

## Childhood Nostalgia in Kamala Das' Poetry

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### Abstract

Childhood and its precious moments literally have a great presence in the minds of ancient and modern poets. Everyone wants to fall in this dream and get lost forever when they sleep at night. The careless behaviors, joys, games, and innocent acts never come back. Hence, no one has a second chance to live it again once they get lost in the oblivion of adulthood. Only the memories of childhood remain at the end. Everyone wants to feel the pleasures of childhood back when they get tired of daily-life problems of adulthood. Confession poetry depicts all such memories and desires to breathe some cool air. This lyrical verse and narrative deals with the intense physical and psychic feelings of the poet's personal life. The confessional poems unite the readers and writer against all odds at one point, i.e. childhood. It is childhood, which is special for everyone. This paper attempts to discover the nostalgic memories of Kamala Das through her poetry. It is a lively portrayal of her childhood which she spent at her old house in Malabar. She recalls those moments after so many years and the pure love she got from her deceased grandmother.

**Keywords: Kamala Das, nostalgia, childhood, ancestral home, Malabar**

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### 1.

#### INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das appears as a significant personality with her unique take and multi-layered approach in Indian-English poetry and feminist literature. She was born to a traditional Nair family based in Malabar, Kerala in 1934. Balamani Amma was a renowned Malayalam poet and her mother. Kamala was excellent in performing rituals and decoration at Nalapat House. She got literary and cultural knowledge at Nalapat house and western and modern education at a convent school in Calcutta. She was married at a very tender age of fifteen. However, her husband was very liberal and kind. She was well-educated in Calcutta and Kerala. She gained proficiency in English as she spent several years in Calcutta (Dr. Monika, 2014).

She recalls her early years at an ancestral house in Kerala. The house got lost into silence with the death of her grandmother. She received pure and unconditional love from her grandmother. She was very close to her grandmother as she felt happy and safe with her. She remembers all the events in that space in a nostalgic mood in her poetry.

### 2. DISCUSSION

The depiction of childhood is the most important thread in Kamala Das' poems and autobiography. Childhood is the time when children grow confident and strong with the care and love of their family and learn important life lessons from their teachers in school. It is a very valuable time when children must live free from violence, fear, exploitation, and abuse. Childhood is more than just a gap from the date of birth to achievements of adulthood. The quality of their life depends upon their state and condition during those years.

They used to imagine themselves in any task, situation, or sharing bond with other people. It is one of the important stages in the early years of children. Simply put, they develop a self-perception. It is the picture they develop as learners. It is fine to explore, ask questions, be curious, and deal with problems, to figure out certain things, to experiment, to be capable, to fail after trying something, and to take manageable risks.

In simple words, childhood is truly a mesmerizing experience for girls and boys, whether they are rich or poor. Children's experience is important for later growth in life. At this stage, experiences are emotional, raw, and inarticulate expressed through sounds and gestures. Those experiences are very meaningful in later years when they consider these experiences objectively. The feeling of mulling over the past memories, getting back in time, and visualizing and expressing them with intensity through an engaging and provocative language is the nostalgia for childhood. It is one of the best features of confessional poetry. Confessional writers have the very same strain of nostalgia that is inevitable for the critics. They look at the uncertain future which doesn't promise any hope, while their present is full of contradictions and tensions, which look unsettled. The poets are often forced and tempted to look back to their childhood to relive and recall happy moments.

It is also true that Kamala Das was one among those writers who took the theme of "childhood" in their writings. Childhood has always been one of the centers in European literature. Children are often found in the work of Pope and Dryden and a lot of Elizabethan lyrics. However, childhood comes from the novel and its importance rises gradually since the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a self-sustainable and sizable theme. With the maturity and development of the theme later on, a lot of ramifications have been found in the literature written in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this day and age, childhood is referred to as an important element of life since the Victorian era and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There had been a great emergence of true children's literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, either for their fun and information. Hence, a child used to become either an object or subject of several writings. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these writers have characterized childhood as the stage of growth on one side and, on the other side, as the sign of ignorance and regression of the world. For example, the child was the theme of some significance and weight for "Songs of Innocence, 1789" by William Blake and "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood, 1807" by She remembers her deceased grandmother and her ancestral home nostalgically in "My Grandmother's House" -

William Wordsworth. Childhood was the symbol of innocence for William Blake and the child had wisdom and natural piety for William Wordsworth. Childhood was considered important for mankind and the process of growing up for a child was an essential metaphor for regeneration. Childhood is considered as the new beginning and children are the symbols of hope.

