

A Psychedelic Study of Select Stories in *Padmavati the Harlot & Other Stories* **(Sebuah Studi Psikedelik tentang Cerita-Cerita Terpilih dalam *Padmavati si Pelacur & Cerita-Cerita Lainnya*)**

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das has always been vocal about the pain and suffering of the women in contemporary times. Her frankness in dealing with the taboo topics of the society invited unwanted controversies for her. The short stories of Kamala Das mostly speak about the uninhibited desires of the females who often face apprehensive behaviour for having their own ideas of sexuality. The paper is an attempt to read and justify the short stories “That Woman” and “The Little Kitten” in *Padmavati the Harlot & Other Stories* through a psychedelic approach.

*(Kamala Das selalu vokal tentang rasa sakit dan penderitaan para wanita di zaman kontemporer. Kejujurannya dalam menangani topik tabu masyarakat mengundang kontroversi yang tidak diinginkan baginya. Cerita pendek Kamala Das sebagian besar berbicara tentang keinginan perempuan yang tidak terhalang yang sering menghadapi perilaku khawatir karena memiliki gagasan seksualitas mereka sendiri. Surat kabar ini adalah upaya untuk membaca dan membenarkan cerita pendek "That Woman" dan "The Little Kitten" dalam *Padmavati the Harlot & Other Stories* melalui pendekatan psikedelik.)*

Keywords: Kamala Das, Psychedelic, *Padmavati the Harlot*, Short Stories, Women Characters. *(Kamala Das, Psychedelic, *Padmavati si pelacur*, cerita pendek, karakter wanita.)*

Introduction

Psychedelic literature offers an insight through which one can delve deep into his inner self, challenge his perceptions, and push his understanding beyond the horizon. It has left a profound

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impact on literature in addition to popular culture, music, and the visual arts. Numerous writers, such as Hunter S. Thompson and Aldous Huxley have drawn inspiration from the psychedelic experience, bridging the gap between the mystical and the everyday in their writing.

The history of psychedelic literature traces its origin back to the era of the psychedelic renaissance. It is an enthralling venture into vibrant characters and transformative narratives through an out surge of creative energy and the examination of consciousness. An indelible impression was left on the distinctive literary style by the counterculture of the 1960s, which emphasized a strong focus on progressive social values and alternative ideologies.

Historically, short stories have served as a medium for the transmission of cultural values, social norms, and moral lessons, especially to children. One gets introduced to the cosmos of stories right away from childhood. In spite of its popularity across the globe, it still lacks the acceptance, the kind of luxury enjoyed on the part of other genres. Olivia S comments on the relevance of short stories with context to novels “Novels frequently receive more attention than short stories. Even though longer works are unquestionably important, short stories should always be acknowledged as a crucial source of literary brilliance and social and historical significance.”

The creative excellence of the short stories lies in its variation ranging from flash fiction, fairy tales, fables, allegories and satire though not limiting itself to these subgenres. Kamala Das through the plot of her stories opened a plethora of issues pertaining to women and the society. At a time when there was little or no women writers her distinctive storytelling brought her immense success in the list of women short story writers. S.K. Pandey appreciates the literary endeavours of Das and remarks “Kamala Das tried hard to build up the true identity and image of woman in her writings. She tried to analyse the psyche of the exploited women with interest and understanding. Though internationally renowned for her spirited poems in English, Kamala Das has penned some brilliant short stories. Indeed, she is one of the first Indian to write short stories in English” (227).

