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### **GENDER EQUALITY AND SELF- IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Poetry is the apparition of human mind and thoughts. It is a means of expression to share experiences in the society. In the post-independence period, the emergence of female writers paved way to the distinct sense of individuality and identity in the patriarchal society. Among these contemporary writers, Kamala Das is one of the most significant poets. She consistently writes poems about herself, her life and her experiences. Her poems projects the complex phenomena of love with complex tensions and these are closely related to her quest for personal identity. Her love is not considered as platonic rather than a torturous physical and passionate involvement. Kamala Das's poems are unique, compared to other female poets in the landscape of Indian poetry. Her experience for the self-identity was not possible, in which she experienced the concept of love as a 'skin-communicated thing' as she mentioned in her poem In Love. The concept of love has a place in her poem, but her tone is distinctly feminine. Through Kamala Das, we see the emergence of Indian women from a passive role to the point of self-discovery and freedom as an individual. This paper is intended to show the concept of gender identity, which was a quest for her and self- identity which she fails to acquire, even though she expresses her own experiences in a direct way of revealing the incidents that happened in her life and society, which is patriarchal. So, she thinks and writes like an emancipated woman.

#### **KEY WORDS:**

Personal Identity, Love, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Culture, Traditional Values.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Kamala Das, also known as Madhavikutty, is one of the predominant writers of the 1960s in Indian English poetry. She born at Punnayurkulam in Southern Malabar and written the masterpiece of her collections of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta (1965)*, *The Descendants (1967)* and *The Old Playhouse*

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*and Other Poems*. Her PEN PRIZE winning poem, *The Sirens* and the Kerala Sahitya Academy winning poem, *The Cold or Thanuppu* makes the quest for her self-identity. In her poem *An Introduction*, Das introduces herself as stepping stone to enrol her self-identity to the readers through her poem.

"I am Indian, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one" (23)

Das writes her works in England and Malayalam. To her Malayalam readers, she was Madhavikutty and for her English patrons, she was Kamala Das. She finds it as the better way to communicate with the people in sharing her experiences in being as 'the other' in a patriarchal society. She describes her feeling and humiliation through her poems. Her poems are frank, personal and intimate. She boldly talks about her experiences through love in relation to sex. For Das, she found the concept of love as a part of sex, which gave awareness for her to become an essential part in life, to have a clear realisation over love. The ill treatment on a woman, who becomes the symbol of passion in Kamala Das's poem is unique because apart from the poetic merit, it creates a sense of questioning the traditional background of the Indian culture. Her poems are considered as the representation of voice against social customs and traditions. Das's poems revolve around the theme of self-identity, love and gender equality in the patriarchal society. This shows an intense flow of emotions, which is unknown for the Indo-Anglican landscape. In *An Introduction*, she points out the traditional values and raises question against their propriety. Her bold expression on how a woman can live in a male centric or male dominated society is expressed through her poems.

### GENDER EQUALITY AND SELF IDENTITY

Kamala Das in all her collections of poetry, is in quest to acquire or achieve self-identity and freedom through her dreams as well as thoughts. Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, she presents her intensely personal experiences from her growth to womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage, and her life in a patriarchal society. In her poem *Stone Age*, she expresses her emotions that her husband will not provide her freedom to enjoy her life in her own dream world also. She cries:

"With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,  
You stick a finger into my dreaming eyes" (51)

The sea is a recurrent motif in Kamala Das's poetry. The colour blue used in the poem *Stone Age* represents her sufferings and emotions in fulfilling her married life. In *The Old Playhouse*, the 'I' in the poem plays the role of an archetypal self. Kamala Das's third volume of verse, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* appeared in 1973. It contains 33 poems. In this collection, she gave more attention for identity and equality. She expresses her perception of love directly without cloaking it either in picturesqueness and profundity. The poet tells her lover that she did not approached him for her mere desire for another man, but she wants to find herself. She had willed herself to romantically in love with her husband. This is a typical way of finding salvation through the token of love. For Kamala Das, Love is not pure in nature and its motif is upon sexuality. She expresses her perception of love directly without cloaking it either in picturesqueness and profundity. She expresses her perception of love directly without cloaking it either in picturesqueness and profundity. In many poems, she talks about her failure in finding the original or pure affection from her husband.

