

Suicide: Death Burdened Psyche

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Abstract

It is Sigmund Freud who first shows psychological insight into suicide and death in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia". He believes that suicide is a transposed murder; an act of hostility turns away from the object back onto the subject/self. To Freud, death is an abstract concept with a negative content for which no unconscious correlative can be found. The death is an abstract concept with a negative content for which no unconscious correlative can be found. The death instinct is an innate and unconscious tendency towards self-destruction. Most of human activities are consciously or unconsciously designed to escape from death, but nobody can deny that death is the finale of life.

KEYWORDS: emotional displacement, self- destruction, transposed murder, deep sensitivity, a protest, conscious desire for death.

I want to be dead, just dead

(The Suicide)

Introduction: Death is a reality, and not a concept. The subject of death has intrigued poets and philosophers since times immemorial. The question is as old as life itself. But to take away one's own life before the ordained time has neither moral/legal sanction, nor the religious approval. It evokes mixed feelings of pity, fear and a wonder whether the person could have solved the problem in any other rational manner. Psychologists brand them as maniacs and say that they are not brave enough to face the life with all its problems. But to take 'Death' as a challenge and to have many encounters with it, is something remarkable.

In modern life, man, as a matter of fact, has to cope with many forces around him and the forces within him. His inability to deal with any of them leads him to a failure and this failure creates in him to either committing suicide or adhering to a self-destructive drive.

A confessional writer often writes about suicide, death, disease, and destruction. Kamala Das's life has also been a story of recurrent attacks of illness and diseases, "I was physically destroyed beyond reconstruction. But while my body lay inert on my sick bed, my mind leapt like a waking grey hound and become alert".¹

Kamala Das's poetry depicts her "inner life". The motive of death dominates some of her most mature poems. Her analytical and image-making mind is often in search of the meaning of death. Finding life empty, evasive, and meaningless, she has

attempted suicide on several occasions. Hence, it seems that she has an instinctive desire for death. Death-wish, a conscious or unconscious desire for the death, occupies a very prominent place in her poetry.

In “The Suicide”, the poetess expresses her desire to die, when she is unable to find true love. She says:

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead.

In the same poem, Kamala Das lays bare her search for an answer to the most unanswerable questions—about life and death—as to how to conquer anxiety and how to endure life and face death. The sea, the archetypal symbol of eternity, represents the poet’s surge and temptation to negate all drudgery arising out of her emotional displacement, and to return to simplicity, perhaps through death. Confronting her own psyche, she stresses the fatality of human body and comes face to face with the question of real nature of freedom.

How well I can see him
After a murder, conscientiously
Tidy up the scene...

The self-devouring and the self-mocking nature of experience of sexual love makes her death-conscious because the self is rendered lonely, empty, lifeless, and sterile by the sex without love. There is no solution to this personal dilemma which rouses suicidal thoughts in her. It is at this stage that the sea comes up with the invitation to eternal solace, comfort and redemption as against the force of oppression and exploitation of the domineering male tyranny. While she feels

I have a man’s fist in my head today clenching unclenching,
the “garrulous sea” comes up, with the invitation:
come in, what do you lose by dying?
which she eventually accepts, because her death-obsessed self
Asks:
How long can one resist?
“Invitation in all pathos and helplessness.

“The Suicide”, “Substitute”, and “Composition” project only the death-burdened psyche of the poet. What they project over and over again is the self’s confrontation with the complex emotional restlessness caused by the new recognition that, despite the positivity of “body’s wisdom”, the body itself is subject to decay.

The awareness of life, its colourless design and crumbling pattern, along with the death preoccupation of the self, is made manifest in the poem entitled “A Request”:

When I die
Do not throw
The meat and bones away
But pile them up
And let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth
What love was worth
In the end.

She begs to her people not to throw away her body on her death, but preserve it to have an evaluation of its “worth” in life. Living in a horrible state, life and death become indistinguishable for her. When life is no more than a dead routine, it is tantamount to death.

Bereft of Soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.

Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead
Of the two?

(The suicide)

Kamala Das knew the answer for the question as she was aware that her soul her been killed and only she wanted to get rid of her physical body. But the streak of love was stronger which pulled her from the jaws of death.

I tell you, Sea,
I have enough courage to die,
But not enough.
Not enough to disobey him
Who said: Do not die
And hurt me that certain way.

The frustration arises when she fails to act as a happy woman. The problem was

I must pose
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife,
I must keep the right distance
Between me and the low

(The suicide)

She could not pretend as a happy and contented wife, which she never was.

