

**Nostalgic Evocation of Kamala Das's Memory of Prejudice Against Her Parents and Marriage: A Critical Study of Her Poems in Feminist Perspective.**

**Dr. R. K. Mishra**

*Retd. Reader in English, Mahalaxminagar, Dist: Balangir, (Odisha) India*

**Abstract**

Confessional poets are mostly preoccupied with the theme of prejudice against their parents and marriage. American poet Sylvia Plath dwells primarily on these issues in her poems, 'Daddy', 'The Applicant' and 'Couriers' etc. In imitation of her thematic exploitation of hatred for her father and marriage, Indian women poet Kamala Das projects her prejudicial impression on her parents and on the issue of marriage. She seems to have been considerably influenced by the Western confessionalists in writing on the subject stated above. Kamala Das approximates closely to Sylvia Plath in her revelation of her unpleasant relationship with her father and mother. She betrays her prejudice against marriage, which she abhors on account of her marital plight that resultant from her misunderstanding with her husband. Her poetry is a spontaneous manifestation of her repugnance for her parents and marriage.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, memory, Kamala Das, feminism

In the annals of Indian English poetry Kamala Das figures prominently as a poet of exceptional accomplishments. She has heralded to the World literature a new trend of autobiographical writing by conventionalizing this new approach to versification unprecedented in Indian English Poetry. She is therefore, reckoned as a harbinger of a new pattern of poetry on account of her breakthrough in poetical works. She is pre-eminently known as a poet of love, lust, and sex by reason of her predominant exploitation of these elements in feminist perspective.

Kamala Das was preoccupied primarily on the theme of marital and extra-marital relationship. Her secondary preoccupation was with the issue of animosity towards her parents and

marriage. She, however, gained enormous reputation on account of her prolific versification and prodigious poetical works on the themes of feminist articulation.

In this article we leave aside discussion on Kamala Das's traumatic reaction against betrayal and frustration in love and on the contrary, we concentrate on her contentious remarks about her parents and marriage. She has written a number of poems dealing with her prejudice towards her parents and marriage.

The father of the poet generally figures in the poetry of the Western confessionalists as well as in that of Kamala Das. First of all, we discuss Das's prejudicial relationship against her father

and then focus on Western poets' impression about their parents and marriage. She has projected in her poems the image of her father with an ambivalent attitude of love and hate. She invariably looked upon him as a personality of love and bitterness. Apart from her bestowing of love on her father she betrays her fear for him in the poems "My Father's Death", "A Requiem for My Father", "Obscure Parallel", "Death is so Mediocre" and "If Death is your Wish". Despite her grandmother's love Kamala Das was emotionally close to her father. She deplores his death and betrays her sense of helplessness consequent upon his departure from mortal life.

The death of the father is extolled as a sacrifice and a martyrdom. At the last moment of his death a sense of desolation has pervaded over the whole family and awakened in them an awareness of the futility of human aspiration for earthly glory. These feelings are poignantly etched in the body of the poem:

You were laid out on the drawing room floor

A dead Nayar gets only the cold floor to lie on. - (A Requiem for My Father)

The pity and pathos of death is evident in the Nair custom of placing a dead body on the floor. The death of the father emboldens the poet to defy death. In the poem, 'I shall not Forget' the poet recalls how she watched her father die:

I have seen death  
And I shall not forget.

Like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das also expresses her love and hate for her father.

Kamala Das's ambivalent feeling is crystallized in her poem: "My father's Death".

I feared my father  
Only in that last coma did he seem  
close to me and  
I whispered into his ears that I loved  
him  
Although bad, A bad daughter, bad  
wife, bad mother (L 27-29)

Kamala Das accuses him of having got her married in the early years of her life and thereby he blighted all her hopes and aspirations for future. Nevertheless, the poem "My Father's Death" gives us the impression that she loved him more than she loved her mother despite his irresponsiveness to her love.

