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Revisiting the Past: Nostalgic Experience in *The Grandmother's House* by Kamala Das

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Abstract

English poetry written by Indian writers has gained a new momentum by manifesting a new quest of establishing national identity. Kamala Das who took the literary world by storm in the mid sixties emerged as one of the dominant voices in all the leading anthologies of Indo English poetry. *My Grandmother's House*, a constituent poem of Kamala Das' first publication, *Summer in Calcutta* presents an intriguing sense of nostalgia and uprootedness. It is a forcefully moving poem at war with nostalgia and anguish in sharp contrast with her childhood and her grown up stage. The poet desperately yearns for the return of those days at her ancestral house which was affectionately surprised by her grandmother. The image of the ancestral home stands as a symbol of strong support and pure love that the poet craves for in her loveless married life. Bereft of love in her later life at her husband's house, Kamala Das yearns to visit the house which one's was a place of symbolic retreat to a world of purity and happiness. The study attempts to present the nostalgia and the memories the poet ponder in the present about her childhood days.

Keywords - Nostalgic, Childhood, Grandmother, Affection, Ancestral

English poetry written by Indian writers has gained a new momentum by manifesting a new quest of establishing national identity. Kamala Das who took the literary world by storm in the mid sixties emerged as one of the dominant voices in all the leading anthologies of Indo English poetry. Written under the pseudonyms of Madhavikutty and Kamala Suraiyya, Kamala Das excelled herself as one of the best known women poets in the cannon of contemporary Indian writing in English. Referred back to the late 1950s, Das' poetry is marked by confessional mode and largely acknowledge the influence of Sylvia Plath and

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Robert Lowell in her poems. Rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists, Kamala Das outshined in writing poetry by exemplifying a shift from the traditional mode of poetry writing to a distinctly Indian persona. Considered as a serious break from the erstwhile female Indian poets like that of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, her poems are a celebration of universal experience of self, anguish, failure and disgust against the traditional gender role in a male hegemonic set up. Kamala Das, is at her poetic best a poet of confessional mode and sensibility. Only personal feeling, perfectly personal and nothing from outside dominates her range of poetry.

My Grandmother's House, a constituent poem of Kamala Das' first publication, *Summer in Calcutta* presents an intriguing sense of nostalgia and uprootedness, Published in 1965 in *Summer in Calcutta*, the poem is a reminiscence of the poet's grandmother and recalls her grandmother's home in Punnayurkulam in Kerala. Ruminating over the past the poet expresses the grandeur and simplicity affection of pure love that she received in a very confessional note. The poem, is profound with nostalgic element with a lively description of her early life which Kamala Das spent at her grandmother's house. The emptiness in her life after her father's death was compensated by her grandmother's love and support which left an indelible mark in the poet's growth.

The poem takes the form of a confession comparing her present broken status with that of being unconditionally loved by her grandmother. Her grandmother's unconditional love is associated with the image of her ancestral house. The imagery beautifully illustrates her plight in a loveless marriage. In her eternal quest for love in such a 'loveless' world, the poetess recalls her dead grandmother which surfaces every love and emotion long forgotten. The past and the present is contrast through the imagery and her longing love. The ironical expression of her past stands a tragic contrast to her present situation.

It is a forcefully moving poem at war with nostalgia and anguish in sharp contrast with her childhood and her grown up stage. The poet desperately yearns for the return of those days at her ancestral house which was affectionately surprised by her grandmother. The tone and attitude of the poet in this poem bears similar to the famous essay, '*Old Familiar Faces*' by Charles Lamb. The poem also recalls Lord Tennyson's '*Tears Idle Tears*', thinking of the days are no more. In *My Story* (Chapter-33), Kamala Das writes, the dominant mood of the poem is one of melancholy, pathos and nostalgia with an attempt to sustain to poet's

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childhood memories. The beginning of the poem takes the form of a story telling giving an introduction of a house which was visited long back and is now far away from where the poetess currently reside.

The poem springs from the poet's utter frustration with the expectation of unconditional love from the soul that she loved once. The image of the ancestral home stands as a symbol of strong support and pure love that the poet craves for in her loveless married life. Bereft of love in her later life at her husband's house, Kamala Das yearns to visit the house which one's was a place of symbolic retreat to a world of purity and happiness. The poet's frustration is poignantly reflected in the poem when she recalls her ancestral home. "There is a house now far away where once/ I received love".

