

Analysing the Traumatic effect of sexual violence in the writings of Kamala Das

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Abstract:

Kamala Das has vehemently subverted against the societal norms of the patriarchy where women are expected to be submissive. As a woman she had to undergo trauma from sexual violence within the institution of marriage. The trauma that she went through, could be seen through her prose and poems. She has explicitly portrayed her personal experiences in her writings, which allow her to open up from the pain she had to endure. Not only in her autobiography, *My Story*, even in her prose fictions and poems she has depicted the perception of men towards women that the patriarchal society has implanted on them. She did not just accept her status as a woman that was placed by the society. In fact, through her writings she has found her identity, paving ways for many women to speak out their rights to find their individuality. It is when we face our fear and open up that we can come out of the trauma of a particular fear. That is exactly what Kamala Das has done. Though we live in the twenty first century, women continue to suffer from sexual violence, the aftermath of which is trauma, and that could also be fatal. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to analyse through the writings of Kamala Das, the trauma that she had to endure from the sexual violence that she encountered. That in turn made her a pioneer for the emancipation of women from the clutches of male chauvinist society.

Key Terms: Subvert, Patriarchy, Submissive, trauma, sexual violence, emancipation, chauvinist.

Introduction:

As a woman, Kamala Das has endured much throughout her life. However, she did not stay submissive by accepting the pangs of her life. In fact, she had to fight all odds to come out from the trauma of sexual violence that she encountered. Before analysing her

depiction of the traumatic effect of sexual assault that she had to endure, let us initially perceive on the term sexual violence and trauma.

The National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children, states that, “Sexual violence refers to sexual activity that happens where consent is not freely given or obtained, is withdrawn or the person is unable to consent due to their age or other factors. It occurs any time a person is forced, coerced or manipulated into any sexual activity. Such activity can be sexualised touching, sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment and intimidation and forced or coerced watching or engaging in pornography. Sexual violence can be non-physical and include unwanted sexualised comments, intrusive sexualised questions or harassment of a sexual nature. Forms of modern slavery, such as forced marriage, servitude or trafficking in persons may involve sexual violence.” (37) the elaborated meaning clearly deciphers what sexual violence encompasses.

Michelle Balaev asserted that “Trauma is thus defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event harboured within the unconscious that causes a splitting of the ego or dissociation” (361) and she continues to add that “The concept of trauma, itself is a source of critique, it is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world. Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance.” (360) from the above descriptions it could be perceived that trauma is the aftermath of events that disrupt the psyche and emotions of an individual.

Traumatic effect of sexual violence:

As it had been asserted, Sexual violence is something that is harmful or unwanted sexual act that is coerced on someone. Kamala Das, in her writings depicts this evil that exists in all societies. Many women endured sexual violence in a society where men believe that they are all-powerful, to show their superiority they try to subordinate women through sexual violence. This kind of action by men against women can have a traumatic effect on women psychologically. In a patriarchal system, the society has implanted in the mind of man that he is superior to women, thus his outlook towards sex on women is that he thinks that women exist solely to quench his carnal appetite. Not realising the traumatic effects on the victim. Kamala Das has described in her autobiography, *My Story*, how her wedding night experience hampered her whole sexual life,

I took off my sari, which was of heavy gold tissue and sat on the bed
Then, without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme
brutality of the attack. I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace.
Then bathed in perspiration and with my heart palpitating wildly, I begged

him to think of God. This is our wedding night, we should first pray to Krishna, I said. He stared at me in disbelief. Was I mad? The rape was unsuccessful, but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual congress. (84)

From the above descriptions, Kamala Das has shown how she encountered sexual violence from her husband. She did not mention that the experience was something enjoyable, in fact, she termed it as a rape. The description suggested that her husband perceived her as a sexual object to gratify his desire. It did not seem to occur to him that his wife is also a human being who has her own desires and emotions. This experience took its toll in the life of the writer, the trauma that she had to go through continues to haunt her throughout her life.

