

KAMLA DAS'S 'THE DANCE OF THE EUNUCHS': AS UNHEARD VOICES

Dr Pankaj Bala Srivastava,

Associate Professor, Department of English,

Mahila Vidyalyaya Degree College, Lucknow

ABSTRACT

Kamla Das's 'The Dance of The Eunuchs' is a poem of some confessional slant and feministic message deriving it from the eunuch dance and the eunuch's view of life. The scene is undoubtedly one of the coming and gathering of the eunuchs to lift the baby from the mother's lap and make it dance as they often do in India. But what pains their hearts, nobody knows it. The Hijras, too, are human beings, but they wail for being neither men nor women. The poetess depicts that they are victims of the social norms that alienate them from being treated as normal humans.

Keywords: *Eunuchs, Hijra, Kamla Das, Dance*

'The Dance of the Eunuchs' is a quite symbolic and perplexing poem written by the great poetess Kamala Das, a victim of patriarchal society. She talks about the dance of eunuchs or transgender people. They are victims of the social standards that estrange them from being treated as normal humans. Being socially excluded, eunuchs either Dance, sing or beg to earn their living. However, their prom and songs have no joy or rhythm or melodiousness. They try their best to look attractive, yet society looks down on them. The present paper explores how the poet's unfulfilled desire finds expression through the dance of the eunuchs' image. The eunuchs dance ecstatically, but there lies a sense of emptiness beneath their apparent ecstasy because they do not have any sensual feeling--the ultimate pleasure a person can have. The word 'vacant ecstasy' reveals the hollowness of the poet's love; it insinuates her sad married life.

At 42, Kamala Das wrote a daring autobiography, 'My Story (Ente Katha in Malayalam). This book was originally written in Malayalam; later,

she translated it into English and then translated it into 15 international languages. The poet writes in her autobiography that at the age of 15, she was married to Madhav Das, a bank executive many years her senior, with whom she had a turbulent relationship characterized by mismatched levels of sexual yearning. She describes the cruelty of the first night of her marriage and how her body was not ready for love-making. She said that her life had been planned and its course charted by her parents and relatives. she was to be the victim of a young man's carnal hunger, and perhaps, out of our union, there would be three children... With wifely pride. Despite her reservations about her husband, she also writes frankly about looking for love outside her marriage and her attraction toward certain men. She narrates, "I was ready for love. Ripe for a sexual banquet." The autobiography also touches upon homosexuality, describing the interest that young girls sensed for each other at the boarding school or the story about her husband and his interactions with his close friend. As a poet, Kamala Das is mighty when she writes about emotions – the ecstasy of

finding love, the depths of depression and the suicidal thoughts she had as a housewife trying to reconcile herself to her fate. "I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, 'Get out of this trap, escape....!'"

Kamala Das was born in a conventional Hindu Nair family with noble ancestry; after being guided by her lover Mr Sadiq Ali, an Islamic scholar and a Muslim League MP, she adopted Islam at age 65 and changed the name Kamala Surayya.

Kamala Das started her career as a poet writing under the Pen name of Madhavi Kutty. She was a renowned Indian author who wrote in her mother tongue, Malayalam and English. In 2009, the Times pronounced her "mother of modern English poetry". Among her many notable achievements is the Pen Asian Poetry Prize in 1963 and a nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1984. She also became a syndicated correspondent expressing her views on women, children, and politics. Kamala lived by her terms all of her life, which is visible in her writings. The first published book of collected poems, 'Summer in Calcutta' (1965), featured romantic love's ups and downs.

The Dance of the Eunuchs is the opening poem of her first collection of poems – 'Summer in Calcutta'. This poem is an eloquent expression of the barrenness of Kamala Das's love life and symbolic of the spiritual aridity of her being. The poet exploits the symbolism or representation of the eunuchs, who symbolize unfruitfulness. The dance of the eunuchs, far from being an aesthetic musical and extravaganza, is a spectacle that is looked down upon. The poet compares her condition with that of eunuchs or transgender people. Like the transgender people, she (as a woman) is also looked down upon by the patriarchal society. She may seem to be enjoying life by her appearance, but internally, she is joyless, lonely and struggling.

