

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF KAMALA DAS

Anita Godara

Assistant Professor in English
Arya Girls College,
Ambala Cantt. , Haryana, India.

Abstract

The quest for identity as a theme is clearly manifest in all her major works. For the achievement of a fully-satisfying, mature, intelligent, happy, and progressive personality, this quest is to be met with success; otherwise one shall have an emotionally and intellectually dwarfed personality.

Keywords: *Identity, Quest, Confession, Soul, Autobiography, Anxiety, Anguish, Freaks.*

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- Anita Godara

It is hard to believe
That I only lost,
Lost all, lost even
What I never had.

("Substitute" Descendants, p. 6)

Quest for identity is basic to the human world. With the decline of grandeur and dignity of human life in the post-world war era, the crisis has intensified. Man faces an unprecedented rootlessness, loneliness, and alienation. His quest is to attain a personal view of life and world which makes the life meaningful and a sense of belongingness. Literature comprises this process--the crisis of self, the quest and the succeeding discoveries. When all the settled dreams and beliefs prove false, when disillusionment pulverizes man, he starts losing his faith into the existential reality of this world and turns towards a kind of nihilism or nothingness. He starts doubting everything including the existence of his own real self. But one cannot live in vacuum or in nothingness and to live in this world, one has to realize one's self-existence. Everyone in this chaotic world is trying to make a place for one's self where one can stand and see the ways of the world.

Identity, its consciousness and quest are not necessarily confined to an individual only. Consequently, identity crisis can affect a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. Identity may mean different things to different persons. The quest for identity refers to the spiritual odyssey of modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings and who is anxious to seek his roots. Emphasizing the need for roots, it is said that only a tree that has driven deep roots in soil can put forth ample foliage and yield abundant fruit. When this sense of belonging is disturbed, one suffers the identity crisis. Kamala Das also emphasises the necessity of an inward search to realize one's true self:

One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inward, will realize his route has no end. (Crisis and Confession 224)

In order to understand her true self, she explores the range of her own experiences through the medium of poetry. Her aim is not self exposure, but self discovery.

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The quest for identity is the real motto of confessional poets. E.V. Ramakrishan writes that:

Confessional writers, right from St. Augustine
to Genet, have in their works made an attempt
to define, their identity with respect to the reality
of their personal experience².

This general observation of E.V. Ramakrishan is pertinent for a poet like Kamala Das, for whom, in Bruce King's words, "writing is the means of creating a place in the world" and "the use of personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion"³. The deep existential anxiety that pervades all her poetry, becomes Kamala Das's basic poetic nucleus.

The life story of Kamala Das has been an eternal quest for identity. The tormented woman's voice in her works represents her "own mutilated self"⁴, tormented by both past and present and resulting in a deep sense of crisis. O.P.Bhatnagar finds Kamala Das, tormented by "two types of identity crisis"⁵ one suffering the loss of what was glorious and innocent in the past, and the other the loss of what is essentially feminine in her.

In *My Story* Das writes, "Like the phoenix, I rose from the ashes of my past" (170). Das's bruised self esteem finds solace in going back in the memories of her grandmother, her old Nalapat house, sea, pond, and Neerantala tree, which are the "symbols of undefiled purity which she left once and lost for ever"⁶. For the poet, her grandmother and the old Nalapat house stand for innocence that is related to the poet's innocence which is not lost "before the red house that had/stood for innocence/ crumbled/ and the old women died" ("Composition" Old Playhouse 3). But all is lost with her grandmother's death and it creates an 'incurable wound' in Das's memories because it was only her grandmother who had given her love, respect and a sense of identity; and in many of her poems she exposes this 'wound'. In "The Millionaires at Marine Drive", she cries out:

Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death;

I wonder why the ache still persists. Was

She buried, bones and all in the loose red

Soil of my heart?⁷

"My Grandmother's House" too, depicts the poet's desire to go back to her Nalapat house and seek her lost identity:

How often I think of going

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There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air. (Old Playhouse 32)

The sense of pride and love she once had in her grandmother's house is now no more her property:

... you can't believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved (Old Playhouse 32)

These lines present a contrast between the poet's past, that was full of love and pride, and present, that is totally devoid of all traces of self-identity.

