

THE PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERHOOD IN KAMALA DAS' 'SUMMER VACATION'

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Abstract:

Kamala Das, a renowned Indian English poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist is known for having a distinct voice for writing about the Indian sensibilities, culture, traditions, customs, values and belief systems. She is known for her true and honest depictions of the society around us with its harsh realities. She presents the chagrins of people, their situations and circumstances in an aesthetic, wonderful and at the same time heart touching way. Her major concerns are women, children, marriage, female sexuality, love, death, class, caste, politics and such other things. Her short stories especially bring out the uniqueness by way of characterization, themes, techniques and the endings. This paper tries to study her short story, 'Summer Vacation' in the light of 'Motherhood'. The story is told by the child narrator, Ammu about how Ammu and her grandmother meet each other every summer vacation; and the kind of love and bonding the both have for each other.

Keywords: Motherhood, women, love, bonding, Indian culture, Indian Sensibilities.

Kamala Das, an Indian English poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist and columnist from Kerala, India is known for her autobiographies and short stories. Kamala Das has a distinct style of writing native to Indian culture and tradition. She breaks the stereotypical way of representation and moves away from euro-centric mode thus bringing a native flavor to her writing. Her interests mainly lie in woman's issues, female sexuality, erotica, children's psychology and politics. She published many of her works with the pen name – 'Madhavikutty'

This paper presents the theme of motherhood as portrayed by Kamala Das in her short story, 'Summer Vacation'. The various themes in the story are childhood, memories, nostalgia, motherhood, death, class and caste discrimination, Nature description, Kerala landscape and environment, culture and such other things. Das employs first person narrative technique to describe the story as seen by Ammu who is now grown up. She goes back to her childhood days and describes how her summer vacations were spent at her grandmother's place.

Motherhood is one of the themes seen in the story. The various situations and scenes between Muthassi, Ammu's grandmother, who is a mother figure to Ammu; Bharati, another woman character and her child; Naani Amma and her daughter, Amini are vividly described, compared and contrasted to depict life as it is in Muthassi's place.

The narrator of the story is a small girl, Ammu who talks about the village, the place she visits in her summer vacation. It is her grandmother, Muthassi's place. The story opens with a simple and beautiful description of a tree. The tree was 'always there', 'emaciated', 'bent' with 'shrivelled up branches'. The tree amidst coconut palms stands as if saying, 'I know I should not be here. But please take pity on me. Don't destroy me'. There is personification seen when Ammu, the child narrator seems to give it a human quality to show that the tree was a part of the family. The words 'emaciated', 'shrivelled up branches' also work as foregrounding devices to show that Ammu's grandmother, Muthassi is also growing old, bent, emaciated like the Nvayal tree. Kamala Das by evocatively drawing the images of 'old tree', 'shrivelled leaves' sends out a message about the impermanence of the physical world as well as the physical body.

Death is one of the underlying themes in the story. Ammu lost her mother, she is worried if her grandmother who is sixty eight years old also would die and leave her and asks her grandmother to promise her that she would not die: 'Promise me that you won't die, Muthassi, promise me'. Grandmother also thinks her mother died at forty, uncle at forty five, her grandmother at fifty. She is made to feel a 'sinner' by Kamalan for living so long. The motherless Ammu looks at her ageing grandmother as her mother figure and is worried if like her mother, she would also die soon and what would be her life without her. Das thus brings out the fears, anxieties and insecurities in Ammu that come as filters between their close bonding. On the other hand, we see acceptance, matured outlook towards life and death in

Muthassi. Kamala Das dwells upon the idea that a beautiful bonding can exist between two women even without the presence of men.

Kamala Das subtly and carefully draws upon the idea that women in Kerala are closely connected to nature through Muthassi who lives through thick and thin as the matriarch of the house. Nature around her is the only solace for her. Ammu acts as a catalyst to the life of Muthassi and she looks forward to meeting her granddaughter every summer. Ammu always was inquisitive and would ask her grandmother, What the name of the tree is and Muthassi replies 'Nvayal' tree with small 'deep purple in color, about the size of the marble' fruits. The life of Muthassi is intricately connected with nature. Trees, birds, plants, leaves, coconut trees are a part of Muthassi's household. The grandmother also has knowledge about birds. Ammu asks Muthassi why crows like 'soap', 'beauty' and carry them away when kept outside. Muthassi replies, 'Ammu, birds are very intelligent. They have more common sense and knowledge than human beings'. Kamala Das fills the dearth of a mother in Ammu's life through Muthassi being like a mother for her, educating, entertaining, and supporting her.