Padmavati the Harlot & Other Stories is an anthology of 19 stories that spin around the lives of different women from the kaleidoscopic view of Kamala Das. Written in the year 1992, it puts forth the raw and unfiltered traits of human demeanour across different ages. With every story, a new twist unfolds in the eyes of the reader. Another brilliant storyteller next to Das is

A.S.P. Ayyar, whose work also explores the women's dilemma in contemporary society. M.K. Naik notes down the peculiarity of the women characters in Ayyar's writings:

“As in his plays, Ayyar's constant theme in his stories is social reform, and especially the plight of woman in traditional Hindu society, which a character describes as a ‘woman-eating monster.’ His women include young widows, who successfully re-marry in the teeth of opposition; young girls married by their parents to old men for money; abandoned or persecuted wives; victims of the dowry system or of the absence of birth control, etc. His titles, like Shankar Ram's, are often stridently didactic: e.g. ‘Right to Happiness’ and ‘The Ways of Providence.’ Ayyar's characters are mostly drawn in monochrome and both in conception and execution his stories are little more than anecdotalage” (186).

Every story of Das celebrates love in all its forms. For love is definitely something she had been looking for throughout her life. The author Satchidanandan points out ““An Introduction”, her most discussed and paradigmatic poem with its defense of her trilingualism, her opposition to male power, her rejection of the traditional roles of the house-wife and the cook, and her longing for love was a clear announcement of her arrival on the scene” (53). Kamala Das narrates:

I am every woman who seeks love...
I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am both the lover
and the beloved. I have no joys which are not yours,
no aches which are not yours
we share the same name, the same fate, the same crumbled dreams... (54).

The present piece of research studies her two stories, “That Woman” and “A Little Kitten.” The stories are woven around the women wishing to be loved and their search for true love. They are pitted against men in the form of other women, wives, and beloveds in these stories. Raphael highlights the opinion of the society with regard to Das' image and her short stories:

This is also true of her short stories. Under the pretext of giving expression to her intimate experiences, Kamala Das indulges in pathetic exhibitionism and subtle eroticism. On account of her sexual frankness, some people have thought her a liberated woman. The truth, however, is that she appears to be a prisoner to her own passions and prejudices, and a single impulse reigns supreme, suppressing right reason, good sense and delicacy (134).

The writings of Das are psychedelic in a manner, as they make both her characters and the readers explore their inner selves, challenge the societal perceptions, and expand their understanding. Das' sharp observation proves her a skilled artist as she withdraws her characters from mundane life. The charisma of those characters is their relatability, as it binds her readers to see them through her lens. M.S. Unnikrishnan records the diverse perspectives of writers on Kamala Das in his article. Among the multitude of writers, he refers to is M.T. Vasudevan Nair, who expresses his profound interest in Das' literary manuscripts. Nair remarks on Das' exceptional piece of writings "I admire her a lot. I am a great admirer of her writing, particularly her short stories with Bombay as the backdrop. She has a way with the words, a unique crafting style. Her themes, plots, language et al are very appealing. She uses plots and language she is familiar with to have an instant connect with her readers," said MT."

"That Woman" begins with the narrator revealing to the readers the death of his father. The distant relationship between the father and the narrator is evident from the fact that the news of his father's death was disclosed by a local barber. Das keeps all her characters unnamed in the story, which shows her marked sensibility and applicability of generalized observation. As the story moves further, one comes to know that the man abandoned his family three years ago to live with a young woman. On receiving the news, the wife, who had been loyal for these many years, lost consciousness. Pandey discusses about Das' observation of man-woman relationship:

Men exploit and cheat women sexually by leaving his legal wife, and daughter and having a concubine; by seducing or molesting women through the creation of a fantasy world; by enjoying the company of woman in order to show society that before getting married, they had a woman in their lives; by telling lies with regard to age and profession so as to make the girl believe that she can lead her life peacefully" (228).

It is notable that the wife didn't desert the family of her husband. She could have easily thought about herself, but she took care of his kids. Since the day he left, for once also he didn't ask her for anything. There was no looking back except for the day when he left this world. The man who wasn't true as a husband to his wife, who bore their kids—how could he have been faithful to the 'Other Woman,' who was relatively new to his life? The wife was left for 'Other Woman,' and even 'Other Woman' was left without anything, she says "“No...there is nothing of mine remaining here,' she said" (9).

