

“Chathurangam”: A Confirmation of Byron’s Dictum on Woman’s Love

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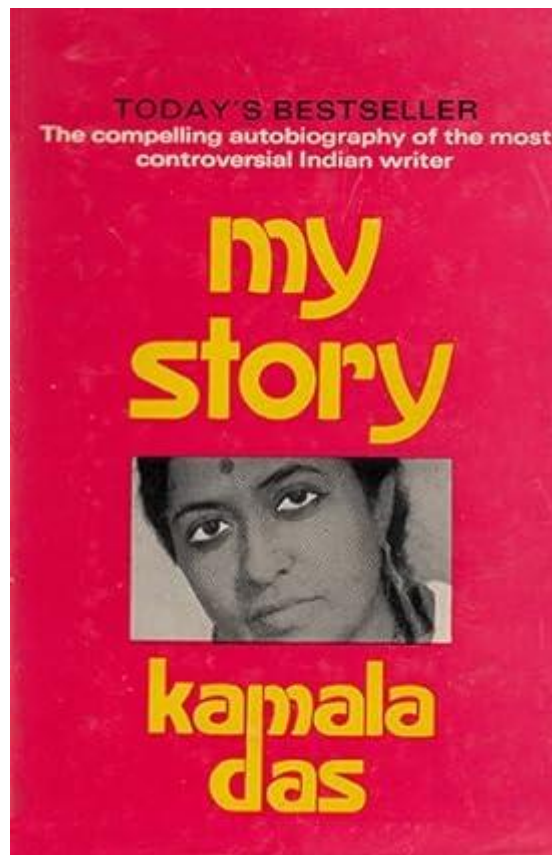
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Abstract

This paper seeks to introduce to non-Malayali readers the plot of a strangely designed story in Malayalam entitled “Chathurangam” (Chess) by Kamala Das, where the heroine moves from a predicament of isolation to a discovery of her lonely self after her journey through the weariness of wedlock and the warmth of transient male love outside the orbit of

marriage. The narrative weaves a tale that reflects the diverse nature of human emotions and psychological dimensions of a romantic relationship. Kamala Das is seen here to be a realist-feminist who appropriates existing fictional frameworks to fashion woman-centered narratives where one could hardly demarcate the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.

Keywords: *Chathurangam*, Kamala Das. woman-centered narrative, isolation, self-discovery, Byron, woman's love.



Courtesy: www.amazon.in

Most of you may be quite familiar with Kamala Das as “One of the most aggressively individualistic of the new poets,” as Iyengar chooses to describe her (677); but only very few non-Malayali readers know that her prolific short-fictional work in Malayalam has added a new dimension to her literary stature. She has authored in her mother tongue more than 250 short stories under her penname, **Madhavikutty**. Four of her memoirs are also found to be in Malayalam.

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This paper seeks to introduce to non-Malayali readers the plot of a strangely designed story in Malayalam entitled *Chathurangam* (Chess) where the heroine moves from a predicament of isolation to a discovery of her lonely self after her journey through the weariness of wedlock and the warmth of transient male love outside the orbit of marriage.

Byron in *Don Juan* writes, “Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, /'Tis woman's whole existence.” It is demonstrated here by Kamala's heroine. The story begins in the first-person narration thus, “The face of the man I love has the crinkles of age. Those heavy hands of his give him the lifelessness of a doll not only when he stands but when he walks as well.” With memories of the man flooding her mind, Achala sits alone in the back row of an ordinary cinema. On the screen before her a cine star with a broad face tries to captivate an actress “with words and smiles.” Achala is unable to follow the story in the film as she keeps dredging up the story of her own mind. The “mature part of herself” questions “the frail fragment in her” “Why do you love the man who presents you with only sorrow?” (170).

The woman becomes possessed with the “colour, voice and the smell” of the flesh of the old and unattractive man. Sowmyamurthy, who holds her under a spell, as it were. There then comes a Chinaman who with his proximity mitigates her unease, she now returns to the film before her and sees an actor who sways his hips with strength as he sings His “amorous and elegant” movement and evokes in her only disgust now. The girls there scream with youthful ecstasy. Achala feels that she is now “on another planet and is hearing conversation in an unfamiliar language.” Her intimacy with her elderly lover has now led her to forget “the special language of youth” (170). Even when she beautifies herself, she asks herself “Who are you doing this for? You are a jilted woman.” Achala does not expect a different end to the story of her romance with a man who is “both married and blessed by fortune.” Despite the dictates of her inner self, she took delight in cultivating the intimacy of the man introduced to her by her own husband. Achala refers to her marriage as one that “took place early in life.” She further recalls “my desire to love that gap in me-had not been filled yet”. She found “softness” in the words of this man worthy to be trusted and adored” despite his old and ugly exterior. His voice had “tenderness”. It was the place of an intellectual that he accorded to her. His “light yellowish, slightly protruding tooth” only awakens in her an “unaccountable reverence” (171).

In the realm of the present, the Chinaman is said to be looking at her with no sense of shame. She senses her tearful state. She repeats her lover's name like a prayer. As she repeats his name, she finds beauty in it and the only thing in him which she sees devoid of beauty is her own heart. She, in the throes of her anguish, defines her love as “the function of every fibre of her being.” Scenes of the film in the present are interspersed with the woman's thoughts and sentiments in the realm of the past. Unable to bear her “loneliness” or “forget” her lover, Achala leaves the cinema with the Chinaman making his presence audible and visible even as she gets into her car.