The writer, through her experience, voiced out her pain and frustration in her writings. What she depicted as a woman, would have been a colossal task for her; however, she did it in order to come out from the shackles of her trauma. This in turn becomes an eye opener to the readers, the society and men to perceived the predicaments of women due to sexual violence. In order to come out of her traumatic experience, the only thing she could do was to open up and speak out through her writings. In her short story, "All the Lovers", she asserted these words:

She had been only fifteen then, and the subject of sex had not interested her, why she had been ignorant of it till her wedding night
When the thin bridegroom overpowered her, stabbing her vitals incessantly, mercilessly so mercilessly that she had begun to sob and he asked her, are you abnormal, are you not a girl, girls are supposed to like this. (Das 22)

The protagonist of the story, Minnie, got married at an early age, and we perceived how she reacted on her wedding night; it was a reflection of the brutality she had endured. From the description of Minnie's experience, it could be asserted that the trauma that Kamala Das had met continued to haunt her, thus, she even let her protagonist faced the same situation that she faced. That is the reason why many feminists consider the institution of marriage as the chief source of violence and oppression of women. The effects of sexual violence manifest in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in survivors, that is exactly what is perceived through the writings of Kamala Das. The sexual trauma that she had experienced are highlighted throughout her writings. Here, Sexual trauma refers to the physical and psychological challenges endured by survivors of sexual violence.

According to Gupta and Gupta, “Rape is an act of violence against a woman; it is an outrage. It is the ultimate violation of the self of a woman. The Supreme Court of India has aptly described it as deathless shame and the gravest crime against human dignity. Rape is not merely a physical assault, but destroys the whole persona of the victim.” (17) In “The Prince of Avanti,” Kamala Das has depicted the brutality of men towards women. The story narrates about an old lunatic woman who believed that she was the princess of Avanti. Three men met her, declaring themselves as kings. They must have studied the behaviour of the woman. Even then they wanted to take advantage of her insanity. They fooled her just to quench their sexual desire; they raped her and took her life. These were the words of the lady as the three men threatened to kill her,

“I am not the princess of Avanti, the old woman said between loud sobs, I do not want to get married. Keep quiet, you old bitch, said one of them, panting like a train off the platform. Another young man closed her mouth and nostrils with his rude red palm.” (Das 12)

From the depictions of sexual violences faced by women, Kamala Das intended to articulate on the brutality of this kind of act and how it can hamper the life of woman who faced this kind of atrocity. Susan Brownmiller has asserted that, “rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.” (15) this thought suggest the true nature of a chauvinist who wanted to assert his superiority over women. However, Kamala Das as a forerunner of women’s plight in a patriarchal society, wanted to thwart this kind of outlook, thus she penned down the theme of sexual violence, in order for others to be aware of its effects. Many women do not want to discuss upon the theme of sexual violence, fearing for a bad reputation of the family, and they are ashamed of what has happened to them, some feel that it’s their own fault, so all these fears and embarrassment make them to suffer mentally which in turn can lead them to extreme depression. When a woman stays submissive in this kind of situation, the predator think he can continue to do this kind of act. It is only when someone assert against these evils that changes can be brought about. In most cases, the most common effects that have been witnessed in the victims of this kind of crime have been trauma, anger, dislike towards men, unwillingness to have sex, severe depression, self-blame, shame, sexual dysfunction, lower self-esteem, feeling of loss of worthiness etc.

The traumatic effect that Kamala Das went through after the sexual assault from her husband could be seen from *My story*, where she asserted,

“I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been, despite

all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water. We have been mere participants in someone else's dream." (230)

she also mentioned in "The Sunshine Cat",

Winter came one day while locking her in, he

Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a

Line, a hair thin line, and in the evening when

He returned to take her out, she was cold and

Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men. (Line 18-22)

All the above lines showed the emotional and mental trauma faced by Kamala Das and how life doesn't seem to bring happiness at all and in many instances, she felt that death could be the only solution to her problem. The traumatic effect of her sexual experience is again perceived in her depiction of a young girl by the name of Rukmani in "A Doll for the Child Prostitute", where she asserted the following words as she began her story,

"It was the same old story. The stepfather raping the minor girl while her mother was out visiting her relatives." (Das 58)

Kathleen Barry asserted how women become subjects of sexual violence, "Female sexual slavery is present in all situations where women or girls cannot change the immediate conditions of their existence; where, regardless of how they got into those conditions, they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation." (139) The young innocent girl of twelve had to be sold off to a brothel, that was the only option her mother had in order for Rukmani to survive. Her life in the brothel could be compared to be like a doll that she got from an old police officer who would be as old as her grand-father. The doll had no choice of her own, she was at the mercy of the owner. Likewise, Rukmani's life was at the mercy of her Ayee and her clients. She was like a living dead for she had no choice of her own. Through Rukmani's life Kamala Das has manifested the status of women in a patriarchal society, where in most cases women are treated like dolls for men's pleasure.

