

SEX AS A DESIRE TO BE EXPERIENCED AND EXPLORED: AN ANALYSIS OF PADMAVATI THE HARLOT AND OTHER STORIES BY KAMALADAS

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Abstract: This paper deeply introspects how sex and gender play a determining role in defining the power structures of the society. The role of woman as a daughter, wife and even as a whore finds ample space in this work. It also become a means to understand how a patriarchal society responds to women s dreams and her needs. It also shows how woman boldly responds to adverse situations of life.

Keywords: Desire, Gender, Sex, Society.

Introduction: In a society where talking about sex was considered as a taboo Kamala Das showed the courage to blatantly expose the female body and to speak of desires of love, lust and sex. Her autobiography which was published in 1973 became controversial for the description of sex. She went on seeing the world from her writings about body which revealed the repressed desires in man and woman. 'Padmavati the Harlot and other stories' is a short story collection of Kamala Das in English. It was published in the year 1992. She through her writings questioned the existing power relations and established through her writing the equal importance of man and woman in having a healthy relationship. Her stories gave woman the right and liberty to determine their partners. It echoed the pains and thoughts of subjugated woman hood. She through her writings portrayed that woman also same emotions and passions like man. Her writings were an eye opener to a woman's mind which the patriarchal society often tend to ignore. Her words proclaimed the fact that woman have same rights and privileges like that of man. Man and woman having equal rights in choosing their sexual partners. In this anthology of short story collection she describes about the women, her body and her lust to reach to a greater glory. But she defines it as something which is common to all the women and men as well. Unlike the popular woman narratives which describes woman as a hapless other unable to make her decisions. Here we can see woman who also have a choice to determine their sexual partners. The stories are narrated from the point of woman as a daughter, wife, sister and also from the view point of a whore. In the story titled 'Grandfather' *Tankam* faces a dilemma of choosing between her husband and grandfather. Though she wished to look after her grandfather in the last days of his life. Her husband was reluctant to take the old man home. It points to the dilemma a woman alone has to face all through her life, being caught in between wed knot and obligations of birth. In another story titled 'Wall' woman is described as the strength of man. *Ramachandra* after twenty eight years of married life

decides to quit his job, yet his wife did not question him. But understands him completely and moves ahead with the decision. She was willing to take any pains in her life and confronted every juncture of life with much care. The story also throws light on changed life of woman after the marriage. Though she knows that the resignation of her husband would lead to an economic instability she was determined to support him in all his ventures of life. In 'A Doll for The Child Prostitute' the narrator takes us to a brothel and the life of woman there. It also tells us how young girls are brought into the business of prostitution and how it changes their lives forever. It also throws light on the humiliations a girl child has to suffer all throughout her life. *Rukhmani* was sold to *Ayee* to raise money to feed the new born babies. At an age when children do not know anything about sex they are being thrown to a market of selling their bodies. Moreover *Rukhmani* was sexually exploited by her step father. By this story, the author opens up the harsh reality of Indian society comprising the brothels, red streets and prostitutes. It also points to the social stigmas associated with the word prostitute and how they are treated in society. *Aye* always makes a comparison with the neighboring brothel where *Kaushalya* always beat the girls and they had no opinions of their own. We are introduced to another girl called *Sita* who came there as her family died of Cholera. She hated men and she cried from pain inflicted by men folk on her. She suffered from various type of illness. *Sindhuthai* symbolizes those women who were thrown out of the brothel as their youth faded away. They became homeless and wandered in streets. *Sita* always dreamed of going back to her home and thought of giving birth to a baby, but she died without realizing her dreams. *Rukhmani* and *Sita* were very good friends, they regarded each other as sisters. Their relationships points to the floundering relationship and human affection inside brothels. *Mira* was the most valuable and beautiful member of brothel. She loved a revolutionary who visited the brothel regularly and promised her a new life. She went with him, with hopes of getting married. But he was not willing to