She drives on until she finds a nice place to sit under a tree. All this while she reminds herself, “In these ways I cannot forget him” because the very place is resonant with the images of the man. Here too a load of memories drops on her crushing her heart. Sitting here he once told her of a man who had bought a Halloween mask. It got into his view every now and then. Unable to bear its ugliness he broke it to smithereens. But “it haunted him ever since”.

Sowmyamurthy remarked, “What is outside you get inside you.” She remembers how she “longed for death” as he finished that story. She goes on to say, “I will then shed this mortal frame and exist in him. Years later, when he becomes a disembodied soul, we too will fly to this old tree, and hang down like bats in its materiality” (173).

Her husband asked her whether the man was her “guru.” She had not posed to analyse her to name their relationship. She says, “in a sense my love was pure and childish like the devotion of the savages.” It was when he entered her life that she began to be relieved of the isolation she had suffered since childhood. She “delighted” in the fact that “she would not have to bear” her “loneliness like a scar on the face before jeering people with a pounding heart” (174). The young man leering her brings to the surface for a moment the conflict between the heart that loves and the loins that burn. She tells herself on her way home, “go back to those sunless rooms, which turn you into a sword resting in its sheath. There you will never have the cruelty to be yourself” (175). She sees that what she had for Sowmyamurthy was “passion” and not love: otherwise, she would not have “dared to hug him on that fateful day” when their intimacy was discovered by her husband, and she was ditched by her lover. She could have “conquered him” sensually but that victory would have only given her “a base satisfaction deriving from his sense of shame and guilty conscience”. The woman in her

wanted to merge with the totality of the man for she says. “The woman in love is not satisfied if her man remembers her with a single portion of his body. She must grow in him like cancer in order to pack him with pain and percipience. That is the unique cruelty of love.” Sowmyamurthy shrank from accepting this selfless surrender of love. She realizes that “if one renounces one’s body only its perishable honour is undermined by that renunciation. But this kind of relinquishment mars the very honour of the soul forever”. In the game of love she unwittingly made the fatal move that led to a checkmate. It was an action that “could not be undone”. She kept murmuring to herself, “forget it. But he said ‘you cannot forget it. I cannot do it either’” (175).

All that she could gain out of this was a hug and a few smooches. She quotes Bhagavad-Gita to ask why “one compulsively commits sin like one destined to do it even when one does not desire to do it.” She found satisfaction ultimately in the fact that she had upset his composure. She called back to mind the men whom she had loved before him. “They had become distant like the vanishing faces seen on a moving vehicle. Those relationships of love were like rehearsals done with substitutes in the absence of prominent actors”. This part she says was reserved for him alone, but he tries to retrace his steps. Even when his lips rested subdued by my labial caresses, I heard the sound of his retreating steps” (176). She sought to make him promise that he would not go out of her life. But this vain promise she sought only reminded her of how she had once made her granny promise never to die. The tears of her husband and the betrayal of her lover made her promise the former that she would never meet the latter. She did not pass the buck to Sowmyamurthy as she knew his “status in society” and his position as a husband and father. But Kamala writes, “But mine is the humble position of one who has learnt to love another more than oneself. This burden of guilt I will have as a banner, with courage. With pride” (177).

She tries to put an end to her life, but she gives up the idea in the belief derived from the Gita that one reaches the form which one remembers as one dies (177). She does not want to live in him “like sin” after death. What she aspires to live in him is “like beauty, like a smile, like a streak of light” (178).

The woman here returns to her lonely predicament and realises as she stands before a mirror that she has only her own self to seek in solitude. Her resolution to transfer her love to her own “loneliness” amuses her and her peals of laughter bring out her husband, but she will

not divulge the reason to him” (178). The narrative thus unfolds the diverse dimensions of emotional attachments and the complexities of human relationships on the intricacies of passionate love and desire. One finds the different stages of the protagonist’s personal journey that leads to her discovery of selfhood. The protagonist moves from a state of isolation to a profound self-discovery when she finds marriage to be tiring thus finding solace beyond the bounds of matrimony.

The text here is subjective in that it explores a feminist’s hanging perceptions of self. A subjective experience could be found objectified in the guise of the narrative of a woman’s self-discovery, and renunciation of fragmentary and fickle male love.

The author refers to her “loneliness” in childhood (84) and “loneliness” in wedlock (153) and her search for fulfillment of yearning for love outside the bounds of her marriage (153) in her autobiography. Kamala could be treated as a fictional autobiographer who transmutes mostly her own experiences into what she writes. Her reaction to and resentment against male betrayal could be seen in the guise of the narratives of her protagonist’s self-discovery and renunciation of male-evolved decrees. The protagonist Achala’s language could be seen as the language of the authorial heart that has been hurt. The cowardice of Sowmyamurthy pictured here also could be traced to the cowardly retreat of a lover that the author refers to in *My Story* (118).

Kamala Das is seen here to be a realist-feminist who appropriates existing fictional frameworks to fashion woman-centered narratives where one could hardly demarcate the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Subjective experiences here get objectified and transferred to feminist fictional figures. Iyengar rightly concludes, “Kamala Das’s is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world” (680).

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