

## **Patriarchy and the theme of Death in Kamala Das' short story "The Scent of the Bird".**

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### **Abstract**

The abstract is a study to understand the theme of Death as symbolized and personified by Kamala Das in her short story, *The Scent of the Bird*. Death is not a relatively new theme in literature. The paper seeks to comprehend the varied thematic representations of Death, as represented by the poetess Kamala Das and a glance to the other poets who wrote poems based on the similar themes. The poet attempts to highlight the private world of feminine consciousness by exhibiting the burden of social conventions and the construction of sexual binaries which strangulate a woman from seeking her own identity, either in her personal or professional life. Here in this story, Kamala Das conveys Death as a tall, masculine dominant hero, who unwillingly pulls the protagonist to her untimely death. The subtle portrayal of such a powerful theme itself is an angle that highlights the writing prowess of Kamala Das. Further inferences will be drawn from the poems of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath to analyze how Death as imagery is being personified. The dominant image of Death as a dominant male, who is trying to subdue the female-protagonist in the story is the underlying crux explaining the patriarchal norms in the society. This will be explained with references and excerpts based on the story itself. The notions of patriarchy becomes relevant even in the twenty first century; as we are facing the extremes of battered wives and the desire to be feminine and attractive to the male sex; and the manifestations of gender inequality at the other end of the scale. The topic of patriarchy, though it is dealt only on the textual level, it helps to understand that male domination is a central tenet in the structuring of the urban social space – the husband, father and the dominant death image in the short story prove the same. It also reveals how high handed patriarchal norms are deep rooted within our minds.

### **Keywords**

Binary, consciousness, prowess, identity, subdue, protagonist, patriarchy

## **Patriarchy and the theme of Death in Kamala Das' short story "The Scent of the Bird".**

Kamala Das is one of the inimitable Indian writers in English who hailed from Kerala- the God's own country. She enjoyed the status of being one of the first poets writing in English from Kerala to be recognized nationally and internationally. She was an iconoclast of her generation, who spoke unabashedly about the Indian women's sexual desires and as a maverick who courts controversies. She had won many accolades to her credit including the prestigious Kent Award.

Kamala Das expressed her female consciousness and the suppression of women in her rebellious and dissenting voice in order to describe the physical and emotional wounds inflicted upon her personal life by the hard codes of patriarchy<sup>1</sup>- male colonialism. The paper strikes to analyze the thematic and symbolic element of Death and how it is represented by Kamala Das in her short story, "The Scent of the Bird". Patriarchy is another dominant image in the poems and short stories of Kamala Das; however patriarchy as represented by the author would also be further discussed in this article.

Death as a representation in literature is not quite novel. Mostly death representations in literature are interpreted in an over-aestheticized manner. Many writers like Dostoevsky, Camus, Sartre, Sylvia Plath, Herta Muller and Anne Sexton have made literary representations of death in their works. The paper tries to analyze how death is represented by a few selected poets in their literary verses. This helps to analyze and gain insights on the universality of female experiences. The poems and stories of Kamala Das were obsessed with the theme of love, death and male dominance.

Kamala Das's stories portrayed her inner self with poetic accuracy, but on the whole lifted her stories to a new metaphorical level; rich with universal experiences. "Pakshiyude Manam" (The Scent of the Bird) which forms a part in her selected anthology of short stories titled *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories* is such a story matching world standards.

The story 'The Scent of the Bird' portrays a realistic picture of a middle class young lady who goes job hunting and reaches the wrong destination. She tried to approach a textile business unit, to improve her social and financial prospects, but unfortunately she enters the wrong place misreading the board in the nearby shop indicating 'dying'. The tall and hefty male image in the story –suggestive of death itself; traps her to her untimely death. In spite of her pleadings and humble moaning, the lady had to unwillingly and unknowingly succumb to death.

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<sup>1</sup>. Lerner (1986:217) defines patriarchy as "the relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior, in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and reciprocal rights"

The story begins with the description of the job advertisement which she saw in the morning newspaper. In spite of being a well-qualified and educated lady herself, she regretted going for the job interview,” without heeding to her husband’s warning”. This first patriarchal image suggests of a male dominant egoistical husband who did not want his wife to go for this particular job. There are many other occasions, where the lady suggests of “prying eyes falling on her face” and how a man who “scanned her from head to toe with his narrow reddish eyes”. The thorough contempt of the writer for the male counterpart (gaze) is expressed when she writes about a “short middle aged man with dirt on his nails” was too eager to help the lady saying that; “I don’t know you; but if you come with me, I will help you”.

The second half of the story narrates the encounter of the lady with the anonymous man, whom she encountered when she got in the shop called ‘Dying’. The lady, though she was well-educated and a woman of a higher social status, with good working experience, she still feared, when she encountered the strange man with a long face which “resembled that of a horse”. Here the animal image itself is suggestive of chauvinism and male ego.

