by any society. Kamala Das says:

“Marriage meant nothing more than a show of
wealth to families like ours. It was enough to pro-

claim to the friends that the father had spent half a lakh on its preparatoin. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue” (My Story, P. 82)

Her marriage was vignonously ‘mismatched’ and it failed. She frankly speaks of her relationship with her husband in the poem ‘Larger than Life Was He’. She says:

“It was never a husband and wife bond.
We were such a mismatched pair
Yet there were advantages, I admit
He was free to exploit and I was free
To be exploited” (SP. P. 148)

K. Das has built up a dramatic framework to convey her experiences to her reader. She is engrossed with her personal trauma which she transfers to the reader reduce her pain. Her poetry is therapeutic to her. M. Sivarama Krishna’s observation about her is:

“Kamala Das’s poetry is a negation of history and total preoccupation with self- a pre-occupation which accounts for both individual talent before her poetry and the absence of a corrective tradition which can prevent self preoccupation from being an obsession” (Indian poetry in English: A Critical Assessment P. 16-17)

According to Bruce King the hollowness of her adult life is always overshadowed by the innocence of her childhood. She intentionally juxtaposes the village life and the city life in some of her poems. One of them is ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’. Kamala’s ancestral home was Southern Malabar in Kerala but after her marriage with a person from Calcutta she was shifted to Bombay and Delhi. So she was uprooted from a village set up to a city life resulting in a cultural clash. This outstanding poem is nostalgic in tone. A hot noon of a city where she dwells now reminds her of the noon at Malabar where she was born and spent her happy and carefree childhood. The poetess is closed inside her house because of the scorching heat of the summer noon. The world outside her closed door is full of sufferings and pains; the beggars are ‘whinning’ and the poor fortune-tellers have come from far off hills with parrots to earn money for their survival. The Kurava girls have come to read palms and please their customers with their singsong voices; the bangle-sellers sell their bangles of varied colours. The noon at

her village home was much different from the noon of this city. She feels lonely and estranged from her home. She says:

..... To
Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet Stirring up
the dust, this hot noon, at my
Home in Malabar, and I so far away.... (SP, P. 22)

The serenity of her rural backdrop is a sheer contrast to the dust and noise of city life. The noon which provides a proper platform for ‘wild thought’ and ‘wild love’ is giving birth to the strangers of city life only ‘mistrust’. All the people surrounding her at city are strangers to her who do not have the capacity to enjoy life and are devoid of pristine energy of mind. As A.N. Dwivedi observes:

“Kamala Das expresses her deep distrust and despair at the city-bred life, which cramps the elemental life-force” (Kamala Das & Her Poetry, p. 99)

K. D. was raised in a well-knit Nalapat family in Kerala but after her marriage she moved to Bombay and Delhi with her husband. She started to live in a single family. The negligence of her partner and insecurity led her to a nervous breakdown. She was uprooted from her origin and her feelings of loneliness and alienation are expressed in another poem ‘The Corridor’. The contrast between a secure, familiar loving home of her own and the lonely home and set up which she experiences now is the theme of this poem. Her feeling of loss and the warmth of love of her parental home cast a shadow of tragedy on her present miserable condition. She says:

“Why do I so often dream?
Of a house where each silent
Corridor leads me to warm
Yellow rooms- and, loud voices
Welcome me, and rich, friendly
Loughter and upturned faces”
(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p, 45)

Her childhood memory and her nostalgic vision is a recurrent theme of her poems. The contrast between the past and present is found in the poem ‘Composition’ where her present life to ‘lying beside my grand-mother’ is placed side by side:

“That was long ago.
Before the skin,
Intent on survival,
Learnt lessons of self-betrayal
Before the red house that had stood for innocence
Crumbled
And the old woman died
The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth?
The child growing into adult” (SP, P.58)

The dominant conflict in the poet’s psyche is between the innocent and happy childhood and the experienced adulthood when she is dominated and tortured by her husband who treats her just as a sexual partner. Her emotional bondage with her grandmother gave her support and love but her bondage with her husband gave her betrayal. Death of her grandmother has emptied her inner and outer world and left her lonely in this world. She says:

“The only secrets I always
Withhold
Are that I am so alone
And that I miss my grandmother” (Selected
Poems, P. 13)

She felt alone even after her marriage and her staying with her husband because he remained busy with his office work so he was reluctant to accompany her. He trivialized and marginalized her by forcing all the domestic duties of a wife on her. In many of her poems she depicts the monotonous life of an Indian housewife. She feels alienated and lonely. The Poem ‘Evening at the Old Nalapat House’ she painfully recounts the happy childhood memories which bring out frustration and pain. The poetess delineates the present desolate condition of her ancestral house which she witnessed when she visited the house on an evening:

No lamps are lit at the Nalapat House
When the first star comes; only the fireflies light up the stone steps and their potted plants (Collected poems, P. 38)

The poetess remembers how as a child ‘a long time ago’ she used to play in the courtyard of this house. The doors of that house are now barred as the house is now deserted. The old trees have been ‘cut down and sold’ and only the thick root remains “bruised by memories”. The evocative ancestral home is symbolic

of her life at present. Her life is like this house empty and unembellished.

