

Existential Confinement in Kamala Das' "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

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ABSTRACT

The research paper endeavors to investigate Kamala Das' poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs," with a sharp focus on the extreme struggles of the eunuchs that result in their excruciating existential confinement. The poem exclusively illustrates a pulsating performance as an upsetting metaphor for the eunuchs' unquenchable longing for social recognition and respect. The paper exhibits how Das' verse lines untie the dormant dichotomy between visible appearances and internal agonies by challenging social norms and personifying a bold pursuit of identity. Through this qualitative research, the study explores gender issues, the quenchless quest for identity, and the relegated status of the eunuch community. This paper also underscores the onerous outcry of existential confinement in Das' "The Dance of the Eunuchs." The analysis emphasizes that the eunuchs' probative plight and their powerful portrayal are the symbols of resistance against social injustice. In this article, the researchers find various dimensions, including unsatisfied desires, stark social oppression, and the struggle for human rights. Ultimately, the research concludes through embattled emotional and physical suppression of the eunuchs' social experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das (1934–2009) is a distinguished Indian poet who established a unique identity through her writing. Her works express the anguish of a woman disillusioned by love and offer a candid critique of male prejudice. Das explores a woman's quest for freedom from sexual and domestic oppression, examining the paradoxes of life and relationships with profound emotional depth. However, her poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs," published in the collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), deals with a profound pledge of her fearless maneuvers of complex and controversial issues. Here, the researchers try to evince the physical and emotional struggles of the eunuchs in Das' poem. The poem opens as a dramatic depiction of performance with a visual representation of the sheer contrast between outward appearances and internal misery. By doing so, the poet poetically expresses the eunuchs' insatiable longing for recognition, respect, and love. The researchers have studied the multidimensional aspects of the poem by addressing gender dynamics, questions of identity, and the marginalized status of the eunuch community. However, the title of the research is Existential Confinement in Kamala Das' "The Dance of the Eunuchs." Here, "Existentialism is a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will. Existentialist philosophers explore questions related to the meaning, purpose, and value of human existence (Oxford Reference)." As a philosophical notion, existentialism explores the individual's quest for meaning and authenticity in an uncomfortably indifferent universe. It emphasizes personal freedom, choice, and responsibility for life and existence. Consequently, Das uses the powerful device of poetry to pose a challenge to the social ignorance of an oppressed class and discovers the existential confinement of the eunuchs. The poet speaks for a subaltern community, whose voice and struggle remain unspoken, and makes a powerful portrayal of the eunuchs breaking their confined existence. With Das' assertive articulation of the eunuchs' anguish, this article investigates the existential confinement in Kamala Das' "The Dance of the Eunuchs" with a focus on the superficial social norms that are responsible for their sufferings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kamala Das' literary contribution to Indian literature establishes her credibility as a poet in the subcontinent. For this reason, many academics and literary scholars have analyzed Das' poetry, and some scholars also focused on

the poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs.” As this poem opens a wide array of complicated themes interconnected with gender, identity, love, despair, and desolation, the paper looks into a narrow dimension of existential confinement that the eunuchs face. However, the paper has investigated the available scholarly articles on the very poem and a few relevant pieces of writing.

For instance, Pankaj Bala Srivastava, in “Kamala Das’s ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’: As Unheard Voices” (2016), published in the *International Journal of Scientific & Innovative Research Studies*, discusses the unfulfilled desires of the eunuchs stuck in the struggle of an in-between existence inflated by the societal oppression. The researcher denotes the alienation and emptiness the eunuchs symbolize concerning their internal turmoil because of their “inabilities” and “disabilities” (69). Another scholar, Vandana Dubey, attunes to the points highlighted by Srivastava in an article, “The Dance of the Eunuchs: Insights into the Pangs of the Transgender” (2021) enlisted in *Innovation: The Research Concept*. Here, Dubey highlights the social problem of not recognizing the eunuchs as respectable citizens because of the dehumanization caused by society. Moreover, Dubey emphasizes the need for empathy, acknowledging the reality of eunuchs and their evolving struggle for human rights, respect, and recognition rather than looking at them “through the lens of gender and sexual difference” (101).

Another dimension of the poem is visible in Madhu Verma’s research paper titled “Kamala Das: Indian Imagery and Vision” (2019), published in the *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*. Verma unveils suppressed desire and unfulfilled love that the eunuchs never receive. The “painful, frenzied and self-consuming” (186) life is intolerable. Moreover, the researcher explains the internal pain the vulnerable eunuchs suffer because of their external decay. The juxtaposition of outward appearances and internal desolation is expressed through the eunuchs’ performance, reflecting the insatiable yearning for respect and love. Another researcher, Amit Bhattacharya, in *The Poetics of Resistance: A Study of Marginal Voices in the Poetry of Kamala Das* (2007), puts critical attention to Das’ bold treatment of sexuality, compiling the themes of frustration, loneliness, and love. In addition, cultural significance and the complex interplay of liberty are noted in Bhattacharya’s research. He also shows the “poetic dilemma of individual choice and social constriction” (6) in Kamala Das’ poetry.

