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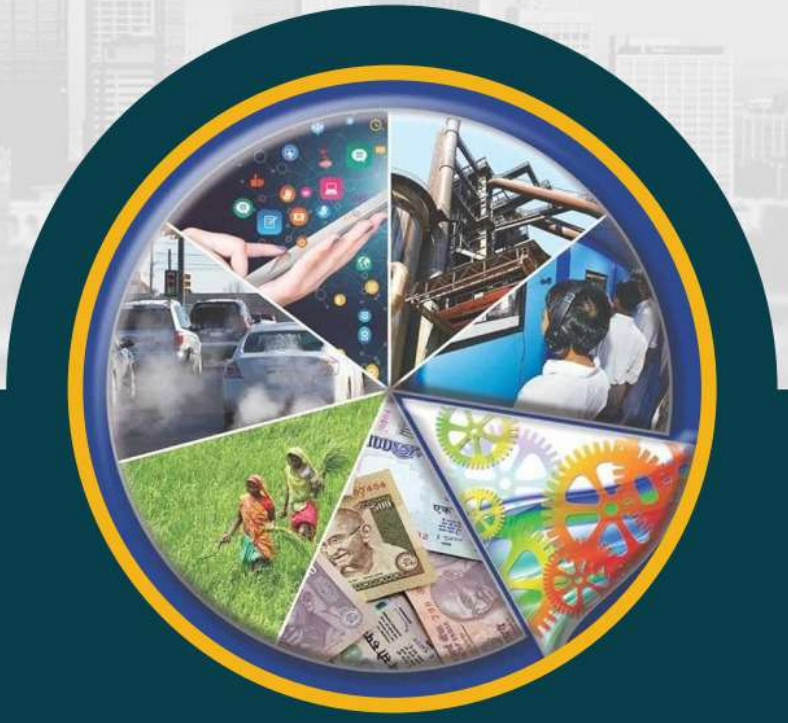
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Female Identity and Selfhood in the Poems of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is one of the most iconic and controversial poets in postcolonial Indian literature. Her poetry highlights the gap between tradition and modernity. She addresses the issues of female identity and selfhood in poems. Her style, images and language accord with her a special status as a poet. Her bold expressions about sexual exploitation of women shed light on female identity, their feelings, expressions, suffering, and expectations in a male-dominated society. The present paper is an attempt to examine the female identity and selfhood in the selected poems of Kamala Das, considering her personal experiences, cultural norms, and societal expectations.

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Introduction:

The legacy of father and mother as poets is followed by Kamala Das. Kamala Das, known as Madhavikutty and Kamala Surayya, is a well-known multilingual poet and author. Her autobiography 'My Story' reveals her true personality. The present paper is an attempt to highlight female identity and selfhood in the poems of Kamala Das. The themes in her poetry show the stark reality of Indian society and make us think about female identity and the status of Indian women. The concern for human dignity and identity seems to be Kamala Das's prime concern. Though the world of Kamala Das and her canvas is very small, she highlights very forcefully and effectively the typical female identity in Indian society through her poems. The images and symbols that are taken from commonplace make her poems suggestive and functional. The conversational style and use of the personal pronoun "I" convey her strong feelings and female sensibility. Her confessional mode and intensity of emotions depict the predicament of a woman in the male dominated society.

In the poem "My Grandmother's House" the suffering condition of the Indian woman is depicted:

"I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers door to
Receive love" (14-16)

It shows the difficulties of married women who are treated just like strangers, and therefore she reminds her grandmother, as she doesn't get love and support after her marriage from her family. It shows the difference between tradition and modern life. The difference in the way of living that the poet experienced in Mumbai and Malabar is seen in the poem "A Hot Noon in Malabar." The poet wishes to live a happy and safe life full of love and care, but she didn't experience it in Mumbai, and therefore she says:

Their eyes, dark, silent ones who rarely speak
At all, so that when they speak, their voices
Run wild, like jungle-voices. (17-19)

The poet criticizes the male-dominated society and raises her voice against injustice. She tries to focus on the problems of the women who are treated as pleasure-giving bodies and nothing else. The poet highlights the female experiences regarding their identities, freedom, emotions, desires and sexual exploitation. The poet criticizes men who are interested only in sexual pleasure and treats woman in a bad way without bothering her expectations. This condition is presented in the poem "The Freaks":

"He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds

Are willed to race towards love;" (1-6)

The poet brings to our notice how a female is considered merely a pleasure-giving source. Kamala Das actually subverts the myth of conventional Indian marriage by exploring the hollowness of a loveless relationship in which the wife is nothing but a sex symbol. This female exploitation is also highlighted by the poet in her poem "An Introduction"

When 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. (27-30)

The poet depicts the stark reality in society where women are exploited completely. A male-dominated society treats women just like slaves without bothering about their feelings, expectations and desires. It makes them suffer and feel unsafe. The poem "The Old Playhouse" shows how marriage makes the poet lose her identity and the attempt of her husband to tame her like a swallow. The poet criticizes the marriage system in which female identity is lost because of a male-dominance. The following lines from the poem "The Old Playhouse" depict it:

"But every Lesson you gave was about yourself.
You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife" (7-12)

Her poetry spoke with fierce and unsparing honesty about the difficulties of being a woman and a wife in a time and for a culture that had trained women in a long tradition of silence. Female assertion and search for selfhood is noticed in the poems of Kamala Das. She tries to define herself through her expectations and desires. Even she makes confessions through her poems by highlighting female desires, frustrations and emotional expectations. The following lines in the poem "An Introduction "reflect her selfhood through her self-realization:

"I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages and write in
Two, dream in one. "(4-6)

In this poem, poet asserts her personality by making use of the personal pronoun "I". It shows her boldness and awareness of her female identity. In the poem "The Looking Glass ", the poet talks about female identity by focusing on the traits of women. The scent of long hair and the musk of sweat between the breasts and warm menstrual blood revels sextual desires. Getting a man to love is easy for a woman, but that love is not lasting. It shows the dependency of women. After the separation of a man from a woman, she becomes a living dead body. Her emotions, desires and wants are not considered, and it makes her suffer. The poet rejects patriarchal norms by

questioning the male dominance in society and tries to focus on the female status and her expectations.

The poem "The Sunshine Cat" portrays the pathetic condition of a woman who is emotionally neglected by men and physically imprisoned by her husband. Her suffocation and frustrated married life torment her. It shows the predicament of women in the modern male-dominated society, where they have lost their status, identity and freedom as women.

The above poems of Kamala Das highlight the complexities of gender and societal norms. She challenges the established traditional norms. It makes her truly feminist, who very boldly challenges and criticizes the societal norms for giving justice to women who suffer in this male-dominated society. The confessional elements in her poetry depict the female identity and selfhood in her poems.

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