The story focuses more on the 'Other Woman' than the wife. The abrupt death of the man leaves the 'Other Woman' homeless. She had nobody except her lover in this world "“Where

can I go?’ she asked faintly” (8). The man never gave her the status and identity that she righteously deserved. No one had any sympathy towards her, not even the narrator who had the impression that the woman was only after his father’s will and property “‘Legally, you have no right to his property,’ I said” (8). Practically, it was the father who was to be blamed for his actions, but targeting women is one of the easiest tasks to perform.

So, it wasn’t the ‘Other Woman’ but the man who was at fault for leaving behind his wife and kids. Although he lives with his beloved, nonetheless his reluctance in accepting the illicit relationship becomes the primary reason for the ‘Other Woman’ to be treated badly by his family. The narrator asks the ‘Other Woman’ if she was there to harass his family, to which her answer was no. Out of all the things in this entire universe, the only thing dear to the ‘Other Woman’ was her lover. Before departing, the ‘Other Woman’ performs her last rites by kissing twice the feet of the narrator’s father. It is clear that the man was never in love with the ‘Other Woman,’ but he used every inch of her skin until his last breath.

The narrator’s father never accepted the ‘Other Woman’ as his wife, although she never left his side and only death parted their ways. Upon reaching the house of the ‘Other Woman,’ the narrator found the woman seated on the floor, weeping softly, burying her face in his father’s bosom. The ‘Other Woman’ wasn’t even allowed to stay with him until his funeral. Her presence was unbearable to everyone around her. The narrator couldn’t even bear to see her any longer when he tells her, “‘In half an hour’s time, our relatives will reach here. It will be unseemly for you to be seen here’” (8).

‘Other Woman’ sacrificed her life for the sake of a man who couldn’t even give her security and safety, even though he used every bit of her body to satisfy his sexual needs. There might have been times when she would have grown tired and restless due to his never-ending animal instincts, but she had no one to share her grief with. As Das explores the dynamics of love in her poem “Substitutes”:

Yet, I was thinking, lying beside him,
That I loved, and was much loved.
It is physical thing, he said suddenly,
End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free.
This freedom was our last strange toy (32).

It is the man who should have provided for the needs of ‘Other Woman,’ which he failed to do. She was destined to remain “the other woman,” never bestowed with the honour of being a wife. The love she offered was just as pure, just as deserving of respect as the one bestowed on a wife. Yet, why was her share only sorrow and infamy? Was she truly so unworthy? All she ever did was love—was that such an unforgivable sin? Das sketches the narcissistic attitude of men in her poem “The Old Playhouse”:

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. 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, but every
Lesson you gave was about yourself.

The man victimizes the ‘Other Woman’ who pays for his selfish behavior at the cost of her own dignity. She could never confront the truth, and by the time she began to understand everything, he had already departed from this world. And when everything she held dear was gone from this world, what purpose remained for her to carry on in this life? Even when she could have stayed a bit longer with him to console herself, she was asked to leave by the narrator, as her presence would have brought shame upon the whole family “‘You may take all your things. You do not have to leave your belongings here,’ I said” (8). It seems so strange how a woman so madly in love had no identity of her own. The society always views the beloved as a home wrecker, whereas it is the man who should be answerable for his deeds.

“A Little Kitten” is the story of a married couple and their ill-fated relationship. The story unravels a happy bond amidst the couple at the very beginning. Later, the cold affection of the husband towards his wife eventually directs her to seek love from another man. The husband was a workaholic man who worked in an ‘insurance firm at the heart of the city,’ ‘from eight in the morning to six in the evening’ (31). The wife loved to adorn herself whilst waiting for her husband to return from his office “When they were on the best of terms she used to take a bath in the evening after tea and buy a jasmine strand from the flower boy to hang from her long plait” (32).

