

# (Re)locating (I)dentity With(in) Politicized (Re)presentation of Fe/Male Body in Kamala Das' Poetry

Sharmin Sultana (Corresponding author)  
Department of English, Comilla University  
Kotbari, Comilla-3506, Bangladesh  
E-mail: shrmnsln1@gmail.com

Nadia Sarwar  
Department of English, Comilla University  
Kotbari, Comilla-3506, Bangladesh  
E-mail: nadia\_sarwar\_35@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

This paper is going to argue that the selected poems of renowned Indian poet Kamala Das are inclined to relocate both feminine and masculine identity through the politicized representation of body. Kamala Das' representation of body in her poems has always been viewed as a medium of re-historicizing the pain, sufferings, and psychological trauma that a woman goes through in a patriarchal society. Though apparently female body seems to be submissive under patriarchal dominance but this paper reveals how female body in Das' poems acts as a powerful agent over the male body. The objective of this paper is to analyze and evaluate kamala Das' representation of body to understand the gender reality in a patriarchal society, to question the existing discourse of sexed/gendered identity, to find a new way of viewing to both female and male body. Echoing Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Hall, this paper is going to analyze how Kamala Das represents body as an important factor in her poems to fight back the normative concept of identity based on patriarchal sex and/or gender stereotypes.

**Keywords:** identity, body, sex/gender, performativity, representation

## 1. Introduction

With the specific analysis of the representation of both female and male body in Kamala Das' poem, a political (re)construction of (I)dentity based on sex/gender binary can be sketched. The female and male body are represented in most of Das' poems with meticulous details and unconventional edge. Although, apparently, both the female and male body are articulated in her poems as the material expression of pain, sufferings and frustration through the voice of poetic persona, it unravels the complex construction of patriarchal power structure based on the heterosexual sex/gender binary. Therefore, this paper is going to argue that the representation of body in her poems are much politicized and functions as the substantial agency to relocate the feminine and masculine identity. The (hi)story of woman has long been absent in the realm of Indian discourse and literature. Interestingly, whereas, Body has always been used as a substance for one's identity from time to time, woman's body is always represented as an 'abject'; being viewed and/or represented' by patriarchal gaze. Kamala Das, in her poems, breaks the silence by rejecting the 'role' playing and denying to be 'represented' through the patriarchal eye. Henceforth, she becomes the representing subject from the represented 'abject' by reorganizing both feminine and masculine identity as a social construction. It will mainly focus on the three selected poems of Kamala Das; 'The Looking Glass', 'The Freaks' and 'An Introduction', with references to the poems, 'Forest Fire', 'Winter' and 'The Old Playhouse'. Resonating Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler in the above mentioned poems, this paper will identify the relationship among body, sex, gender and identity, analyzing how female body acts as an authoritative agent over the male body. Moreover, with references to Stuart Hall, this paper is also going to argue that the selected poems of Kamala Das one way or other subverts the patriarchal representation of sexed/gendered identity.

## 2. Literature Review

In Kamala Das' poetry the diversified representation of fe/male body provides a critical space to discover multi-dimensional interpretations from several perspectives. The body in Das' poetry has always been viewed as a medium of searching feminine identity in a patriarchal world. Her poems directly discloses the "unquenchable thirst for identity with respect to her repressed self which is artistically trapped in the labyrinth of male chauvinism." (Prakash & Sujata, A Desperate Craving for Identity in the Major Works of Kamala Das). Bhattacharya argues that "[T]he hitherto premises of male hegemony are violently shaken by Kamala Das who can defy the conventional ideological discourse of sexism and love." (Love as a Quest for Identity in the Poetry of Kamala Das). In her poems "Female body becomes

the manipulated place of sexual pleasure leading towards suppression of female Identity (Baghira, Dichotomy between 'Female Desire' and 'Constructed Identity': The Subversion of 'Male Ego' in Kamala Das' My Story and "The Looking Glass"). Gradually "[H]er woman emerges from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity...her feminine self wants to be attached with 'body's wisdom.'"(Rawal, "Quest for Female Identity in Kamala Das"). Kamala Das, attempts to "transcend the body through which she expresses herself through body (Nirmala, 2002, P.69). Contrary Rao viewed body as a trap which prevents her (Das) from experiencing true love" (2000, P.60) and/or real identity. In her poems, body has been epitomized as an "object of glory", "decaying form" "source of disgust" that encapsulates the feminine identity throughout various stage of a woman's life. (Rahman, 1981, p. 42). It is apparent that most of the critics regarded body either as a medium of attaining spirituality or a derogated object which shapes the feminine identity. Instead of interpreting body as a means of lamenting the pathos of feminine psyche and/or a mere medium of establishing feminine identity, this paper attempts to expose the politicized representation of Fe/Male body on the part of Kamala Das which (as this paper argues) subverts the patriarchal demonstration of sexed/gendered identity.