Another depiction of sexual violence could be seen in "A Week with Manasi", where the protagonist, Manasi, related about her wedding night to her lover, she asserted:

All I wanted was my husband's love. that is why I fasted on Monday and wore Tulsi in my hair. That's why I went to temple of Shiva every morning. I got nothing. I got nothing at all. He gave me such silence, such contempt. Even on our bridal bed, all strewn with Jasmine, there was no tenderness. It was rape and silence. I asked myself then, is this marriage, is this what all my fasts and prayers earned for me, this excruciating pain, this humiliation. (17)

The trauma Kamala Das has of her sexual encounter with her husband continued to be highlighted in this story as well. According to Manasi, as a woman, she also had her hopes

and dreams for her wedding night. Yet, all she encountered was ‘rape and silence’; the pain she endured was humbling. Her need for emotional attachment was never fulfilled.

In order to emancipate women from the clutches of sexual violence and its trauma, someone has to come out with their personal experience and expresses their pain, their hurt and humiliation they go through from sexual violence. Therefore, Kamala Das has played a significant role in paving ways for women to speak out about their experiences, just as she has done in her writings. Her trauma, her depressive thoughts and all her pains were released through her writings, which allowed her to move on in her life.

In a Patriarchal society, when it comes to marriage, women are often viewed as property offered to the husband. This notion originates from statements by Sir Matthew Hale, a 17th-century Chief Justice in England, who asserted that, “The husband cannot be guilty of rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual consent and contract, the wife hath given up herself this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract”. (629) Kamala Das has asserted to Merrily Weisbord about the condition of women in a patriarchal Indian society, with these words,

“You are just a body. You hand your body to him so he’ll feel soothed, he feels it’s his birthright. You sleep on your husband’s bed, you don’t call it yours, his bed, his home.” (41)

She continued her description of the rape that she had to go undergo in this manner, “I let him take my body every night, hoping that the act would relax his nerves and make him tranquil. At night after all had slept, I sat in our tiny sitting room, sobbing and trying to believe in a destiny that might change for the better.” (97)

The above words again showed the traumatic experience of the writer. Every night becomes a nightmare for her. For her sex was never a thing to be enjoyed. Her husband never showed any tenderness towards her, he would force himself upon her, since that is the notion of men towards their wives. Not realising many times that the wives are not just sexual objects, in fact, they too have feelings of their own. In *The Love Queen of Malabar*, Merrily Weisbord has asserted Kamala Das’s experience in this manner,

And more bitter about the society that gave the stranger who she married her the licence to rape her. The rape that went on and on because he had the licence to do it. One night, coming home drunkard using me five times. In the morning, I was broken and lacerated. She cried silently then somebody crushed me. My whole body hurts. Forced sex is like an auto crash, Kamala says: fear, pain, blood, and confrontation accompany both. She says girls forced to have sex begin to look at men with fear in the same way as people are afraid to get into a vehicle after an

accident. (129)

The trauma of sexual assault never left her, she bore the pain within her, the pain and fear she had was magnanimous. However, it was her outlook towards life, that made her face her fear. She was ready to reveal to the society what many women generally experiences in this kind of situation. The thing that made her face her traumatic experience boldly was her unwavering nature of finding her own identity as a woman.

Conclusion:

After analysing the traumatic effect of sexual violence in the writings of Kamala Das, it can definitely be asserted that, as a voice of the voiceless, she has definitely paved ways for women to emancipate themselves from their trauma of sexual violence. It is only when they reveal and speak out against these kinds of crime that men as well as society will be able to perceived the struggles of women. Not only that, it is only when the victims of sexual violence speak out that they will be able to face their fear and move on with their lives, just as we have seen through the life of Kamala Das.

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