The wife was so emotionally dependent on her husband that she forgot about her own existence. Time and again the idea of self-identity has been highlighted by the Indian women poets. One such poet is Eunice de Souza, who, in her poem “Advice to Women,” advises women to keep an attitude like a cat while dealing with their lovers, as it will help them in coping with the indifference of them. She writes “Keep Cats / if you want to learn to cope with / the otherness of lovers. / Otherness is not always neglect —”

Slowly, the honeymoon phase comes to an end, and the couple gets settled in their small Dadar flat. It becomes monotonous for the wife to be at home and wait for her husband, whereas he is busy doing files in the office. She feels lonely and unhappy confined within the walls of concrete. When her loneliness takes control of her happiness, she expresses her desire to have a pet. The husband chuckles at her demand as she demands a cat. Though he had no time to spare for her, still he didn’t want her attention to be diverted towards anything “Then, he began to lick her toes, mumbling, you see, I am your kitten, I am your little kitten” (31).

Although it appears to many critics that Kamala Das through her writings only addressed women issues but such is not the case as she has discussed the other dimensions of human relationship too. In the words of Bijay Kumar Das “What is significant in her poetry is that by speaking for herself, she speaks for womankind as well. If she expressed her disappointment against male hegemony in some of her poems, she also accepts the value of wife-husband relationship as a norm in family life” (245-246). Kamala Das’ ideology on prominence of marriage is reflected in her poem “A Widow’s Lament”:

My man, my sons, forming the axis
while I, wife and mother,
insignificant as a fly
climbed the glasspanes of their eyes.
He 'was a sunshade, he was my home,
now I walk naked as a babe (125).

All goes fine in the marital paradise of the couple until the arrival of Miss Nadkar, the secretary. Within three months, the passion for lust gets replaced with arguments. Men, on being caught doing suspicious activity, either react or go tacit about it. The husband maintains silence on being asked about his relationship with Miss Nadkar. He would avoid any conversation with

his wife and slip into the bathroom. She becomes upset due to his prolonged silences “Speak to me, I cannot bear these silences” (31). Pandey points out that the women in the stories of Das are oppressed not only physically but financially too. The wife is made to suffer all the while when the husband is wooing his secretary (228).

With the passing of time, the wife grows angry and frustrated. It all affects her so much that endless questions and doubt pave their way to her mind “One day, she climbed upon a stool and peeped into the bathroom through the ventilator” (31). Unperturbed by her actions, he was sitting on the edge of the tub when she yelled at him. He was so insensitive to even feel that how hurt his wife was because of his behaviour “He got up and pulled the ventilator shut. It nearly snapped off her fingers” (31). K.V. Surendran states that Kamala Das is a true feminist as she proposes equilibrium between man and woman. In her poem “The Composition” She expresses “Husbands and wives, / here is my advice to you. / Obey each other’s crazy commands, / ignore the sane (155).

The society in general tags the other woman as a home wrecker, whereas the man who brings that woman into the orbit of his married relationship stands innocent. It is the women who suffer, be it the wife or the beloved, at both ends. With the opening of Miss Nadkar’s chapter, the hues of color fade from the life of the couple. All the charm of wife goes away with the secretary’s arrival “Even the old Maharashtrian woman who used to wash the vessels for her in the morning began to wonder what had gone wrong. She had lost her bridal freshness. There was a new crease on her brow which sliced the red bindi in two halves. Pimples began to form on her cheeks. She found herself worrying about her digestion” (32).

Normally a man bears with a woman who appears cheerful and presentable, but when that same woman turns gloomy, she becomes unwanted. In the story, the wife grows tired enough to put up with her husband’s ways, but the husband hardly realizes that it was he who drove her insane. No wife can be patient with a husband who has no time to love her but has all the time for himself “Then, one day he came home dead drunk after attending an office dinner” (32). In a state of frenzy, the wife on seeing her husband destroyed the priceless possession of their wedding “She tore her wedding sari into shreds” (32).