The father was a strongman with a never-fading zest for life. He resisted death for nine days and sustained the medical torture till he succumbed to death:

They bled you to test your blood  
when you lay insensate and stiff  
They did the lumber puncture.  
(A Requiem for My Father)

She voiced her impression about her father's popularity which was so great that even his secret foes came furtively to watch him die. The image of the father is that of a popular and bold leader who was indifferent to his family although the latter loved him unilaterally.

The poem 'A Requiem for My Father' is a memorable and evocative poem that expresses in a feminist vein the love and affection of the members of her family for her father. Kamala Das remembers how

her father soon after betrothal constricted firmly that his wife was to wear nothing other than Khaddar and preferably white or off white. Besides, her father used to leave his daughter alone and “probably my father thought that I would enjoy being alone with the young man” (P 86-87) (1).

Her father was not of an affectionate nature and hence she and her brother were brought up more or less neglected because they were aware of themselves as neglected children in a social circle. She stated how she was deprived of father’s love and affection although she herself loved him unilaterally like a one-way traffic. In alliance with her father’s complex, a sense of failure in love and marriage manifests in her poems. Kamala Das had mismatched her husband for which she blamed her father for having miscalculated in the selection of grooms for her wedding. She expresses her reluctance for marriage with an unsuitable husband: “I ought not to have married the one I did (P 95)” (2). These pronouncements manifest her prejudicial impression against her husband. Her mental affliction is often accompanied by a father complex. Kamala Das expected father’s love from her husband and lovers and when the same was denied to her, she felt agonized. She, however, betrayed her deep concern for her father:

Father I want to remember only the good  
Only the good and the happy  
(A Requiem for My Father)

His death has deprived her of joy and complacency of her life. She

experiences a feeling of claustrophobia that haunts her invariably.

In another poem “Glass” she writes:

I have misplaced a father somewhere  
and  
I look for him now everywhere (L 14-16)

Kamala Das approximates to America poet Sylvia Plath in her ambivalent attitude towards her father. The latter has written a number of poems revealing her exuberance of love and hate for her father. Her spite for her father finds its spontaneous outburst in her poems “Daddy”. In this poem she presents her disconcerted state of mind obsessed by her father’s premature death. She found the world without father, meaningless, dreary and a waste land and hence she wants to get back to him through suicide despite his prejudice against him. On the other hand, she fostered a strong dislike for him as he died earlier and left her alone in a hostile world of claustrophobia.

The father-daughter relationship is described in the poems in terms of the victimizer and the victimized. She depicts her father as a Nazi, as a fascist and a brute authoritarian. She acknowledges him as a despot, a brute and a devil. The father, who appears in many of Plath’s poems as a life-giving force is identified as cruel and uncouth. Nevertheless, she desires to meet her father by means of deliberate suicide. She, therefore, welcomes death. She writes:

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back to you. (Daddy, P-58, 59)

This intensity of desire to get united with her deceased father through her own death impels the readers to accuse her of having an Electra complex towards him. In her speech on BBC radio, she made a confessional statement about her Electra Complex: "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her Electra Complex is discernible in the poems "Daddy" "Cut" and "Fever". Her father died while she thought he was God" (3). Plath construed the death of her father as a betrayal and as a desertion to her.

"Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are the poems that express Plath's venomous attitude towards her father. His shadow looms large in her poetry as an ominous figure, a Man in Black as a colossus. She treats her husband as surrogate father, but this surrogate father turns out to be 'The Vampire' who sucked her blood for seven years.

Like Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath once recalled her feelings for father and said to her friend Nancy Steiner that "he was an autocrat I adored him and despised him and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died I imagined that I had killed him" (4). In spite of her hatred for her father, her love for him surfaced in her poetic utterances and articulations.

Her poems can be analyzed from the angle of love-hate relationship between daughter and father. Plath often looked upon her father in the personality of her lover and rejected the suit of many suitors for not

having in them the complex and spirit of her father.

In the context of this tendency of Plath, Gordon Lameyer who was camouflaged as Buddy Williard records his reflections in his essay "Sylvia at Smith" "Basically I think Sylvia wanted someone to replace the father she had lost in her childhood. After coming close to me as she had and later did to others, she rejected this suitor as not god like enough to be both father and lover" (5).