Everyone has been through the stage of childhood and they can easily describe it beautifully, and of course, Kamala Das is no exception. But those descriptions should have something more than nostalgia. Kamala Das' poetry bounds the beautiful imagery of landscapes and nature. Even the landscape has significance and meaning as such in Kamala Das' poetry. She uses landscapes more beautifully.

Both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath are confessional poets who drew clear imagery of their early years in their writings. There is a great difference in their individual childhood experiences. As compared to Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das is a lot more emotional in her poems. It seems that Plath filters her events out through her known ones. On the other side, even the landscape has some meaning and importance in Kamala Das' poems as important parts of her memories. Hence, Kamala Das knew how to use the landscape and add further meaning to her writings. Both Plath and Kamala Das are considered prodigies in childhood.

The themes of every poem by Kamala Das have her previous life experiences. Childhood memories of her family home, marriage, love, relationships, maternal instincts, and Radha-Krishna legends are the recurring themes of her poetry. She alters the psychopath aspects of her life into universal elements in her writings. She also lived in Calcutta in her childhood, where her father was employed in the Walford Transport Company as a senior officer, dealing in Rolls Royce and Bentley cars, and her ancestral home of Nalapat in Punnayurkulam. She was also great in writing like her mother. Hence, she inherited her affection for poetry from her mother at an early age. Nalappatt Narayana Menon was a legendary writer and her great uncle, and she was greatly inspired by him.

There is a house now far away where once  
I received love..... That woman died,

The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved  
 Among books, I was then too young  
 To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon  
 How often I think of going  
 There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or  
 Just listen to the frozen air,  
 Or in wild despair, pick an armful of

Darkness to bring it here to lie  
 Behind my bedroom door like a brooding  
 Dog...you cannot believe, darling,  
 Can you, that I lived in such a house and  
 Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost  
 My way and beg now at strangers' doors to  
 Receive love, at least in small change?

Kamala Das's imagination and her poems are very personal and every word is the reality of her life. She has penned this poem nostalgically as a confession, in which she compares the conditional love of her grandmother and her current broken state. The poem is a loving memory of poetess' grandmother and their family home in Kerala's Punnayurkulam. This poem was published in Calcutta during the summers of 1965. She associates her grandmother's love with her ancestral home. The poem introduces her ancestral house she visited a long time ago and is too far away from her residence and she also indicates the distance of affection and love she received once.

It is true that her ancestral house is still standing silently without anyone living in it. The poet throws light on the love she received and the fact that she is now bereft of love. Hence, she craves for the love she is missing. Now the poet lives in another city, which is far away from her ancestral home. But her grandmother's home still haunts her and leaves her saddened and heart-broken. Her emotions are so intense that they appear as the ellipses of a few dots. She desperately wants to go back as she lives another life in another city. The house was never inhabited since the death of her grandmother. Echoed as "far away", the house has now become remote and abandoned. Silence started to sink in every nook and cranny of the house with her grandmother's death. The poet asserts, "That woman died, the house withdrew into silence." The poem looks back to the period of her ancestral home and grandmother in Kerala's Malabar region. She made the happiest memories in childhood over there showered by the affection and love of her grandmother. With the phrase "the house withdrew", it seems even the house shows his grief.

The property soon became isolated and snakes started crawling around the bookshelves. There was

no one who could love her like her grandmother. She knew that she cannot get back to the past, but she desperately wanted to visit her home and look through its windows once again. Now, she made the sadness and dreary memories her permanent companions and she always remembers the happy moments in the past. She yearns for love knocking door to door like a beggar for some change. Even her marriage couldn't satisfy her need for approval and love and she always expected strangers to give a little bit of love. Her hunger for love always remained unfulfilled and there is a huge empty space within her. The window looks like a portal from her present to her past.