The second type of identity crisis that's related to her feminine-self, can be witnessed throughout her poetic output. Her eagerness to let her "mind striptease" is in fact due to her search for her authentic self. Here is an attempt to redefine her identity and in "psychoanalytical terms it can be defined as a woman's identity"⁸

One seeks in love the completion of one's own personality but here, the fever of domesticity, routine of lust, artificial comfort, and male domination, completely dwarf Kamala Das's feminine-self. In the "Old playhouse", where the central burden of the poem is the total loss of identity and freedom,⁹ Das voices her anguish and protest against her husband who has turned her in to a "caged -bird":

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she
would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind,
but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky.. (Old Playhouse 1)

The poem "Freaks", deals with the poet's quest for identity. The quest for identity becomes a dire necessity. Sometimes she feels that she is a freak. Her quest becomes a universal quest of all those who suffer from compulsions to seek their identity. The poem "An Introduction" voices the poet's quest for identity. In this poem she is introducing herself as an innocent Indian girl:

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I don't know politics but I know the names
 Of those in power, and can repeat them like
 Days of a week, or names of months, beginning with
 Nehru, I am Indian, very brown, born in
 Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
 Two, dream in one.

But soon there are tensions and conflicts. The lyric is concerned basically with question of human identity, but it effectively uses the confessional and the rhetorical modes in order to focus on questions relating to a woman, and Indian poet's identity in English. To her dismay, all the society wants from a woman is to conform, to adjust to "fit in";

Be embroider, be cook
 Be a quarreler with servants
 Fit in, oh
 Belong, cried the categorizers.

("An Introduction" "The Old Playhouse 27')

Kamala Das refused to fit in to any scheme devised by the categorizers and rebelled; "this rebellion is duly projected in the frank and confessional quality of her poetry which thus seems to be a bitter attempt on her part to "retrieve her undermined dignity"¹⁰. Kamala Das's works contain many open statements about the poet's efforts to define the constraints in which she has been trapped and make an endeavour to redefine her position as an individual viz.a viz. the world.

To the poet, sex is a matter of permanent interest. It gives her an opportunity to examine her own self and reach the depths of her personal identity. She finds no difference between her body and soul she writes in her poems "The suicide":

Bereft of soul
 My body shall be bare
 Bereft of my body
 My body shall be bare. ("The Old Playhouse" 34)

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Before we understand the way in which the poet has failed in love, we should recognize the fact that she searches her identity by frankly accepting the defeat. She needs loneliness to search her personality. Relations and other things are of no use. Her problem is to counter the threat to her identity:

Kamala will find her true self when she is liberated from the hollow marital cocoon built around her by her lustful husband.

An elevating dimension is contributed to Kamala's identity by her poems depicting the famous Radha-Krishna relationship which represents the ideal concept of love. Kamala, in the person of Radha, the celebrated beloved of lord Krishna, exclaims in grateful jubilation. 'Vrindavan' is here symbolic of a psychological state of the woman's eternal quest for true love, and the security and fulfillment that such love brings.

Her poetry is confessional. She has always dealt with private humiliation and sufferings, the stock themes of confessional poetry. Confession requires courage and fearless guts to face the world, family and friends. It is particularly difficult for women to turn to confessional poetry, and that too in India.

Kamala Das's poetry has been labeled as poetry of protest, of anguish, of love, of pain; -of disgust and of bitterness. She could not find her identity throughout her life. She feels duped in life by all --husband, lovers, society and the 'humorous heaven'.

No doubt, she was very bold lady but she could not find what she desired in life. The female persona in her poems is variously engaged in a restless quest for fulfillment in love and life. The abrasive experiences in love force them into a desperate desire for self definition and discovery.

The monotony of domesticity, the bouts of lust and constant male domination that ensued were highly detestable to her, leaving her no chance for making her identity felt--something which she always prized highly:

During his stay in Malabar, he spent most of his time with his cousins and his sister-in-law, paying me little attention and never bothering to converse with me. At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal, simply and without exhilaration. All the Parijata that I wove in my curly hair was wasted. . . .