The poem ‘Blood’ paints a vivid picture of her grandmother who was her shelter and support of true love and affection. She remembers her:

..... How she rode her elephant
When she was ten or eleven
Every Monday without fail
To the Siva Shrine
And back to home again (The Old Playhouse and
Other Poems, p.16)

In this poem Kamala reiterates the picture of crumbling Nalapat house with a pathetic tone. The disintegration of the house resembles her own life at her husband’s house. Critics unanimously group Kamala Das’s writing as ‘confessional.’ Her poetry is an honest expression of her sincere feelings and personal experience. Her poems are autobiographical in nature which frankly show her private events. She herself writes in this connection:

“A Poet’s raw material is not stone on lay; it is her personality (My Story, P.151)

In another poem titled ‘Drama’ the poetess remembers the drama she and her cousins acted as children when they were living in Kerala. She acted the role of Draupadi of Mahabharata. For the sake of the drama she had to appear in black gown and veil. She had to wail and beat her breast for unrequited love. As Kamala was a child at that time so she played the role in such a manner that it provoked laughter among the audience. The poetess then goes to compare her present condition of life to the life of that time which is strikingly different: There is no such stage today; no Footlights, no veil, no lamp shining like a crimson sun (Collected Poem, P. 62) Mrs. Das is nostalgic in this poem and the reminiscence of her sweet childhood memory is juxtaposed to her present mirthless state. It is mentioned by the psychoanalysts that a person feels nostalgic when he/she is exhausted from the current situation of life or when they are bored. Nostalgia is also a sign of loneliness and dissatisfaction. Childhood of any person is appealing and the few memories that we can recollect work as the corner stone of our life. Mrs. Das feels alienated in the big cities where she lives after her marriage. The sense of tenacity and

simplicity is lost in the city life. Her nostalgia only reinforces the feeling of loss. A feeling of uprootedness repletes the poems of her past. Even her happy incidents in the past seem ironically pathetic when it is looked back from an insecure and painful adult perspective. Kamala Das's nostalgic poems can be compared to the poems of Manohar Shetty and Toru Dutt. In the poem 'Our Casurina Tree' by Toru Dutt, she combines her love for nature where she spent her childhood with tender evocation of childhood:

"Dear is the casurina to my soul; beneath it we have played, though years may roll,
O, sweet companions, loved with love intense,
For your sakes shall the free be ever dear!
(Poetic Achievement of Toru Dutt, P. 115)

Again in the poem 'Baugmarce' the poetess draws a picture of the scenic beauty of a flower garden at her ancestral house at Bangmarce in Calcutta:

A sea of foliage girds our garden round.....
The light-green graceful tamarinds bound
Amid the mango clouds of green profound,
And palms arise, like pillars grey, between.
And O'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red;- red and strantling like a trumpet's sound
(Poetic Achievement of Toru Dutt, P. 129)

Monahar Shetty's poem 'fireflies' is about a common habit of children to map and cage fireflies which he used to do in his childhood. Commenting on this poem Bruce King Said:

Memories of past experience are brought into the present to become the subject for reflection' (Modern Indian Poetry in English, p.141)

Kamala Das like many other poets expand herself by relating herself to her romantic past where she received love from her relatives especially her grandmother. She realizes that she does not need the futile bodily relationships. In sheer frustration she falls back on the past memories which never lose its meaning. In writing about her sweet childhood she implies her loneliness and neglect of adult life. Mrs. Das renounces all the ties of relationship out of utter disillusionment:

Love/ I no longer need,/ with tenderness I'm most content/I have learnt that friendship cannot

endure / That blood- ties do not satisfy (Composition, Selected Poems, P.60)

Mrs. Das could not establish a smooth and friendly relationship with her husband which made her life painful, insecure and lonely. According to Iqbal Kaur:

"Mr. Das failed to handle her psychologically. The mutual rapport was missing right from the beginning."

Her craving to be loved and to have companionship compels her to write:

"I want to be loved/ and/ If love is not to be had/ I want to be dead, just dead" (The Suicide, SP, p.40)

Mrs. Das was a very emotional and sensitive woman with tender feelings but she was neglected by her husband who wanted her body only to satisfy her sexual hunger. The poet became fed up with her pathetic condition which made her to raise a voice against this social injustice to women. In a rebellious tone she exposes the suffering of a woman in this male-dominated society- through the poem 'A Request':

"When I die/ Do not throw/ the meat and bones away/
But pile them up/ and bet them tell/ By their smell/
What life was
Worth/ in the end" (SP, P. 69)

A woman's corpse will bear testimony of the absurdity of her life in a loveless social relationship. Kamala in talking about her personal pain and suffering externalizes and universalized the inner pains of her own race. P.K.J. Kurup writes:

"Pain being the central and all pervading symbol to her existence, Kamala Das makes use of her poetry as redemptive and as a metaphor of relief in order to transcend the aches of her lonely soul" (Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, P. 145)

CONCLUSION:

Kamala Das's Poetry is representative of her personal sorrows and they reiterate the ideas of equality and justice in a hierarchical power structure. She shows through her past incidents how a daughter and granddaughter receives love but ultimately is reduced to a 'beggar' by the negligence of her man. The lonely soul of a poetic mind calls for an altruistic society where a woman will feel loved and secured.

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