This poem is one of her those poems which speaks of many a thing under the garb of them, the eunuchs, transgender, homosexuals, lesbians, gay people and their rights and our understanding of their ethos and psyche. How are their heart and

soul? What is their sentiment, feeling, sensitivity, bonding, gesture and lacuna? Apart from that, the voices of feministic discontent, revolt, suppression and repression of rights too can be heard. How were our patriarchal laws and regulations, and how the bondage and social convention? How severe and rigorous?

The poem has no stanzas. However, it can be divided into three parts. In the first part, the poet discusses the beautiful things that eunuchs use or show to attract people who can give them money. The second part talks about their inabilities and their joyless inner-self. In the third part, the rain comes, a boon and a bane.

The poet says it was pretty hot when the eunuchs came to dance. When the eunuchs came dancing, tinkling the bells, jingling and the streets a beat with their arrival, the footstep, the eunuchs coming to sing lullabies, to rock and roll the newborn baby crying, awe-struck and spell-bound, frightened and crying and hidden into the arms of the mother and her sari anchal. They appeared to be women but were not; they seemed to be other than men, half-men and half-women, blessing and cursing. They lifted the baby, danced, sang after the dance, song, and folk show and begged for money. When they come to dance, the folks can be seen explaining them in whispers holding themselves in check and saying it shyly.

"It was hot, so hot before the eunuchs came

***To dance, wide skirts going round and round,
cymbals***

Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling

Jingling... Beneath the fiery Gulmohar, with

***Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced
and***

They dance, oh, they danced till they bled..."

They cut a sorry figure for being neither men nor women. What is the irony that no one says about her creations of the Divine, but when they bless the people, they are known as Ardhanarishwar God Shiva, and when cursed, they, hairs stand on. Was it

a personal experience that she came to feel it? Whatever the spectacle is, no doubt bizarre to experience the dissatisfied souls dancing, singing, and clapping. Their lullabies, too, are of their type.

She wants to describe the event, eunuchs coming to make the brand-new dance with the broken drum beats and harsh lullabies, clapping, making a noise like tomboys just like notes from the broken reeds. While singing, dancing, and trying to make the baby play, their antics may tickle or annoy with their behaviour, dress, clothing and gesture. It is a moment to pause and think about how the men and things of the world are; how has the same Almighty made them? How do they feel, and What do they want? Is Kamala Das talking about her attitude and psyche?

When anyone sees the eunuchs, think about whether they are men or women, what they are, unless somebody tells us that they are the same human beings but with biological deformities. Their sterility is a curse as they can neither enjoy life nor derive pleasure. They cannot be mothers even though they look like women. They want to tend to but cannot as their voices appear harsh and louder.

Beneath the Gulmohar blossoms, when the clusters of yellowish-reddish orange or scarlet seemed to be thrashing the heat wave and decorating the summer, danced they, the eunuchs coming with the leader of some dance, one subsequent another as a troupe. But their dance was not as usual as it had to be. Something used to hold them in check, and they were hurt from within. Hiding the pains, how would they have? Even though they were dressed with embroidered hands and coverings, they were not as shy as the newlyweds. Some beat their breasts, and some wailed for being barren. The children saw the spectacle with their eyes wide open. The women and men were sitting around and forming a circle. The trembling notes and harsh voices had not the prowling and lurking of the cuckoo's voice but like the crow crowing. A place hit by drought or famine appeared before the mind's plane. They parted as brides and mothers but were not, the men under women's garb, and this too was not. All watched the chirrup, convulsions and

spasms of the poor creatures and the skies, all silent above, partaking in the unnatural, artificial presentation without any taste or arrangement. It thundered, and the lightning hit the sky with the raindrops falling, but it did not. The lands remained the same Eliotesque wasteland.