The opening lines of the poem indicate the poet's yearning for a house where she felt secured and embrace the unconditional love that made her life worth. A child feels a sense of strong emotional closeness and affectionate feeling in the lap of grandmother. But the poet is now far away from the house and staying at a distant remote place in her husband's house. Her entry into a hasty arranged marriage put an abrupt end to her childhood dreams. The marital life of the poet was an unhappy one and the consequences contribute to increased internalizing behavior in the poet resulting in anxiety and frustration. In her utter disillusionment, to get relief from the frustration she turns to her past memories where she received unconditional love and affection as a child. The present time is though not worth – living but the inspiring past and the memories soothe her as she yearns to visit the house. But surprisingly enough, the very realization of her grandmother's death has rendered her sorrow stricken, desolate and bereft of love. The desolate house now shares the poet's own grief which is poignantly expressed by the phrase 'the house withdrew'. Kamala Das remembers that the grandmother's house which was once associated with an impenetrable sense of security and protection has now accepted the seclusion with recognition. Now only dead silence haunted over the house. Silence began to seek in the house, when the poet says that; "The woman died/The house withdrew into silence".

With grandmother's death the poet's ancestral house ceased being inhabited. The poet recollects that after the death of her grandmother, the house which was full of life became desolate and inhabited by snakes and rats. She had the feeling of horror and repulsion that makes her blood go cold and turn her face pale like the moon.

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The poet is of the opinion that the past cannot be reclaim but she wants to go back and recall the memories once again. In her lonely and depressed life, She longs to go back to that ancestral house, just to peep through the “blind eyes of the windows” which have been dead-shut for years and just to listen to the “frozen air”. The reminiscence of the poet is choked with the intensity of grief with the realization that the past cannot be retrieve. The expression “*blind eyes of windows*” and “*the frozen air*” both reinforce the idea of death and desperation. The image of the window signifies the nostalgic peep and resurrects her dreams and desires.

How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air

The surroundings which were once filled with the empathy lack the security and protection. Now the air is frozen. Kamala Das plead to us to ‘listen’ to the “*frozen air*”. But in reality it is impossibility. The grandmother’s death had turned the poetess a numb shedding away the emotions which has hitherto filled her life. Though she was too small to read the books, but the poet was emotional enough at that time to comprehend and to feel the true love. In utter despair, the poetess longs in an “*armful of darkness*”. The “*darkness*” of the house seem a protective shadow and security for her instead of terror and violence. Darkness that generally connote negative shades has positive connotations here of a security and protective shadows. The essence of the poetess nostalgia is presented through her longing to bring in an “*armful of darkness*”. Her feeling of lack of security is expressed through an evocative image:

Pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog...

In this darkness, she can lie down like a brooding dog behind the door, lost in contemplation, The imagery is personal and articulates her plight encountered in her loveless married life. The promising and satisfaction atmosphere makes the poet’s feel so proud that she wants others to know about the provocative days of her childhood days at that ancestral house at Malabar. Enthusiastically she remembers her childhood days and tells her husband that:

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I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved
But now she has lost her way

She added:

I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers doors to
Receiver love, at least in small change

She craves for the love with at least small change. The pronoun “I” stands here emphatic and melancholic too. It also echoes the poet’s pain of the loss of that sense of pride and love she had in the house of her grandmother. The demise of the grandmother left the house no longer a property of the poet and she lost her way in quest of true love. She admits that it seem hard for one to believe that her present situation stands sharp contrast to her pleasant days spent in her childhood. In quest of true love, she started knocking helplessly at strangers door begging for love. The quest for true love has thus made her to move in the male monopolistic chauvinism and beg for love in the form of change. While recalling the soothing company of her grandmother, Kamala Das tells that she has often remembered her “sweet frail great grandmother, with a sense of nostalgia.

The fullness of the past and the emptiness of the present give the poem its poignancy. Through the images like ‘snakes moving among books’, “cold like the moon”, “blind eyes of window”, “frozen air” evoke a sense of death of despair. Kamala Das is at her best portraying the picture of her grandmother. One of the prime concerns in Kamala Das’ poetry is her grandmother who is inseparably linked with the poet’s memory of the parental home now more than three hundred years old. The grandmother’s house is a great seat of comfort and consolation to the poetess. In the nostalgic poem, *My Grandmother’s House*, Das celebrates this house and associate great pride to this ancestral home. Her deepest remembrance of love she received from her grandmother is inseparably connected with the image of ancestral home.

Childhood is a fascinating experience for all. The excess of nostalgia for childhood forms the basis of many celebrated poems of Kamala Das. Like Sylvia Plath Kamala Das too have drawn concrete images of her childhood in the poem. Das has asserted her identity in firmament of the poetic world by her honest and candid poetical lines. In recognition of her

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contributions, the Times called her “*the mother of modern English Indian poetry*” (www.timesonline.co.in) in 2009. The writings of Kamala Das are accounts of deeply personal experiences. The poetic corpus of Kamala Das operates at two levels. On the one hand, Das’ poems are a depiction of a personal, a very individual tragedy and on the other hand, her poems are an attack on the life characterized by the patriarchal influence. The concern of the poetess rest not on the philosophical, spiritual or mystical rather her poems are dedicated to the celebration of love in all its aspects.

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