Like Plath, Roethke and Berryman too lament the loss of their respective fathers in their poetry. Their lamentation of his death must have exerted psychological impact on the sensitive mind of Kamala Das who too mourned the death of her father in the poem "My Father's Death".

Sylvia Plath identifies her father as a despot whereas Kamala Das regards her father as a hero, bold and popular. For both Plath and Das the source of inspiration is the overpowering personality of the father. In the case of Kamala Das there is no trace of Electra Complex, nor does she consider her father omnipotent. "A Requiem For My Father" "is a poem that manifests Kamala Das's love and affection for her father whereas Plath's poem 'Daddy' professes lack of emotional communication with her father:

I never could talk to you  
The tongue stuck in my jaw (Daddy, 24-25)

These two poems mentioned above betray the poets' feminist sentiment and reaction.

She remained obsessed with the reminiscences of her father's death in some form or other. He died when Plath was ten years old. But when she was thirty, she wanted to get him back due to her exuberance of love for him. Plath confesses:

I have always been scared of you  
(Daddy, 41)

As a contrast to Plath's adoration for 'Daddy', Kamala Das's 'A Requiem for My Father' closes with a simple innocent statement:

I loved you father, I loved you  
all my life

She had much admiration and faith in her father. She assumed that she could join him by the gateway of death. Sometimes she betrays her anger towards him and other times her love and regard for him. In her poem 'Daddy' she portrays her father as a greater personality than he is actually in her poem. He has been enshrined in the temple of her poetry as a worshipful deity. In the following lines of the poem 'Daddy' she betrays her outrageous sentiment towards her father:

"Father you should not outrage me anymore".

You are a blackshoe

I have lived under your shoe or strict discipline

For thirty years I have felt very much

Depressed under you. (Daddy)

She further addresses him 'daddy'  
I have to remove you from my heart.

You died before I was fully grown".

The black shoe which symbolizes Nazism represents her father. In this shoe of Nazism, she has lived for thirty years like a foot. She always felt depressed under the vicious influence of her father. She has therefore externalized her prejudice towards him as he has invariably broken her heart and agonized her.

In like manner Kamala Das betrayed her loath for her father. Likewise, the confessional poets Plath, Berryman, Roethke and Lowell ventilated their love and hate relationship with their fathers. Lowell speaks of his father's failure in public life and his financial burst. Sexton accuses her father as incestuous. Berryman mourns the suicide of his father. Roethke's quest for identity seems to revolve round his father but nowhere does the father complex manifest such prominence as it does in the works of Sylvia Plath. In almost all her poems and in some earlier ones she refers to her deceased father whose visage haunts her invariably. Her "The Bee Poems" are invocations of her father who was an authority on humble bees. In the poem "Daddy" she conjures up his ghost in order to revive his image.

Another similarity noticed in the poetry of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath is their prejudice towards their mothers. Both these poets nurse a deep resentment towards them. In her autobiography "My Story" Kamala Das expresses her odious remarks on her mother. She writes "My mother was vague and indifferent. She spent her time lying on her belly on a large four poster bed" (6). Like Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath also treats her mother as

tyrannous and indifferent. The latter neglected her and deprived her of motherly affection and love remaining engrossed in her academic pursuit. In the absence of mother's love, she received the love of her grandmother who greeted her every afternoon when Plath returned from school. Plath has deliberately written a poem "Medusa" to depict the personality of her mother. Medusa is a mad character representing her mother.

Like Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton also portrays the picture of her dying mother although without any prejudice against her. She refers to her mother's suffering from breast cancer. She feels guilty of the rest of her life with the assumption that she was responsible for her death.

On the first of September she looked at  
me  
and said I gave her cancer.  
They carved her sweet hills out  
and still I could not answer.  
(The Double Image III Stanza)

Thus, the mothers of the confessional poets also figure in their poetry in some form or other. As the poets project their love and hate for their fathers in poetry similarly, they externalize their deep discontent towards their mothers' side by side.

