

The Quest for Identity in Kamala Das's Poetry: A Journey Through Self-Discovery and Cultural Conflicts

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Abstract

Kamala Das is indeed a unique figure, holding a prominent place in the canon of prominent poets in the Indian English literary tradition invariably associated with her candid, autobiographical writing on identity, selfhood and female experience. Issues of identity are indeed a foremost concern for this intimist poet, specifically when exploring issues of women living/realising their own desires with an adherence to social constructs. In fact, we contend, that Das's poetry is about a trajectory of self-building which occurs through a view of contributor, regardless of conflicting demands and complex interplay of feelings, cultural constructions, and gendered construals of self. This paper is meant to explore identity as the consequence of research theme within Kamala Das's poetry and the line is drawn through conflicting wants-needs, grounded in societal beliefs and with a space of personal desire in her poetry. As an expansion to the identity theme, we follow parallel themes of sexuality, marital dissatisfaction, imposed constraints on women, and lastly the ontological claim to a more real and free self. Overall, this paper will put forward that through Kamala Das's poetry is a realistic journey looking for self-recognition in the space of claiming one's self, in the space between the subjective experience of claiming the self, in contradistinction to the socially sanctioned self.

Keywords: Kamala Das's Poetry, Cultural Conflicts, Indian Literary.

1. Introduction

Kamala Das's poetry could be read in the framework of seeking identity amidst a world of stereotypical societal roles for women. Therefore, she is expressing the anxiety of her inner turmoil, struggles, and wishes to create a line to her actual identity. The hallmark of her most confessional poetry is the hallmark of messy emotionalism. In her formation and deconstruction of identity, Kamala Das' poetry gestures the tensions of inner desire and outer societal expectations, the tensions of marriage, the tensions of motherhood and the tensions between sexualities that all complain about her inner world and the outer more menacing forces upon her life. The struggle to define oneself within the norms of the expectations and pressures of society of what it means to be a woman.

1.1 Sexuality and Self-Definition

Sexuality plays a significant role in Das's search for identity. Das's poetry suggests that sexuality is a crucial component of her identity—one that either frees her or constrains her. In Das's work, female desire is both emotional and carnal; often, these desires are silenced by all of society. "The Old Playhouse," "An Introduction," and "The Looking Glass" convey the female interests of desire, love, and freedom. These poems focus on emotional suffering that arises when societal pressures conflict with personal desires.

In "An Introduction," the poet openly celebrates her body and her conflict between being alive and being culturally oppressed. These iconic lines of the poet, "I am sinner, I am saint. I am the beloved and the betrayed" convey the conflict Kamala Das experiences in negotiating traditional roles, often with her sexual and emotional desires vying for their own space. The duality of sinner and saint exemplifies the tension of her inner self against the outward moral and cultural impositions of society. The poem speaks from the voice of poet Kamala Das (1934-2009), a much-loved Indian poet for her anguished and poignant poetry, laden with often autobiographical content about love, sex, identity, and the plight of women in a patriarchal society. From Kerala, Das writes poetry that deals with the contradictory tensions between human desire and the ordering agency of culture. Though it feels at times autobiographical in nature, Das's poetry recounts the experience of a woman from self to self-exploration in a culture that has formalized gender roles, institutions, and structures that occlude female space, agency, and autonomy. An especially preoccupying conflict has to do with identity in Kamala Das's poetry; the pursuit, essentially, of a homing ground for one's soul. The conflicted consciousness of the poet often poses similar questions, "Who am I? Particularly in a society that permits the women's role to become so limited and stereotypical?" In her poetry, the woman unapologetically experiments with the concept of selfhood, confronting and waging a war against both external and internal barriers placed upon her by the spheres of family, culture, and society. In that sense, the poetry of Kamala Das engages in the act of identity, which is not merely an intellectual or philosophical endeavor, but rather intimate and subjective work. One challenging--art--way Das wrote to deep pleasure and identity is that identity is fragile, specifically when identity is forged from a position of 'other.' Kamala Das tries to articulate the contestation and dissonance that occur at the interface of social cognitions and the self as she embodies and demonstrates the full spectrum of her intense, passionate life world, and in the highly kaleidoscopic demonstration of that life. This paper seeks to analyze notions of identity in her poetry and compare her treatment of the 'self' in her poetry and wider role as poet.