### 3. Performing Identity and Body in Kamala Das' Poems

Being a confessional feminist poet, Kamala Das' pursuit to re-examine the identity comes from a continual sense of deprivation, sufferings, frustrations and injustice in her own life. In most of her poems, the poetic persona unleashes the sufferings of womanhood, pain and disappointment in love and relationship. A close reading of Kamala Das' poems reveals that she anticipated identity as a mere performativity of the normative gender stereotypes. Judith Butler influenced by postmodern post-structuralist feminism, in the book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) identifies the idea of 'gender performativity' arguing both sex and gender as a social and cultural construction. Butler's idea of gender performativity is remarkably implied in Das' poem 'An Introduction', where she realizes how the idea of sex/gender is predetermined in our society following certain bodily features and how it exists with(in) the functioning of gender. In this poem, she portrays how gradually and by degrees in the life of a woman, body becomes an important factor to form her feminine identity where the poetic persona finds her grown up body becoming a part of social structure at her adolescent years:

They told me I grew, for I become tall my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair ("An Introduction". 25-26)

Here the poetic persona is under immense pressure to perform the normative gender role decided by the society because she has already been defined as a woman according to her bodily features. Now she needs to give a life to her 'womanliness' endowing herself with gender 'performativity': "Dress in saree, be girl /Be wife... Be embroiderer, / be cook, be a quarreler with servants" ("An Introduction, 34-36). As Butler said, one's body "becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 1988). Simone de Beauvoir, discussed that female body develops as the weaker sex by naturalizing itself as an object of the patriarchal gaze. She is encouraged to be like "a passive object ... an inert given object" (Beauvoir, 306), whereas a boy is encouraged to involve in outdoor activities that needs physical vigor. There begins a woman's journey to live a life as submissive object dependent on patriarchal gaze for the appraisal, approval and identity. Being the object of persistent observation burdens her physical ability (355). As the poetic persona realizes that her bodi(ly) feature is making her a weak person after a painful sexual encounter with a man, she starts to dress in "a shirt and my/Brother's trousers/cut my hair short" ("An Introduction" 32-33) and ignoring her 'womanliness'.

She subverts the normative gender performativity by denying the norms and performs her chosen identity rather than conforming to the normative stereotypes. She denies to 'fit in' to patriarchal stereotypes by following certain dress codes and playing those given roles. A man is designated to wear shirts and trousers that enables him to move with ease as he is going to work outside. A multilayered complex dress like saree allows little freedom to women to move spontaneously. But that is necessary because it will ensure that she must stay at home, to be a cook, to be dependent on man and to allow him to have the upper hand in a heterosexual relationship. But rejecting to conform to such norms, the poetic persona raises herself to the level of her male counterparts and declares:

... I have no joys that are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. ("An Introduction", 57-58)

As Judith Butler said, "the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again." (Butler, 1988) Here, likewise, the poetic persona of this very poem not only chooses to perform an identity that is a derivative of patriarchal codes, she makes it apparent that the males are not omnipotent superior sex by birth rather he is also the social and cultural construction.

### 4. Transgressing the Image of Fe/Male Body

In the Indian patriarchal society, female body is viewed as medium of reproduction and motherhood but Kamala Das "critiqued, mocked and subverted these representations by writing... about her bodily needs." (Sarker, 2013). As Sarker claims, "In her writings the Indian first viewed the desire, the sexuality that as a woman she feels and how audaciously she proclaims it." In this patriarchal world, female body has always been represented as an object of pleasure and sexual gratification for man which doesn't leave a single space for female sexual gratification. Kamala Das in her

poems, deconstructs these traditional images of female body being a sense less sexual object rather 'we find a rare body and its feelings' (Raju, 2001, P.25) where women are seen to be a sensual creature who are very conscious and curious about their body and body's desire. In Das' "Forest Fire", the poetic persona is lustful over male body:

...My eyes lick at you like flames  
 Consume; and, when I finish with you, in  
 Pram, near the tree and, on the park bench  
 Out small heaps of ash, nothing else. (8-11)

Likewise in, 'An Introduction' the female poetic persona feels; "the oceans' tireless Waiting" to fulfill her sexual and emotional needs just as the man feels the lust for women as "the hungry taste Of rivers"; only her desire is deeper (ocean) than the man's (river) ("An Introduction" 45-46). She is a person who enjoys life, gets sad, makes love, and drinks at midnight. She does not refrain herself from having sexual pleasure from a male body because she has every appetite that a man has. In the poem "Winter" also she declares, 'I loved his body without shame' (Das, 1965, 5).