marry her and left her at the brothel. It also throws light on the prejudices of the Indian society in marrying a whore and how they are thrown to do the same profession. *Rukhmani* was able to change the mind of that inspector who gifted her with foreign dolls. For her he resembled his father. In the end we can see him considering her as his granddaughter. When the story ends he says that something has died in him which is corrected by Aye as she says that something has born inside him. It refers to the change in attitude of the inspector and implications of humanitarian considerations being evolved. In another story titled 'That Woman' a woman who had a relationship with a man, who had legal wife and children walked out of her home after his death leaving everything to his married wife and children. It throws light on the kindness and love of woman to give up everything to the man he loved. It undercuts the notion of woman being seductive out of her greed. 'Tattered Blanket' vehemently portrays the sufferings of the old woman and how she gets neglected after being grown old. Even her own son refuses to look after her and is in a hurry to sell his home for financial benefits. Here also woman as a mother and as a sister faces a dilemma, being unable to oppose the patriarchal notions of money, power and possessions. Those mothers who were of great help during childhood remains ignored as a tattered blanket once their utility gets reduced. When we reach 'IQBAL' we are carefully drawn into an extramarital affair of a woman with the friend of her husband and finally becomes pregnant. She deals the situation with a lot of courage. On the other hand, Iqbal ties to commit suicide. We can see a bold woman who goes to the hospital to visit and laughs at him when he calls her a devil. The stereotype of woman as a virgin, crying for acceptance from father of her child is unequivocally broken as she moves out laughing in the corridor. She behaves as a courageous woman ready to accept any challenges in life. She understands Iqbal more than he knows her. We are drawn to see a woman who is bold, where sexual partner is her choice and she carry on her life without any distrust. Lust and sex become a personal choice and the process of writing one's body is considered as a paradigm feature to continue with life. In another story titled 'Princess of Avanti' an old mad woman who stays in a park got baffled by a group of three young men who supposedly claimed to be the kings, who molested her to death. It is also pathetic that even after many years of independence and strict laws to protect woman a large portion of woman folk continues to bear the sexual violence of this male dominated society. Yet the Indian woman continues to live bravely with courage. As mentioned in 'Sign of Lion' though the woman knows that sometimes he may kill her for the

simple reason of bearing his child she continued to have relationship with him and dared to tell him that he was pregnant. He was a politician and had a legalized family. But it did not control his desire for sex and extramarital relationship. He and the woman of a lower social strata have the same desire and both enjoyed being with each other. Also in 'A Little Kitten' when the bank manager husbands fell in love with his secretary Miss *Nadkar*, his wife initially found it difficult to accept that situation and finally retaliate by having a relationship with other man and thereby recapitulate her urge for life and retains her lost glory. In all these stories women enjoys same freedom as that of men to have multiple sexual partners and she enjoys it. It is to be noted that in 'Sea Lounge' the narrator takes us to the mental agony faced by a woman who had to undergo a break up in a relationship. She behaves in a confident manner and adds up that she would convince her family of his decision and told him not to worry. But when he offered her a lift to home she refused it. Such an attitude of rejecting further comforts from him, is indeed a bold venture to build up a new life. The woman is emboldened to face the hurdles of life and is confident about each and every decisions which she had to take in life. 'Moongphali' reminds us of the Sikh riot which happened after assassination of Indira Gandhi and the communal tensions that existed among people. It is a story which tells us about the unrequited love that existed between people irrespective of their religious differences. *Jasmit*, a Sikh married woman along with her son *Bittu* is being rescued by a Hindu vendor who sold sweets in that locality. He made up a story that her daughter who wed a Muslim man had come back from Pakistan and he called *Jasmit* as *Sita*. Thus he saved the lives of two innocent souls. It reminds us of the love that has the power to resolve any kind of violence and retains peace in the society. Unlike her mother in law, *Jasmit* did not have any prejudice towards other religious communities and respected all of them with due respect. It was this love that ultimately saved her from the hands of religious fanatics. On the other hand, her husband became a scapegoat on hearing the words of his mother, eventually leading to the death of both. We are introduced to different shades of love and the pivotal role of woman in society in spreading the message of love to the large Indian population. Finally when we reach 'Padmavati the Harlot and other Stories' Padmavati is portrayed as a typical Indian woman who lived for her family. In this case she forgot to live for herself. Initially she spend her teenage in looking after her ailing mother, later she worked hard to educate her younger brothers and marry off her sister. She in her old age was left with nothing and was compelled to roam through the roads. Thirty

three years of her life she worked for her family and finally she came to meet her lord. On the way to temple she was teased by a group of young men who passed comments expressing their wish to have sex with her. Ignoring their comments she walked to see her Lord to seek comfort and peace. She expressed her helplessness of being unable to offer him anything other than her body. She had sex with her Lord. It is also a reminder of the devdasi system which still exists in various parts of India. It reinstates the fact that even rape done in the name of religion becomes divine and legitimized. It indirectly criticizes devdasi system practiced in India where young girls are subjected to prostitution and rape but nevertheless questioned due to its religious sanction. Sex as a desire is complicated as it can be done under the bondage of love as well as lust. All her stories describe sex as a part of social conventions and appeals that it should be done with the consent of male

and female. And how it intertwines with the society and religion which we are brought up. In the autobiographical work of Kamala Das titled 'My Story' she describes The hospital days in Mumbai, her life in orphanage, obsession with dolls, days after marriage and life after her marriage, the Sikh riot and the communal tensions which she experienced in her life finds a commendable space in this anthology. Her alienation, loneliness and thirst for love unconsciously brought out the other in us. Yes, it was a revelation to quench the thirst for love with an insight about sex to live life, without any regrets. Writing about one's own body is a kind of liberation to come out of the restricted structures which denied freedom to women. In this context, these stories are path breakers to a new world where woman will have the liberty to live a life where her voices will be heard and her rights duly acknowledged.

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