I yearned for a kind word, a glance in my direction. It became obvious to me that my husband had wished to marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gain. A coldness took hold of my heart then. I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted

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to be given an identity that was lovable. (98-99)

Kamala Das's autobiography, *My story*, clearly shows how her urge for identity and liberation finds its fruition and fulfilment in the super-imposition of her poetic self over her domestic self-in her emergence as a poet by her overcoming her domestic self which compelled her to play the monotonous and enslaved wife and mother:

The heroine of *My Story* is a semi-educated girl, rudely pushed into marriage, into premature sexual experience, to be left floundering in the quicksands of repeated pregnancies and child-births. This doomed girl overcomes her destiny. There is heroism about this effort in an earlier age which gives a period weight to the book. It also makes one overlook its mixture of good and bad prose, and its emotional kite-flying.

This struggling self, desperate for release and fulfilment, is a lyrical self. It is', in short, the poetic self of Kamala Das, as we know it.¹¹

The quest for identity often occurs as a theme in several of Kamala Das's poems which stress the need for discovering and asserting her true self. For example, 'The Old Playhouse' describes that love aims at achieving an insight into one's own being, not into another's. Its essence lies in the realization of one's own self, and not in the loss of one's freedom:

It was not to gather knowledge of yet another
 man "that I came to you but to learn What I was,
 and by learning, to learn to grow, . . . For,
 love is narcissus at the water's edge, haunted By
 its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
 an end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the
 mirrors To shatter and the kind night to
 erase the 'water.'¹²

Thus "Of Indian Poets Writing in English,' Kamala Das is the one poet who makes complete and open statements of the evolution of her 'self both in her poetry and in her autobiography.'" This quest for identity is noticeable in her other prose works too like, *Alphabet of Lust*, and *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* etc. In *Alphabet of Lust*, the life-story of Manasi, the frustrated wife of a Government official, Arnol Mitra, "who looked old enough to be her father,"⁶ is a long and persevering quest for identity, which, witnessing various vicissitudes of life, finds its culmination in her achieving the highest and the most-coveted

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political office of the country-Prime Ministership. And this quest overtakes her so overwhelmingly that it recognizes no barriers, no inhibitions, no moral code, and no social code. Manasi becomes a poetess out of her sheer despondency in life: "her poetry had burst out of the mind of her utter hopelessness like a red lotus." (9) Her loveless, emotionally starved, and maladjusted married life is a great disappointment to her: "we are not suited to. each other. He is busy with his files all the time. I like people, conversation, some show of affection." (10) Sex with her husband was "an act of self-mortification," (16) and, instead of his appreciation of her intellect, she, like every woman, wanted him to admire and adore her physical beauty: "She wanted him to praise the contours of her full breasts and the smooth silk of her thighs. She wanted him to smother her with surprise-gifts which had no utility value. Instead he brought for her tins of ovaltine or a bottle of pickles picking them up at some reduction sale and offering them to her heraldically as though they were coveted trophies(27)

Thus Manasi's despair in her married life acts as a spur to her search for identity which gets a further promising stimulus and direction through her turning to Vijay, one of her "old admirers," (7)'a womanizer, a young and depraved politician, now a Minister., and a rising sun in politics. She wishfully feels that theirs would have been an ideal pair: "We would have made an excellent pair Poetess and politician." (15) Vijay, who, too, is greatly enamoured of her, and wants to possess and marry her, is instrumental in procuring for her several advantages. The highest literary award she receives in Delhi for her latest book of poems is correctly believed by her to be the result of his efforts. Her pleasure-trip to Simla in his lustful, luscious, and luxurious company for a promised pair of diamond earrings, serves to bring her closer to him. Manasi's uninhibited and bountiful bestowing of sexual favours upon those who matter is but one part of her quest for identity. It helps her in establishing close contacts with the Prime Minister, a woman-hunter, and a widower for twelve years, and wins her the greatly-cherished office of a Minister. And her sexual surrenders to those who wield great power and influence cause no remorse of conscience in her, so long as they continue to help her in climbing socially and politically:

Vijay, I am willing to do whatever the P.M. wants me to do. It is not as if i am a chaste woman now. A pativrata. You saw to it that I became a mere tart. I rented out my body for a pair of diamond earrings. And hereafter for power I shall rent. it out to the most influential tenant I can hope to get (40-41)

Manasi's becoming a mistress of the Prime Minister fetches her several rewards. She starts commanding a very great power and authority in the Government, and her less important portfolio of Information and Broadcasting is replaced by the more important and powerful Home Portfolio. Her political rise is now never on the wane, and, with the paralytic stroke had by the present Prime Minister, it takes her to the highest political office of the country-the Prime Ministership. So this is how her assertion of individuality, though it causes her rift with her husband, brings her to the highest pinnacle of success and glory.

