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## A Feminist Study of Kamala Das's poem "The Old Playhouse"

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### Abstract

The objective of the paper is to showcase the feminist approach in the poem "The Old Playhouse" by Kamala Das. The poem represents the speaker who voices out the oppression and psychological perceptions of a woman in the patriarchal society, gender stereotyping as well as the longing for personal space and creativity which is brought forth by the self-expression of the speaker itself. Das shows the demands of intellectual space for a woman to pursue her dreams in life and the objectification of a woman who were caged as a private property of a man strictly bounded to the four corners of the house whose inner desires to fly and nurture are overlooked in the male dominated society. The poem serves as the voice of the unheard inner emotions of the woman who becomes the victim of silent oppression in the patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal society, stereotyping, woman, gender and oppression.

### Introduction

Kamala Das (1934-2009) was an Indian poet, novelist and a short story writer of the Post Independent era. The poem deals with the themes of silent oppression of a woman, overlooking of a woman, oppression faced in the patriarchal society, male dominance, self-expression, gender stereotyping and others. The poem "The Old Playhouse" is structured with the feminist perspectives on the patriarchal society. The speaker addresses

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the suffering faced under the male dominated society and connects her mental psyche to the old playhouse which is abandoned and left to isolation. The paper will explore the notion of gender construction in the society and the roles portrayed to a particular gender especially of a woman. The study of this paper will enhance the impact of oppression on the mental consciousness of a woman who faces the feeling of isolation, detachment and a complete sense of abandonment.

The poem “The old Playhouse” addresses the speaker’s oppression in the patriarchal society where the speaker compares a woman to a bird “swallow” who is being planned to be “tame” by her lover. The word “tame” in the poem is a bold expression of captivity and control which the speaker voices out to highlight the lover to be dominated while caging her “nature, the urge to fly, and the endless/Pathways of the sky”. The lines are in suggestive of the superiority of a man and overlooking of a woman’s desire to pursue her dreams.

However, Das has highlighted the critique of psychoanalysis. Das made a contrasting comparison to establish the female persona construction in the society to that of the male persona. The speaker in the poem suggests that she came to her husband’s marital house “not to gather knowledge/ Of yet another man that I came to you” which is an implication of a general perception about woman’s sexuality which the feminist such as Cixous argues that woman’s sexuality is suppressed and constructed by man in the patriarchal society. The speaker tries to deconstruct the femininity construction by man through a confession that she came “to learn/ What I was, and by learning, to grow, but every/ Lesson you gave was about yourself” which clearly indicates that she came in a quest for self-identity and growth as an individual but her husband taught her about himself which Cixous states that man reinforces only himself in the patriarchal society about “that same self-admiring, self-stimulating , self-congratulatory phallocentrism”(pp. 879).

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Furthermore, the speaker in the poem echoes the gender stereotyping in the society. Beauvoir talked about the differences between gender and sex which both the sexes performs in the society of gender roles. The poem depicts the gender role of a woman where the speaker emphasize that she was called a “wife” and “taught to break saccharine into your tea and/ To offer at the right moment the vitamins”. It clearly represents that femininity is constructed and defined to the household chores and cater the needs of her husband interests which Beauvoir had tried to establish the distinction about the gender and sex.

In addition to this, Das evinces the decapitation of a woman in the patriarchal society. In the poem, the speaker is silently oppressed where she hides her emotions over “your monstrous ego” letting her feel like she ate a “magic loaf” and became a “dwarf” which is suggestive of her feeling of being insignificant and unwanted in the marital house. The speaker highlights that she becomes silenced towards her husband’s “Questions I mumbled incoherent replies” which represents that man holds a dominion over woman to shut their mouth or decapitate them from speaking.

Furthermore, the speaker throws light upon the objectification of a woman in the patriarchal society. She is bounded to the four walls of the house and left isolated and completely detached from the communication with the external world and the speaker shows that “Your room is/ Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always/ shut” shows woman as a property of a man caged inside his patriarchal space which Beauvoir argues that the rise of capitalism and private property had made men to treat women as objects and material property. The speaker also mentions upon the demand of intellectual and creative space in the patriarchal society. It is a reflection of the unheard feeling of the inner psyche of a woman who feels abandoned at her marital house where there are “No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old/ Playhouse with all its lights put out”. The lines are in suggestive of the complete

detachment to art and creativity as she is caged and isolated without any light in her room which Virginia Woolf argued that a woman needs a space for her creativity and a room to write and the speaker as well in the poem seeks for personal space and a freedom to develop her creative forces.

Thus in conclusion, we can say that the poem can be studied from the feminist perspective. The confessional tone in the poem heightens the bold self-expression of the poet and her vocal against the oppression faced in the patriarchal society. The poem emphasizes on the gender roles and identity and tries to break away from the construct and dissociates the role of gender from sex. Hence, “The Old Playhouse” serves as an expression of one’s individuality, self and role in the society and a quest for self-identity.

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