The man with the pale smile and long face was a symbolic personification of death itself. The fearful patriarchal authoritarianism is seen when the author describes that his “pale smile entered her eyes and diffused all over her...her legs trembled “.In spite of her pleadings and humble requests, he would never let her go. She had a feeling that she was trapped.

The symbolic imagery of the brownish bird with the yellowish tinge and its struggle to break open the glass; finally collapsing on the floor and being smashed by the man’s shoes indicates the lady herself. The yellow tinge in the bird represents death or paleness. The struggle to open the glass indicates the lady’s own plight for escapism from the world of stark realities. The ‘smashing’ image indicates the cruel fate of death imposed on her by destiny.

The imagery of Death is further symbolized by the lady recalling the death of her own mother, who mumbled that she had ‘no pain...only too unwell’. The death of her diabetic father who was bedridden with a paralytic stroke is also described by the soft breeze of the orchards diffused in her room. Here Death is further personified as having ‘sweet smell’ and he says that “Death has the scent of the bird’s feathers”.

The man further describes how the lady had once she longed for death. She is described as “...river that longs to merge with the sigh of the soft waves of the sea in sweet exhaustion”. The dominant male ego is visible when he asks whether he had longed for an ‘endless caress’.

The death image is further seen when he explains that he had come to her once, when she was eleven years old and was affected by jaundice. Here the repeated use of the colour ‘yellow’ for the sari (the one the lady wore), the yellow arali flowers and the colour of the disease (jaundice) is also suggestive of death, paleness and disease.

Death as the man image in the short story is further personified as a lover when he says:

“Perhaps you were not aware of my love for you and did not know that I am your and everyone’s guide... only I can offer you consummation of love. You will give me all of yourself- red lips, dancing eyes, shapely body everything... and even the very roots of your hair, until you will be totally beggared. Then as a reward for your sacrifice, I will give you freedom.”

Though he finally allowed her to leave, little did she realize that it was her final journey in the damaged lift, which “rose up with the sound of a huge disaster”, where she felt that she was high up in the sky ‘among thunderbolts’.

The dominant imagery of death reminds one of Emily Dickinson’s poems, ‘Because I could not stop for Death’; in which Death on a similar vein is represented as a man who metaphorically takes the speaker in a carriage to the final passage. The sunset also suggests the ‘yellowish orange shade’ which is suggestive for the sunset/death of one’s life.

“Because I could not stop for Death

He stopped for me”.

These opening lines in the poem itself are suggestive, and it indicates the image of a male suitor who waits for the speaker longingly, until she turns up. The imagery in the poem also has a striking balance to Kamala Das’s short story, where Death waited for the lady until she finally turns up. The poem also has a similar suggestion to the ‘horse’s head’ (maybe even before she got into the carriage with her fellow traveler Death ) The horse’s heads are long and angled forwards, perhaps like an arrow pushing one through the barrier from life to death.

The dominant male image is also suggestive of a patriarchal society. Through the images and symbols of ‘ death’ and ‘ horse ‘, the writer echoes the faith and rage of the feminist against the limitations imposed on women in a male dominated society. Kamala Das knew the indomitability of the male ego and she tried to bring the female experiences in par with the male experiences instead of trying to free woman from male imposed shackles. She expresses the intensity of the emotional or psychological wounds and the experiences of being oppressed in a patriarchal society.

Another poet who wrote on a similar theme was Sylvia Plath, who through her confessional poems, candidly analyzes and evaluates her personal experiences. In her poem ‘Lady Lazarus’, the poet speaks of Death as a physical challenge, which she needs to overcome. In the poem, the speaker is a woman who has a great terrible gift of being reborn. She has to die first and to be reborn here. The imagery of death is personified<sup>2</sup>. The poet describes herself as a phoenix, the libertarian spirit.

Sylvia Plath’s poems were mostly based on the theme of death and her disgust for men. Death was an all- pervasive theme in Plath’s poems. She portrays death as a lover and a be- all and end-all of life. She uses the image of the ‘human body’, to show that the male body is a source of corruption and exploitation and the female body as a store house of beauty and chastity.

In most of her poems and short stories, Kamala Das described death as a dominant male image or a patriarchal icon. Her writings in general, echoed the rebellious inner conflicts of an educated Indian middle class woman trying to free from the chains of Orthodoxy. She was emotional,

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<sup>2</sup> Personification is a figure of speech where humanly qualities are attributed to non-living things or concepts.

impatient and honest to the core. She described herself as a wounded nightingale that preferred to fly the eagle's path.

Though many writers have presented the theme of Death; only a few writers like Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton could fantasize and give a glorified version of a longing suitor image to the theme of Death.

Undoubtedly, the emerging generations of new Indian women would definitely find Kamala Das worthy to be celebrated as an icon of freedom and individuality. The legacy that Kamala Das left behind is bound to stay beyond the predictions of any controversial establishments.

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