It wasn’t anything which can’t be handled by the husband but he wanted to rub off his responsibility on the shoulder of his in-laws “Would you like to visit your parents for a month, he asked her. You look as if you need a change” (32). His harsh words were so alarming that

they shook her soul to the core. Quietly, her footsteps moved towards the bathroom to catch a quick glance. “He was speaking the truth. She had lost the glow which she had before she settled down at Bombay. They were living close to a mill. She felt that the smoke from its chimney was darkening her skin” (32).

The wife could have cured simply with his love and attention but her husband very wittingly conditioned her in believing “Yes, I need a change, she told him” (32). She had been tormented so badly that instead of leaving him, she says, “But you will have to come with me...” (32). The husband, all this while, was busy impressing his secretary by presenting an ‘ivory figurine’ on her birthday. Although, she liked the gift very much but she said “You shouldn’t have spent so much money on me...” (32).

The readers come to know that Miss Nadkar, aka Indira, was soon to leave India with her fiancé, who was an NRI from Canada. Although the news didn’t go well with her boss, he didn’t want to admit this as he remarked, “The office will miss you” (33). However, it wasn’t the office; rather, it was him who would be missing her presence. No one acknowledges the fact that marriages don’t collapse because of a woman; rather, it is the man who shakes the existing harmony. Still, the woman is accused of collapsing the system of marriage. Gupta takes note of when Kamala Das reveals how normal it was in her matriarchal family for a niece to divorce her husband at the insistence of another man. It all was simply because she loved another man and wanted to marry him (183).

The man already knew that Miss Nadkar was about to tie the knot “The marriage will take place only in December, she said” (33). Still, he had no regard either for the secretary or his wife. The man was not only mean but also self-centered. Knowing that Miss Nadkar’s fiancé was abroad, he exploited her, as there was “Still four months to go” (33). He shamelessly spent his evening at a restaurant with his secretary, hiding from the eyes of the world, while his wife “sulked and lost her looks thinking unkind thoughts incessantly” (33).

The man wanted to take hold of both the women in his life. Neither did he want to stop romanticizing Miss Nadkar, nor did he want to divorce his wife. “Once or twice, she put all her silks inside a trunk and decided to go back to Dharwar, but he dissuaded her. What will your parents say, he asked her” (33). Everything comes to an end after a long storm. The same happened with the couple in the story; by the time the husband realized his deeds, the wife had learned how to keep herself happy. He expresses his astonishment at her ecstasy “You look so

pretty, he said. So pretty and happy” (33). A.N. Dwivedi comments on the unbearable state of the wife and their tumultuous relationship “The subtle hint of the story writer seems to be towards the wife’s intolerable agony which gets some relief in the intense embraces of some other man” (153).

Conclusion

Kamala Das, through her psychedelic approach in short stories, dives deep into her women characters to challenge the societal perceptions. She sympathizes with her characters, showcasing how the desires of a ‘wife’ are never met, as in “The Little Kitten,” where the husband is busy exploring his secretary, and in “That Woman,” the wife is left behind with the kids with no consideration by the husband. The concept of ‘other woman’ and its associated problem has always existed in the real world.

The women as ‘beloved’ in the stories are deprived of respect and identity of their own. They seek acceptance from society just like any normal human being. A fulfilling love life is all they wish for, but all they get is unruly behaviour from their lovers. The textual analysis of the stories put forth the reasons that led these women to carve their own paths in the ruthless society.

Das' dexterity in handling the form of short stories to discuss the lives of women who are deprived of love, self-identity, and freedom is on par. The characters in her short stories are the women who have been victimized by the men in their lives. The thorough and in-depth examination of the female characters has brought out the different grounds where the identity of a woman is questioned by the society and the man remains untouched. Despite facing all the criticism, she justified the ways of her life by her unwavering courage and determination, which can be very well noticed in her various poems, novels, and short stories. Thus, Das, through her fictional writings, raises the underlying pertinent issues concerning women, further trying to expand the understanding of the masses towards women.

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