Another feature of confessional poetry is the betrayal of hatred for marriage and sex. Kamala Das has written many poems expressing her contempt for marriage and sex. With regard to marriage, she observes:

I hate marriage I have to show myself  
naked to anyone (1976 p 72) (7)

Sylvia Plath has also professed her repugnance for marriage in the poems "The Bell Jar", "Jail" and "Purdah". In these poems she depicts the tragedy of a married woman. She compares marriage to imprisonment and construes it as a kind of self-entrapment. The poem "The Applicant" accentuates the conspectus of self-entrapment in marriage. The relationship between man and woman is depicted through a parody of marriage. A marriage is a bondage in which the wife is subordinated to the husband and leads the life of a doll without freedom. From this point of view, she condemns the patriarchal dominance of her husband and states that a husband is the colonizer and the wife colonized for being inferior to and dependent upon the colonizer. She seems to be revolting against this kind of power-imbalance. In the following poems 'An Introduction', 'Freaks', 'This Stone Age' and 'The Old Playhouse' Kamala Das censures the domineering attitude of the husbands who degrade and debase the position of a woman to the state of an object, a commodity. In this context Sylvia Plath too disparages the institution of marriage in her poem "The Applicant". This disparagement presupposes her rebellious outburst on her husband. The sentiment of Kamala has been much outraged by the constraints of marriage that becomes a perennial source of suffering for the wives. She has given vent to her bitterness towards marriage in the light of her own experiences as a wife. In her 'In Writer's Diary' Kamala Das

admits frankly and betrays her bitterness towards marriage “perhaps my marriage was meant to be chastisement, a punishment to remove kinks from my personality” (8). She remorsefully repents for her marriage due to her inability to flourish as a creative writer: “If I had been unmarried, I would have been a better writer” (9).

She has portrayed vividly the different aspects of suffering of a married woman. Her sentiment reflected in her poetry is one of feminist perspectives. The confessional poets ventilate their bitterness towards marriage in their poems. Likewise, Kamala Das too exploits the theme of marriage in her verses. She has revealed her prejudice towards this issue in poem after poem.

Plath betrays her agony of failure and frustration in conjugal relationship with her husband Ted Hughes. She like Kamala Das was also mismatched with her husband who invariably ill-treated her and tortured her. The misunderstanding between wife and husband is recounted in the poem “Event”. Plath’s other poems ‘The Couriers’ and ‘The Applicant’ are revelatory of her disillusionment and despondency in marriage. Her bitter relationship with her husband is revealed in those poems. Esther a character in the poem ‘The Bell Jar’ feels “that getting married is like being brainwashed” (The Bell Jar 89) (10).

As regards the theme of marriage, Kamala Das has expressed her contempt in poem after poem. In ‘An Introduction’ she writes how she was asked to wear sari for

being a wife and to abide by certain domestic codes of conduct. She writes:

Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife  
They cried (L.26-27)

In the following lines she expresses the disgust of the constraints and restraints of a married life:

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 loaf and  
Become a dwarf. (L. 12-16)

With regard to her own marriage, kamala Das reveals her reaction in her ‘My Story’, “I was not prepared for marriage because marriage meant nothing beyond sex. I hate marriage” (11).

About the tragedy of marriage, she observes:

Women, is this happiness, this lying  
buried  
Beneath a man? (Conflagration)

She aspires to escape from this prison of marital life:

For I must someday find  
An escape from its snare.(The Prisoner)

She further determines to get rid of the shackles of marital life and gain freedom:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon.  
You built around me with morning  
tea(The Old Play House)

These are the confessional revelations of her sentimental reaction about marriage.