"...snakes moved among books, I was then too young to read, and my blood turned cold like the moon. How often do I think of going there, to peer through blind eyes of windows or just listen to the frozen air, Or in wild despair, pick an armful of Darkness to bring it here to lie Behind my bedroom door like a brooding Dog..."

The above lines describe poet's nostalgic peek into her past and brings her desires and dreams back (My Story, p.101).

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The moon is the symbol of love and snakes crawling on the books are worms at present, keeping the eeriness of the moment. The abandoned house is a desert filled with reptiles. The poetess longs at her own house to 'peer' on. She needs to

get a sneak peek into her house through the windows as those “blind eyes” are totally closed. The surroundings were filled with empathy when she was alive, but the air is now frozen. Kamala Das appeals the readers to “hear” the “frozen” air and it is virtually impossible. The air is neither a medium for visuals nor does it lead to any displacement as it is frozen. There is a reason why grandparents are closest to the children in any family. Most children get attached and enthralled by the unconditional and selfless love of their grandparents. They are petted and pampered all the time. Grandparents know how to handle the innocent and immature children and they are more experienced than parents. Jacqueline Carroll clearly defines why grandchildren love their grandparents so much –

Grandparents

Are up for adventure as the kids do.

Know many stories.

Can grow things (garden) in which kids like to soil their hands.

Are great guides.

Are not afraid to be silly. Did a grandchild make a mask or a funny hat?

grandparents will try it on.

Let grandchildren take their own time for any task.

Make the best audience even if it is silly.

But, lying beside my grandmother,

Quite often I thought

That I could hear at night

The surf breaking on the shore

The sea was only two miles away

The imagery of the ocean is associated with her grandmother and it appears so meaningful and powerful. Her Nalapat house makes a central theme in her writings. When she couldn't settle at the boarding school herself, she was brought to “Nalapat House” where her grandmother lived, and it became her “Paradise”.

According to her, “It had been clear to me that my home was broken up for incomprehensible reasons. My mother was living in Malabar while my father

stayed in Calcutta. It was not a complete family like everybody else. . . (My Story, p. 18)”

She describes her grandmother and explains how she fell in love with her -

She was really simple.

Fed on God for years

All her feasts were monotonous

For the only dish was always God.

And the rest are mere condiments.

Her grandmother was the only woman who encouraged the royal personality of Kamala Das. She always wanted to be born royal and she was a “queen” in her dreams. Her nostalgia became stronger as she realized her middle class life. She reflects the pain of being the part of a different class -

There is a house now far away where once

I received love ..... That woman died,

.... You cannot believe, darling,

Can you, that I lived in such a house and

Was proud and loved .... I who have lost

My way and beg now at stranger's door to

Receive love, at least in small change

Childhood was not a rambling process for Kamala Das, but a consistent experience. She was dreaded to grow old and she couldn't accept the reality till it was reminded.

My grandmother cried,

Darling, you must stop this bathing now.

You are much too big to play

naked in the pond.

Growing up was a deep ragedy for her.

The tragedy of life

is not death but growth,

the child growing into adult

and growing out of needs,

discovering,

that the old have black rimmed nails,

and scalps that emanate  
a sweet, mouldy smell.

Kamala Das never accused her father for forcing her into a rushed arranged marriage and spoiling her childhood, where she was just finding happiness in little things in life. All of her childhood dreams were shattered. Kamala Das draws vivid pictures of her nostalgic moments in her poems as a confessional poetess. Her grandmother is an important part of her poetry. The speaker keeps her grandmother alive in the poem "My Grandmother's House." The fascination of Kamala Das with seaside view from the house can also be inferred for some childhood associations. Her ancestral home symbolizes the profusion and impulsiveness of love.

It seems Kamala Das has an intense desire to live her life as a child. She purposely brings in an old relative, an old lover, or a grandmother to emphasize her childhood. According to Anisur Rahman, her retreat to her grandmother and family home is a "symbolic retreat to the realms of purity, simplicity, and innocence of her childhood." The speaker finds the house binding her to her past in "My Grandmother's House". The sea brings the pond into mind where she loved to swim in childhood. She has a new significance in the childhood memory in the verse-writing and love affair of adults. Swimming recalls her visions of unsatisfied love to her child self. It brings her to the tragic experience as she returns to her ancestral house –

Himself as a stiff drink. The only movement I know  
well

Is certainly the swim.