Kamala Das' clearly depicts the matriarchal society that once prevailed in Kerala. As a feminist, she creates strong and powerful women characters such as Muthassi and the other village women who come to have discussions about what is happening in the village and who is doing what at Muthassi's home. Muthassi comes out as a domineering woman. When the neighbors ask her if Ammu is her granddaughter, she curtly replies 'Who else could she be? Do you imagine I would keep other people's children in my house?' The women still turn out to be inquisitive and ask her if Velayudha Menon, Ammu's father had dropped her. Readers are made aware that inconsistencies can exist between the people of the same sex i.e women, who can't tolerate the coexistence of fellow beings.

Kamala Das draws out a clear distinction between women who have children and children who don't have mother like Ammu and their attitudes towards raising up children. The class divide and their mentalities are depicted through some minor characters in the story like Bharati. Bharati, who is a mother calls her child, 'rascal', 'the rascal deserves a sound slap.', 'I'll kill you,' she said, 'Just you wait. One of these days, I'll really kill you.' To the little girl, Ammu, the words sounded harsh and asked her grandmother, if that lady would really kill the child. The woman responds immediately, 'Ammu, would mothers ever kill their own children? No one loves a child more than its own mother does.' The pride of the mother of simply owning a child is evident in the words and actions of Bharati.

Another woman with graying hair takes pity on Ammu and says, 'Poor Child! How can she know?' 'Just think of her fate. So very sad. Bharati exclaims, 'Motherhood and moonlight are alike, so comforting, so essential to life. There can be no happiness without either.'

Muthassi now sees through the danger of these women inflicting pain on Ammu. She then tries to protect innocent Ammu from the callous and flippant remarks of the village women. She wanted to take away Ammu from there as the women were trying to make Ammu

remember her mother. The unruly, insensitive nature of the illiterate women comes out. In order to avoid the confrontation, Muthassi asks Ammu to have her snacks in the kitchen itself. When Ammu asks if she can have her milk with others in the 'Tekkini', she curtly replies, 'No', 'That's the way I want it done. That's all.' Thus Muthassi turns out to be a protective mother who doesn't want the child to be hurt in anyway. It is the craftsmanship of Kamala Das which enables her to balance out the odds which is seen in the story through Muthassi.

Another interesting woman character through whom we can see a different way of raising up her child is Nani Amma, a servant maid who belongs to the lower strata of the society. Das compares the various attitudes of women towards womanhood and gives a detailed account of their mother-daughter relationships.

Nani Amma is a woman who pounds rice at homes for her living. She has a five-year old daughter Amini. Class discrimination is seen when Muthassi says she can't allow her to come and grind whenever she wants money but Muthassi's generosity comes out when she says, 'Come, Nani, come to the Vadakkini. Let me give the little girl something to eat, may be the dosas left over from breakfast.' Ammu who is of the same age as Amini just observes how Nani Amma caresses her daughter which she feels she lacks in her own life.

When it is time for Ammu to leave the place, she feels all the more distanced from her grandmother. Death is a recurring theme in the story. Ammu is really worried about death and the fear lingers in her heart about Muthassi and asks her father, 'Will Muthassi die by this time next year?' he says, 'I Promise. Your Muthassi will never die. She'll never die.' 'Will never die, will never die'. Kamala Das uses refrain and repetition of the words 'never die' only to emphasize the fact that the father tries to instill confidence in the phobia stricken, Ammu. The phenomenon of death which has created a mental suffering in the tender mind of Ammu has to be erased for which the father acts so.

Thus the story interweaves the bonding, affinity and affection between Ammu and Muthassi who belong to an upper class and the other women mothers in the story who belong to the lower classes. Whatever may be the class, caste or status, the love of the mother for her child is undying. The theme of motherhood is thus brought out through these characters in the story.

References:

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