Now let us quote Ezekiel's views about marriage. In his poem "Marriage" Ezekiel ironically portrays the stages of growth in wedding. The initial excitement of honeymoon, the ecstasy the husband-and-wife experience after marriage and their newly marital experiences are described in the following lines:

Lovers when they marry, face  
Eternity with touching grace  
Complacent at being fated  
Never to be separated.(L.1-4)(Marriage)

Marriage after initial enjoyment of grace proves to be a disillusionment and distaste. Marital relation suffers a setback on account of frequent quarrel and misunderstandings. Marriage is a great paradox. It traces couple's journey from the world of innocence into a world of experience. Ezekiel confesses candidly like Kamala Das his own tragedy of married life without concealing anything. His famous confessional poem 'Case Study' is a candid exposure of the plight of his own marital life. In this poem, woman is attributed as the cause of man's ruin:

His marriage was the worst mistake of all.  
Although he loved his children when they came,  
He spoilt them too with just that extra doll,  
Or discipline which drove them to the wall.  
His wife and changing servant did the same

A man is damned in that domestic game. (L. 13-18) (Case Study)

The poem 'Jewish Wedding in Bombay' is a frank, candid and ironical statement of what happened on the poet's marriage day. The bride, who gains a life partner, laughs at the conventional weeping of her mother. The poet was the reluctant bridegroom of the day. The word 'Reluctant' is suggestive of his dislike for the institution of marriage. He refers to the marital quarrel:

During our first serious marriage quarrel  
she said Why did  
why did you take my virginity from me?  
(L.42-43)

As Ezekiel points out, the mirth and joy of the first stage of married life is followed by marital fighting. Like Ezekiel, Kamala Das has also portrayed the disillusionment of marriage and misunderstanding with husband.

Like Kamala Das, who writes about the futility of marital life, Ezekiel portrays the adversities of married life. He particularly focuses on the quarrel and misunderstanding that ensues in marital life.

Just as Kamala Das depicts her personal experiences of married life, so also Ezekiel writes about his own marriage and also the features of marriage as an institution. He has universalized the weal and woe of this life in the relationship between wife and husband. Kamala Das states the absence of love in marital life which she was seeking from her husband. She treats all husbands to be indifferent to their wives in respect of bestowing love on them. But Ezekiel in



the “Marriage Poem” sings the glory of marital love although in other poems he expresses his disgust for it:

Between the acts of wedded love  
A quieter passion flows  
which keeps the nuptial pattern firm  
As passion comes and goes  
And in the soil of wedded love  
Rears a white rose. (L.1-6) (Marriage Poem)

Thus, the comparison drawn between Kamala Das and Ezekiel in respect of their concept of marriage, leads us to assume that Kamala Das was disinclined and disinterested to write poems on marriage. She has invariably betrayed her reluctance on this issue in her poems. She has not written any poems specifically on marriage although she has expressed her contempt for marriage in the lines of her poems and in her autobiography ‘My Story’ but Ezekiel has versified on this issue in the poems like ‘To a Certain Lady’, ‘Love Sonnet’, ‘Marriage’, ‘Case Study’, ‘Jewish Wedding Day’, ‘Song to be Shouted out’, and ‘Marriage Poems’. These poems uphold Ezekiel as a greater poet than Kamala Das in respect of her contention about marriage.

Marriage is a controversial issue of discussion in the context of autobiographical poems written by Kamala Das. She often remembers her marriage with remorse and repentance and reveals her prejudice against it in some of her poems such as ‘An Introduction’, and ‘The Freaks’. These poems manifest her bitterness in marriage. In the beginning she was reluctant for marriage, she states

“I was not prepared for marriage” (12). After her marriage her mind was embittered by her experiences of marital life. In the poem ‘An Introduction’ she reveals her contempt for marriage. She hated the idea of marriage for sex not for love but marriage as an institution legalizes sex activities, “if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit” (13). Like Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, Anne Sexton feels rather restless with this kind of sexual politics which tends to reduce women to mere inertia. She reveals her annoyance for womanhood in the following lines:

I was tired of being a woman  
..... tired of my mouth and  
breasts

Beauvoir puts it “Marriage incites man as a capricious imperialism” (14). Kamala Das’s early marriage with a man much older than her creates an aversion in her. She considers her husband to be unsuitable to her for his over age which evokes her remorse for her marriage with him:

“Fall in love  
with an unsuitable person”.  
fling yourself on him  
like a moth on a flame:

Thus, this article comprehensively dwells on predicament of marriage

Another feature of poetry is the manifestation sense of motherhood in poetry. This sentiment is revealed in the following line of the poem ‘Jaysurya’. The sense of motherhood is expressed in the following lines of this poem:

Out of mire of a moonless night was her  
born,  
'Jaisurya' my son as  
out of the wrong is born the right and  
out the night  
The sun-drenched golden day (L 41-44)

When Plath was pregnant, she revealed her sentiment about pregnancy and compared herself to 'a bag of apples', an elephant and other heavy objects:

New statue  
In a drafty museum your nakedness  
Shadows our safety  
(Morning Song Line)

Motherhood is wrought with tensions and fear. The mother fears for the very existence of the child in a violent mechanical world. With this presentiment Plath writes:

It is the heart  
The holocaust I walk in  
O' Golden child this world will kill and  
eat'(Mary Song)

We have already referred to her poem Jaisurya in the context of motherhood. The other poems that remind us of this feature are the poems "Afterwards" and "My Sons". She writes:

My sons are old enough to take their  
own women,  
old enough to forget the lullabies  
I sang and the prayers  
Recited near their beds  
when they were ill (My Son L. 7-10)

In the light of these two poems, we can discuss Kamala Das's sense of motherhood that spontaneously manifests

in her poems. In these two poems Jaisurya & Afterwards she delineates her labour pain that she had to undergo to give birth to her son as its mother. The birth of the son after much pains brings a sense of relief to Kamala Das as she became aware of her motherhood which marks a state of fulfilment of marital life.

Similarly, as a mother she is conscious of the oblivious tendency of her sons who in the course of their adulthood forget the lullable songs that she was singing to lull them to sleep when they were children. She realizes the effect of her songs on the mind of her sons who were induced to sleep during their illness. Thus, Kamala Das as a mother has revealed her experiences of motherhood in a feminist perspective.

Thus, this article seeks to revive Kamala Das's memory of her past life of bitterness towards her parents and marriage. The article is, however, an autobiographical manifestation of her nostalgic recollection of her past experiences of marital and social life. Her reminiscences and revelation unmask her private life.

Many women in Indian society profess their discontent about their relationship with their parents. Some women betray their animosity towards them on account of their being neglected and ignored by them. Thus, women in Indian society accuse their parents of having neglected them and slighted their presence in the family. Like Kamala Das all contemporary confessionals betrayed their disgust against their respective parents. They further ventilate

their terrible chagrin against marriage for being subjected to subservience and drudgery by their husbands. Besides, numerous wives condemn their husbands for poisoning the stream of their conjugal life and curse their marriage. Kamala Das was boldly extrovert by virtue of which she revealed candidly her innermost dejection and repugnance against her father and mother. Much more

aggressive in tone and utterance was Sylvia Plath who denounced her father opprobriously. Thus, ventilation of prejudice against parents and marriage is a common feature of Indian social life. Synchronization of these incidents not only jeopardizes their familial life but also vitiates the sanctity of social life. There is no remedial measure to remediate this evil of life and enliven it.

#### Notes and References:

- 1 Kamala, Das. *My Story*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1976. (P- 86-87)
- 2 Ibid P- 95.
- 3 Paul, Brestine. *The Psychological Muse: The American Poetry Since the Fifties* Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987. (P- 47)
- 4 Nancy Hunter, Steiner. *A Close Look at Ariel: The Art of Sylvia Plath*, New York: Popular Library, 1973. (P 10)
- 5 Gordon, Lameyer. *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Studies in American Literature*, London: Oxford University Press 1976. (P 232/42)
- 6 Kamala, Das. *My Story*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1976.
- 7 Ibid P- 74.
- 8 Kamala, Das. *In Writer's Diary: Indian Literary Review*, Nov-Dec 26-27.
- 9 Kamala, Das. *My Story*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1976, P-82.
- 10 Sylvia, Plath. *Bell Jar*, London: Faber & Faber, 1966.
- 11 Kamala, Das. *My Story*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1976, P-58.
- 12 Ibid P-96.
- 13 Ibid P-86.
- 14 Simone de, Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*: New York: Bantam Books, 1949. (P 483).