. . . you called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins

(The Old Play House)

Kamala Das was fortunate to experience parental love, it was true that she was brought up and influenced by her grandmother. Her nostalgia to go back to the sea and become a child again finds a place in many of her poems. She loses her identity once she is married. Her ambition to be an aristocrat, a snob, a rich wife wearing diamonds becomes only a dream and she loses herself in the bargain. She knew she was “a Narcissus at the water’s edge, haunted by its own lonely face” (Old Play House)

The search for the lost self continues

I’ve spent long years trying to locate my mind
Beneath the skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The Bone’

(Loud Posters)

The “death” which was introduced to her when she lost her “Nany the pregnant maid hanged herself” (Nany)

The question which she could not find answers haunted her:

When a man is dead, or a woman,
We call the corpse not he
Or she but it. Does it.
Not mean that we believe
That only the souls have sex and that
Sex is invisible?

(The Doubt)

She feels

They are lucky
Who ask questions and move on before
The answer come . . .

(Nany)

Kamala Das, as a poet never wanted to exercise restraint through her poems.
When she could no more pretend,

And wail, and beat my breast
And speak of unrequited love.
I am wronged, I am wronged
I am so wronged . . .

(Drama)

She even tries to universalise her problem,

We are all alike
We women
In our wrappings of hairless skin
All skeletons are alike,
Only the souls vary

(Composition)

She strongly feels that it is her duty to awaken her tribe:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive.
The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame.

(The conflagration)

Kamala Das's twenty four year old marriage was on rocks due to such frustration and which resulted in "heart trouble". She has recorded the idea quite vividly both in *My Story* and poems like "After the Illness," "Composition," "The Invitation."

The Invitation was from the sea.

Oh, Sea! let me. Shrink or grow, sloshing.
Slide down, go your way.

When Das comes out from the grip of death, she writes

There was then no, death, no end but a re-uniting
The weary body setting into accustomed grooves.

The "life" starts again and was the time when she started writing her confessional, auto-biographical novel *My Story*, which was serialised in the journal *Current*.

She adds in prose:

I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been despite all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water.¹⁴

Still the question is haunting her

Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price . . .

(The Stone Age)

She, as a person might have paid a heavy price to know the answers, but the readers are benefitted through her poems which are the result of this eloquent quest.

Kamala Das sounds sentimental when she says:

O Sea,
You generous Cow,
You and I are big flops.
We are too sentimental
For our own good.

(Suicide)

The Vortex' is a real whirl pool of air and fire which sweeps her emotionally.

Only the soul knows how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.
There must be a sun Slumbering
At the vortex of the sea.

(Suicide)

For Kamala Das, Sea is still a personification, to whom she would address directly confess:

O, Sea, I am fed up.

She questions her:

Bereft of my soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of Body
My soul shall be bare.

Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is more dear of the two.

(Suicide)

Kamala Das confesses:

If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead

(The Suicide)

Mythical imagery like “Radha” suits her theme. She universalises her theme when she says:

Vrindavan lies on in every women’s mind,
and the flute, hearing her
from home and her husband
who later asks her of the long scratch.

Kamala Das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian women’s ambivalence, giving expressions to it more nakedly and as a thing in itself.

Kamala Das, recovered from the rude shock the attempt of suicide had left on her mind, mellows down both in life and in her poems also. She opines in all urgency and in all earnestness:

What exists must exist. Only the compositions
will change. Tomorrow my soul might migrate
into the womb of a Both happiness and
unhappiness are more to enjoy. I have no end.
Instead of an end, all that we suffer is
discomposition.⁷

The discomposition Kamala Das speaks of is actually an extension, a continuation, a rejuvenation of life. This life, because of its strong existential urge, makes itself manifest as a continual flux. The transient, thus, transforms itself into the eternal by the alchemy of her poetry.

A thirst to live beyond time and death, a longing to live on the earth’s amplitude and variety, remains at the very epicenter of Das’s existential philosophy and vision. She urges earnestly:

Rob me, destiny, if you must,
Rob me of my sustenance, but don’t,
I beg of you, don’t take away my thirst.

“Souvenir of Bones”

This “thirst” to live on, year after year, this “thirst” to pass through all the avenues of life, despite suffering, fear of aging, and separation, and death, sustains and nurtures the profound sense of optimism in Das’s poetry. This “Thirst”, rather the unquenchable thirst, keeps her engrossed with the manifold pleasures associated with the senses, with the body, with the “mire of human veins”, to use the Yeatsian poetic expression. She is drawn towards the physical, the mundane, the transitory aspects of life, its hues and colours, so as to understand the meaning and essence of life.

References:

1. Kamala Das, My story, (New Delhi: Sterling, 1988), p. 209.
2. Ibid, p. 215.
3. Ibid, p. 227.
4. Ibid, p. 218
5. Kamala Das, op.cit., p. 214-215.