It is noteworthy that in most of her poems "kamala Das does not ignore the physical aspect of love. Sex remains an outer grab for her inner worlds of emotion and feelings." (Chakravarty, 2003, p.119). Although the poetic personae in Kamala Das' poems long for emotional love, they do not ignore the pleasure of body. They view the sexual encounters of the body as expression of love as well as imagines to be lost into male lover's arm, to enjoy the warmth of his body. In the poem 'Forest Fire', though the poetic persona has been given an edge of motherhood but she is also desiring to have the warm physical embraces with her lover and consume the male body with her desire. Kamala Das, in these poems, attempted to reconstruct the feminine identity associating it with sexual desire. In the poems, 'Relationship' and 'In Love', 'Krishna', female sexuality is celebrated likewise.

On the other hand, The Male body, in Kamala Das' poems is often represented through peculiar and unusual imagery where the rough and aggressive features of masculinity is always present in the male body and the body is unable to reciprocate emotional advances. The lover in "The Freaks", who has 'mouth like cavern full of stalactites....' (3) represents a man with mouthful of uneven teeth. When he talks his sun-burned cheeks are noticed.

He talks, turning a sun-stained  
 Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark  
 Cavern, where stalactites of  
 Uneven teeth gleam! ("The Freaks", 1-4)

The male body is not a very aesthetically appealing one here. Kamala Das' portrayal of his body is critical here because by using certain parts of male body like, "sun-stained Cheek, mouth as dark cavern, uneven teeth gleam" (Das, 1965, "The Freaks" 4), she is providing a negative image of male body shrinking him only to a body and thus determining his identity through it. Further, what makes this male body a freak is its inability to have any emotional connection to the female body:

Can this man with  
 Nimble finger-tips unleash  
 Nothing more alive than the  
 Skin's lazy hungers. ("The Freaks" 9-12)

In "Forest Fire" too the same pattern of representation of male body can be found where the man is not aesthetically appealing. The image of male body is portrayed as an old man and 'a bald child into open pram' ("Forest Fire" 5). The male body is represented here as an ambiguous combination of a child and an old man. Usually the image of an 'old male body' is associated with knowledge, self-preservation and experience. But the male body of her old lover is compared with a child, hairless, bald, helplessly put into a perambulator signifying its immaturity, dependency and ignorance. In Prashantha Kumar's words: "Kamala Das conceives of the male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the woman loses her identity" (34).

Portrayal of male body as a corrupting force is very obvious in the poem "An Introduction":

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
 Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me  
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
 The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.  
 I shrank Pitifully. (26-31)

Here the body of the poetic persona experiences a painful sexual encounter with a man, who 'crushes her breasts and womb' (30) she feels sad and beaten although she was not physically tortured. However, the action of the male body implies it as intruder, sexually aggressive and emotionally distant conforming all masculine features.

The representation of male body in "The Looking Glass' deconstructs preconception of male body image associated

with phallus. The man is portrayed as the stronger one with the perfection of limbs of his body. But the movement and activities of his body do not associate with the conventional phallocentric identity of a man. In the patriarchal social construction, the power of masculinity is often center around the phallus which makes him a difference to woman. But the unusual image of urinating undo all of these illusion of phallus reduced it only to a biological part of the body. Shyness is not a virtue of male according to patriarchal social norm, it is attributed upon female. The male in this poem is represented as shy and vulnerable, which is a transgression from conventional masculine image of a man. The phallus is not embodying the erect penetrative power male body over female body in this poem, rather it is shown as flaccid and vulnerable part of one's biological body:

The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,  
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he  
Urinate. ("The Looking Glass" 10-11)