2. The Role of Marriage and Familial Expectations

Another key aspect in Kamala Das's search for identity is the examination of expectations surrounding marriage and family life. Marriage has been and continues to be one of the main identifiers of women in Indian society; thus, Kamala Das's poems examine the issue of whether marriage stifles a woman's independence as a person. In one of her most famous poems, "The Old Playhouse," Kamala Das examines the emotional/physical constraints of unhappy married life. In "The Old Playhouse," as well as other writings, marriage is viewed as a metaphor for the restrictive roles women were expected to adapt, the roles that are requested too much from women and act as restrictions on women's wants, independence, and dignity.

Marital protections also show the tension between family expectations and personally desired life. In "The Looking Glass," the woman is estranged from her reflections, which show glimpses of the inner self and the multiple representations inmates are expected to act out. In both pieces marriage becomes a confinement of some sort, where the poet wrestles with self-realization and the demands of the family.

3. The Struggle for Autonomy and the Role of Language

In Kamala Das' work, language functions as a means of self-expression, and a means of engaging with the struggle of independence. The fact that the poet is writing in English (a language that is neither her own mother tongue nor was originally hers, but merely the one she has chosen to speak through in order to engage with her internal struggle) signifies a statement of her independence. By writing in English, in contrast to a culture that silences women, or sees women as passive players, it becomes, in effect, her voice, her identity throughout the world that is trying to silence her.

When she states in the Introduction, "I speak three languages, write in two and dream in one," we must understand "languages" as identities with each language contained elements of her total identity. However, the poems, in English, language signifies liberation, or the space where her most vulnerable pure feelings can exist. Kamala Das is covering her identity through language, in some sense attempting to assert herself in ways her culture denies and is pushed to portray herself against...

4. The Search for a Unified Self

Another direction, worth noting, when examining the identity dilemmas found in Kamala's poetry, is that of the search for a unified identity. The unification of self, albeit in a healthy sense of the word, is depicted in Kamala's earlier poetry, where the self of the poet is represented in what seems like a "unified" and "hung/one" - permanent fragmentation of roles and expectations. In various, yet equally destabilizing, ways, an ache for an apparently unified identity is expressed where the mind, self, and emotions are all seemingly separated yet conjoined in ontological contradictions. The looking glass becomes a metaphor for her soon-to-be "fragmented" self in "The Looking Glass," while the carefree possibilities of her childhood in "My Grandmother's House" are suffocated and weighted by adult feelings toward false possibilities.

The work of Kamala Das as a poet tries to construct identity through experimentation with certain aspects of the self that has been developed through different streams: she defines self with some, while rejecting others from her own identity. However, the self that is arrived at through this experiment or compromise has no fixing and certainties; it is always fluid and will continue to remain fluid in order to have continuity and wholeness. Identity in Kamala Das's poetry is thus an incomplete and ongoing process, never to be fully realized and always in the very act of 'coming to'.

5. Conclusion

Kamala Das's poetry is a lovely expression of the desire for identity that consistently lies under her writing. As a woman in a male-oriented society, she wrestles to reconcile her own will and desire with her role in society. She conveys the emotional texture of this conflict through her poetry as she seems to submerge herself in society's expectations. For Kamala Das, sex, the conflict of marriage, language, and self-expression all appear synonymous with notions of identity.

With her bold and confessional writing style, Das critiques the tension between her intimate world and the social rules that govern her. The commercialization of her work subverts women's traditional roles, highlighting the importance of emotional honesty, self-expression, and liberation. Ultimately her poetry stands as a powerful comment about a struggle for identity, and the emotional and psychological consequences of a society attempting to impose identity, externally. Das's desire for identity is not a final self, but a continually shifting view, with always new opportunities to explore the self. Her poetry, therefore, has an overt liberating message: share any new part of yourself without reservation-even half the time you may not understand your developed self-just share you exist.

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