The eunuchs sang of vanishing lovers and children left unborn. As lovers, their love could never get it fulfilled. The beloveds waited for it, but the lovers came it not. How could the children have been born to them if they could never be? How would they have expected it otherwise? Everything but remained a chimaera. Love appeared to be a mirage, and they seemed to be after this delusion.

"Their voices were harsh,

their songs melancholy;

**they sang of lovers dying and or children left
unborn...**

**Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry
breasts**

And wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy.

They were thin in limbs and dry;

**like half-burnt logs from Funeral pyres, a drought
and rotteness."**

The phrase "writhed in vacant ecstasy" is very significant as a devastating image of the barrenness of Kamala Das's own life. The poem also ends with some imagery which conveys the poet's sense of the futility of her sexual experiences.

In the second part of the poem comes the harsh reality, i.e. their inabilities, disabilities and the things which alienate them. According to the poet, their voices were extreme (as they had both male and female characteristics) and not sweet, and their songs were quite sad.

They sang about the dying lovers and the children who did not bear them. The line is quite exciting and confusing. Transgender people are sterile and still narrating the stories of those with proper male and female manners.

This can be explained more meaning – first, they may be talking about themselves who cannot do love-making and cannot deliver offspring. Thus, their love decreases, and their children are not born. The next meaning could be that they are talking about the world's dark realities. Whatever the purpose may be, their song is quite sad. Some of them beat their drums while others have breasts, which the poet calls "sorry breasts" because they are useless. Neither a man is concerned with giving them sexual pleasure, nor can they produce milk; thus, they lack these sacred signs. Thirdly, they might be disordered.

They were wailing and writhing in vacant ecstasy, i.e., making cries and asymmetrical steps (i.e. singing and dancing but badly) without any pleasure and joy. Their limbs were thin and looked like the funeral pyre's half-burnt logs (wood), and their body looked dry and rotten. These symbols depict their miserable condition. Transgender people are poor, live in unhygienic conditions and are without proper food or other essential things like a house, pure water etc. hence they seem to be dead-like.

Even the crows were so

**Silent on trees, and the children wide-eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures'
convulsions**

**The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice...**

While they were dancing, the crows were silent on their condition while the children watched them with amazement. In India, the crow is a symbol of doom/destiny. But here, even this terrible creature is soundless because eunuchs are treated inferior to the doomed bird crow. On the other hand, the children have not seen them and seem alien to them.

The rain was meagre, i.e., significantly less or of short duration. Though it brought a sweet smell of dust to the attics, the foul smell of urine of lizards and mice was also there. The lines have a more

profound connotation. The poet expresses two different aspects of the rain. First, it was a blessing because it was scorching, and people wanted relief. However, it was a bane for the eunuchs because they were dancing to earn their livelihood, and because of this rain, the people might have run away.

Kamala Das is a victim of society; like the eunuchs, the women are also treated as in-humans. A woman is supposed to please her husband and family. She has to smile without pleasure and purpose; she has to work without stopping, and women are ordered to quench the sexual desire of their husbands without satisfying themselves. Thus according to Kamala Das, the condition and position of women in society are no better than that of transgender people. It enacts her quest, an exploration into herself and seeking her identity.

As a poet, Kamala Das is mighty when she writes about emotions – the ecstasy of finding love, the depths of depression and the suicidal thoughts she had as a housewife trying to reconcile herself to her fate. "I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, 'Get out of this trap, escape....'" This highlights the depressed and discouraged mental state of Kamala Das.

REFERENCES

1. Das, Kamala.1965 "The Dance of the Eunuchs", Summer in Calcutta, New Delhi: Everest Press, p.09
2. Eunice de Souza Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997
3. Julia Kristeva. Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection p.65, 1982
4. K. M. Bhatnagar. Feminist English Literature (New Delhi: Atlantic Pub. and dis.), p. 7,2002.
5. The Hindu. The Feminine Sensibility of Kamala Das by M.S. Nagarajan, 23 Aug. 2011

Copyright © 2016, Dr Pankaj Bala Srivastava. This is an open access refereed article distributed under the creative common attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.