### 5. Subversion of Power and/or Politics (of Representation)

One's identity is created through representation as Stuart Hall argues that "... identity is 'production' which is never complete always in process and always constitute within, and not outside, representation". (Hall, 1994) Hall assumed the identity of the marginalized people is always being constructed and changed by those who holds the center of the power. In Indian patriarchal society and discourse, woman is always regarded as the negligible, mere an element to serve the male discourse. Woman is represented by the male, through the male gaze, is given an arbitrary inferior identity based on her constructed gender. After having a critical analysis of the selected poems of Kamala Das, it is noteworthy that the patriarchal politics of representation regarding gendered identity has been overturned here and one way or other, being a feminist poet, Kamala Das seems to subvert this power politics visualizing the power of representation and discourse. In the poems, 'The Freaks' and 'The Looking Glass' she does not separate the male body from its masculine form, rather shows that this phallocentric masculinity is dependent on female body for the recognition and the assurance of masculinity:

Stand nude before the glass with him  
So that he sees himself the stronger one  
And believes it so, and you so much more  
Softer, younger, lovelier. ("The Looking Glass", 3-6)

Here Kamala Das doesn't go beyond the gendered portrayal of body rather she accepts the femininity in female body and the masculine traits in male body. What makes her different is the attempt to reshuffle the underlying power struggle between the two gendered bodies showing the politics of representation.

Again the representation of male body takes the center in 'The Looking Glass' for unconventional representation of male nudity. Dependency of the masculine identity over the feminine body is also obvious here. The woman in the poem, in her attempt to explain the man-woman relationship suggests that she and her male counterpart stands before a looking glass and keep looking at their nude bodies. The male body is nude and being exposed and scrutinized which is quite an unfamiliar pattern in our familiar world of art and literature. It's the woman who has always been the object of gaze, the object of display. The body of women becomes publicly acceptable in the representation of nudity from a very long period. Kamala Das deliberately put the male body on display making it exposed and vulnerable. Apparently, it seems that the sensitive female psyche is vulnerable under the power and behavior of a male body, but a close reading of the images of represented bodies subvert the underlying power struggle between two gendered bodies. By putting the male on display and making it an object of exposure, this poem attempts to re-construct the masculine identity in a different way:

Notice the perfection  
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under  
.....  
All the fond details that make  
Him male and your only man. ("The Looking Glass", 6-12)

Conversely, the representation of female body is at the same time feminine and unusual in this poem. The female body is represented as softer, younger and lovelier comparing to the roughness of male body. The sweat, the menstruation, odor of female body is not very often seen to be a part of female aesthetic. Das portrays these quintessential image of womanhood that always been missing in the representation of women by the male writers and thus deliberately presenting the 'unnatural' things of women as 'natural' making it a part of the existing discourse:

...Gift him all,  
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,  
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your  
Endless female hungers. ("The Looking glass", 12-15)

As Helen Cixous proposed, "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (1976). Cixous echoes women must represent themselves and put themselves into the discourse animatedly. As the sexuality of women has been denied over the time and consequently she lost the possession of her body. However, Kamala Das in her poems, represented the women body with all its womanliness, sexual desire; "endless female hungers" 'sweat of breasts' 'menstrual blood' ("The Looking Glass", 14-15). Subsequently, her body is retained back to her. Das' representation of female body transports the women from the periphery to the center of the discourse.

Interestingly, the representation of male body through female gaze pervades over the poem 'The Looking Glass' which is rare in patriarchal discourse. kamala Das attempted to represent both male and female body through the eye of a woman in the poem 'The Looking Glass' where the poetic persona through her female gaze is constituting the identity of herself and of her male partner. Here, the female is the identifier whereas the man is being identified subverting the patriarchal pattern of representation. The female body emerges as the powerful one simply by recognizing her feminine body on her own. Consequently, the female identity is a complete individual vocal with its both physical and emotional desire on the other hand, man's identity remains underdeveloped, fragmented, silent and dependent upon the acceptance and approval of female body.

## 6. Conclusion

While analyzing the politicized representation of female male body in the selected poems of kamala Das through which, as this paper argues, she attempted to relocate both feminine and masculine identity. Being a "rebel against the restraints of man-made world" (Baruah 2014), Kamala Das tries to uncover and subvert the politicized patriarchal representation of gendered identity. In her poems, identity is perceived as a performative act which is vulnerable to change, transformation and modification. The poetic personae here rise above the stereotypes of submissive women declining to be a silenced sexual object. The female persona evolves as an assertive individual who is aware of her own emotional predicaments, sexual desires, frustrations and trauma. On the contrary the male identity is revealed here as vulnerable, emotionally unreachable, rude, insensitive and dependent on female body for its ego gratification. While the male body is being represented, female body is representing itself. Thus Kamala Das, in her poems, with her authoritative power, is able to overturn the power structure of gender binary relocating both feminine and masculine identity from a female's perspective.

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