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The quest for identity is discernible in other characters, too, for example, in Vijay, Cyrus, and Suparna. It urges Vijay to make a niche for himself in the Government, and, for this, no manipulation, no endeavour, is too intriguing and immoral for him. His desire for greatest political power and influence subordinates all his interests, even his interest in Manasi, whom he sends to Prime Minister's bed, as, "through her, he, Vijay Raje, was going to become the most powerful minister in the Cabinet." (60) The love-affair between Suparna and Cyrus Contractor, and its ultimate fruition in their marital union, in spite of various hurdles, reflect their search for individuality.

In *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* the quest for identity is clearly noticeable in the character of Mira the prostitute, who, through her love and subsequent marriage with her student client, wants to achieve the fulfilment of her personality by freeing herself from the immoral and ignominious shackles of the world of prostitution. He, too, is greatly interested in her, and visits her several times, paying for her by saving his money on several other items: "No, Ayee," said Mira, "he said that he had to sell his pen to visit me. He has no income of his own. He comes here saving his lunch-allowance and his bus fare. He loves me." Her secret marriage with him is highly exhilarating to her: "There was a red flush on her high cheekbones and a glitter in her eyes. Mira decorated her hair with a string of mogra flowers and bit her lips to make them redder." (33) And she elopes with him to enjoy the bliss of married life. But her search for identity, that promises newer hopes and joys to her through her married life, is blessed with only temporary success, as her lover-husband who is discovered to be "the ungrateful swine, . . . A liar. A stinking liar," (55) betrays her only after a week, and she returns to the abhorring profession of prostitution once again. The quest for identity is also reflected in the character of Rukmani, a child-prostitute, who, instead of being given a doll to play with, is forcibly initiated in the degrading and vilifying ways of prostitution, through her sale, by mother, to Lachmibai (Ayee), the keeper of a brothel, and thus she attempts at the realization of her true self, and all her urges and aspirations to grow into a cultured and cultivated woman are strangulated. Finding her as the new attraction of the brothel, the Inspector Sahab, who is extremely fond of little girls, develops a great liking for her, also has sex with her, of course, rather forcibly, wants to make her his "keep," (42) and also promises to bring her a foreign doll costing a hundred rupees. But Rukmani addresses the Inspector as "Papa,:" who starts behaving as one, forgetting all his lust:

"Oh. papa, take me away from here," she said, "otherwise I too will die."

The man kissed her forehead. Lust had suddenly retreated. . .

"Don't cry, my child," said the Inspector, "you have me as your papa. I shall from now on treat you like my daughter. Is that enough, Rukmani?" (50)

And the Inspector does bring Rukmani the promised foreign doll. and. reacting to Ayee's request to him to spend some time with Mira, declares, at the end of the novel, that he

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lias now been purged of all lust: "No, Lachmibai, I do not feel like playing with a woman today,' said the man [the Inspector], applying lime on the leaves of the betel carefully. 'Something has died in me today.'" (57) Thus, with the change of heart in the Inspector-his lust yielding place to parental love and affection-and, with the announcement of Ayee's proposal to marry Rukmani to her son, it is hoped that she will be able to seek her true identity, and grow into a decent and self-respecting woman. .

The quest for identity as a theme is clearly manifest in all her major works. For the achievement of a fully-satisfying, mature, intelligent, happy, and progressive personality, this quest is to be met with success; otherwise one shall have an emotionally and intellectually dwarfed personality.

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- Abbreviation used for Kamala Das works.
- M.S. - My Story
- S.C. - Summer in Calcutta