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Das's poems mainly focusses upon the gender equality. In her poem *Composition*, she finds her husband allowing her to be free in her house, which literally meant for dancing without rest. Here, the poet is considered as a puppet for her husband, when she questions about this to her husband. This clearly shows the patriarchal system of oppressing woman.

"For such questions  
Probably there are no answers  
Or else  
The answers must emerge  
From within." (5)

*An Introduction* is a strong remark on the patriarchal society. She undergone the loneliness and because of this she felt hatred over her feminine and ashamed of playing the role of a woman in the society. She cries:

"Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said

.....

Be Amy, Or be Kamala, Or better,  
Still be Madhavikutty." (27)

She revolts against the set of rules which are applied for women, by breaking the conventional womanhood compelling her to become a traditional woman. The poem concerned with the question of human identity. Kamala Das wrote all her poems in free verse. She is honest in conveying her experiences. In all the poems, the I persona is the poet herself and she takes the role of a premature mother, wife and a lonely feminine. Feminine refers to the sufferings, oppression, passion, passivity and conventionality. On the other hand, masculinity associates everything in opposing feminine. In *The Old Playhouse*, the husband represents the patriarchal society and trapping the wife with predetermined gender roles. As men are perfecting them as superiors, in their work, just like that they are controlling the woman in their house, considering them as inferior. They control nature through civilization, like that he wishes to control woman. Das cries:

"I came to you but to learn  
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every  
Lesson you gave was about yourself." (6-8)

The growing refers to the physical and mental growth of the woman. The lessons which was given to her represents the gender roles created by patriarchal society. Kamala Das critically analysed the gender roles and sexuality within the institution of marriage in *The Old Playhouse*. Her poetry has strong feminist images mainly focusses upon marriage, motherhood, a woman's relationship over sexuality and the roles of woman offered by the traditional Indian society. Through her poems, Kamala Das experienced the alienation, the pain, the anger and her everlasting desire for her freedom.

## CONCLUSION

Kamala Das displays feminist ethos in her poems. The poet as an individual tried to raise voice on womanhood and shares her experiences, in search of female identity in a male dominated society. She demands equal social status and voiced through her emotional experiences. She slurred the conservative society, which was always harsh towards her conventional lifestyle. She liberates the role

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of a poet and embraced her ideas honestly by taking the role of a very honest woman. As a poet, she finds it as her duty to share her real-life experiences faithfully. She talks about the emancipation of woman in a male dominated society and seeking to establish the identity. Her poetry is a feminine protest on the male-chauvinism. Her poems are different from the other female poets, in which she achieved an absolute rebellious dimension. Through her poems, with her personal experiences, she tried to lift the position of woman and resists the dominance of men. Kamala Das's poems were unique compared to other feminist poets, because no other women poets have such a boldness to speak about the organs and the inner feelings. This makes her apart from the other feminist writers. It is her boldness which makes her as unique in the eyes of others. Her works are autobiographical in content and highly confessional in nature. Most of the poems are written on the subject, marriage, which reflects her life and attitude towards her husband. I conclude this paper by identifying the fact that Kamala Das has not raised as a feminist in all her poems. Moreover, she demands an equal position for the female in the patriarchal society. The gender equality was not applied in all the poems, but she made a quest for self-identity and she achieved her self-identity through her poems, which are meant to be autobiographical. On the other hand, her own personal experiences in leading a life in the male dominated society. Through the poems, her quest for self-identity has been achieved, but there remains the question of gender equality. The gender responsibilities played a great attempt to exhibit the attributes of women in the society. Throughout the poem, a cold rebellion takes place between the powerful (man) and powerless (woman).

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