It comes naturally to me.

AS swimming comes naturally to the child, love  
comes

naturally to the woman:

The white man who offers

Is for me,

To tell the truth,

Only water.

only a pale green pond . . .

Kamala Das confessed very frankly about her childhood at Nalapat House that it was very fun and

nice. She studied in Calcutta at a European school for a few years. Das realizes that it was normal to have friendly relations between Indian families and a British family. Her father was a senior official at an automobile company selling luxurious cars. His British friends used to visit their home. They had very close British friends. The Anglo-Indian and British classmates treated them quite differently. She tells a heart-wrenching event of discrimination of brown children in a European school. In his class, she tells that her younger brother was very bright but he was still bullied by British students. She remembers William, a student who yelled, "Blackie, your blood is red." Kamala went mad at him and scratched his face but the white guy was supported by an Anglo Indian. Hence, Kamala and her friend always spoke out against the bullies from the British students.

Kamala recollects her school days and narrates that the Britons were treated well but Indians always looked down. Kamala Das was tasked to write a poem and a girl named "Shirley Temple" was assigned to read it in an assembly. But the principal gave credit to Shirley when asked who had written it. Assuming her beauty with brains, she got a special kiss from the Governor's wife.

The brown children always kept hidden discretely when the guests used to come. Kamala Das always had to face color discrimination by the British students and teachers as an Indian. Kamala and her brother were tender kids and they always looked down due to their ordinary features and swarthy skin. Along with school, these children also observed that their parents were disappointed by their skin color. According to her, they never told that they never liked their skin color but their gestures and behavior were evident. She remembers how her father yelled and forced them to drink the purgative every month and asked her grandmother to apply oil and turmeric on her skin. It is loud and clear that children are always affected by their parents' behavior. She observes that her parents were terribly mismatched and dissimilar. Her father never loved her mother. Her mother, as a usual Indian wife, was very shy and always maintained domestic harmony to be acceptable in society.

Kamala's father was always pitiful to his kids. He always tried hard to improve their behavior so they can fit in Indo-British culture. Parental burden always affects child psychology. Her father didn't



like her poetic talent. Britons loved Art and Literature, but not Indians. She was always the victim of color discrimination.

I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple,

who may have been proud of my

verses . . .

She felt isolated in her childhood for being a brown child. Her European teachers looked at her as an abnormally lonely child and her parents looked at her as a naïve child whose behavior should be changed. She felt so alienated that she preferred talking to natural objects instead of anyone else when she went out with her classmates to a picnic -

I went away to the farthest fence and lay near a hedge of Henna which had sprouted its tiny flowers. The sun was white that day, a white lamp of a sun on the winter sky, I was lonely. Oh! I was so lonely that day. No one seemed to want my company, not even my brother who was playing a kind of football with his classmates. (My Story, p. 117)

Further, when her teacher called her she felt:

. . . And the white sun filled my eyes with its own loneliness.

The Smell of Henna flowers overwhelmed me.

Sobbing, I rose

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and walked toward my teacher . . .

Since then, she has had a strong bond with nature. According to Kamala Das, her parents were like other parents as they didn't know that every child has its own personality. Remembering the leisurely time of her mother, she tells that her mother used to spend her time lying on a 4-post bed on her belly, writing poems in Malayalam language.

## 3. CONCLUSION

Kamala Das seems to be like an unsatisfied, isolated poet who doesn't like her current position at all. This is why she used to get lost in her past. Her professional career was full of achievements, but her personal life was very disturbing and empty. She used to recall her childhood memories when she enjoyed her early years at her ancestral home based in Malabar region of Kerala. Her heart was filled with both thoughtful mood and happiness. Published in Calcutta, "A Hot Noon in Malabar" depicts her nostalgic desires for pleasing childhood and old house. She always desired to get back to her old childhood times. When she thinks of her parents and ancestral home, she used to get emotional. She remembers every small detail of her old house which is far away from her current residence. In "Hot Noon at Malabar" and "My Grandmother's House", she always used the pictures of doors and windows to the fullest.

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