Furthermore, Shubhi Bhasin and Pallavi Srivastava, in the paper “Pragmatic Analysis of Kamala Das Poetry” (2013) published in the *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, mention the sterility and despair of the eunuchs depicting deformed personality and suppressed

longings as portrayed in Das' "The Dance of the Eunuchs." The poem exemplifies a contrast between superficial joy and inner depravity; the eunuchs' momentary happiness is a veil that hides a heart "full of melancholy" (26). Dipali Sharma Bhandari, in "Use of Objective Correlative for Expression of the 'Self' in Kamala Das' 'The Dance of the Eunuchs'" (2012) printed in *The Oriental Anthropologist* shows how anthropology and literature are connected in her research paper. She also uses "Objective Correlative" (209), a literary term to express personal experiences in the poem.

A relevant theme of spiritual emptiness is noted by two scholars, Shubha Prakash, and Sujata, in the article "A Desperate Craving for Identity in the Major Works of Kamala Das" (2014) published in the *Impact Journals*. According to them, the images of the eunuchs symbolize sterility and societal disdain. The poem accentuates their vacant happiness and figurative corrosion, highlighting the lack of purpose and efficacy in their "cold" and "frigid" (65) existence. A different but relevant article titled Exploring "Identity and Space of Hijra: Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" (2020) by Rama Islam, published in the *Journal of Asian and African Social Science and Humanities*, also deals with Kamala Das' "The Dance of the Eunuchs." The mechanical dancing and melancholic songs are meaningless for the rest of society. The eunuchs' adoption of both masculine and feminine traits, and being neither of them, echoes nothing but a tale of relentless agony of the "oppressed and neglected" (28) part of the society.

To summarize, some scholarly articles and relevant write-ups show the gender issues, identity crisis, trauma, and social turmoil of which the eunuchs are the victims. An echo of existential confinement is exhibited in their articles by the researchers, but there is no detailed discussion on the topic. This research paper is significant because it addresses the eunuchs' excruciating existential confinement as a potential area of exploration.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research paper is a qualitative one based on the critical analysis of the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs" by Kamala Das. To examine the primary text, a survey of many scholarly writings has been done. The paper amalgamated the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs" with the existing scholarly articles to add a new variation. To conduct this article, the paper compiles and compares the write-ups in the literature review section to make an analogy with different socio-scientific aspects. Additionally, the study has taken into account the

personal life of the poet to see the reflection of a powerful voice against social injustice that creates existential confinement for the oppressed eunuchs.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The initial setting of the poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs” by Kamala Das foreshadows an extremely unsettling and unbecoming circumstance. Before the arrival of the eunuchs, the central characters in the poem, the eunuchs, the weather is scorching. This image is a testament to a lifelong fire that must have been burning the eunuchs since their involuntary castration, a deformation that no one ever expected. The first line signifies the oppression of a forceful entity that has caused a never-ending curse for them. “It was hot, so hot...” (line 1) still they show up to perform because some hope of life is still driving them. The dancers try to impress their audience; the audience watches their performance, perhaps not in an interested mood. People are indifferent to the emotional entity of the eunuchs and ignore the existence of the human soul inside the eunuchs. The poet uses an auditory image of music and dance; however, these can be interpreted as disturbing nuisances too, “cymbals/ Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling/ Jingling” (lines 2-4). They become existentially confined because of the sordid social outlook. Usually, music and dance should create an atmosphere of joy and liveliness. However, the image of “the fiery gulmohur” (line 4) tree connotes both the outward flames of the incomplete bodies of the eunuchs and the inward agony that is burning them. Still, they are passionate about their performance as it is the means of their livelihood. Their energetic and enthusiastic movements are metaphors for their suppressed spirits, every motion desiring and longing for the testimony of their existence. The “dark eyes flashing” (line 5) appeal to justice for a subverted emotion with a gesture of defiance. The intensity of their expression is reflected in their dance as “they danced till they bled...” (line 6). They are revolving and revolting to break the confinement of their physical deformity in a repeated attempt to establish their existence. Their repeated dance steps symbolize the repeated episodes of their timeless suffering, both physical and mental. Nevertheless, the adamancy they exhibit in their movements asks for a testimony of recognition by society.

The rituals the eunuch community follows have some cultural and symbolic significance. The decorative “green tattoo” (lines 5-6) may suggest harmony, balance, and freshness they bring with the performance. However, in a negative connotation, green can represent degeneration and decay, as it happens to the eunuchs. “Jasmines in their hair” (line 7) signify a sense of serene beauty, sensual fragrance, and sentimental appeal. The eunuchs also come with

a spectrum of diverse beauty different from the other two significant sexes. Nevertheless, the poet brings another negative image that correlates to the uglier side, “Their voices/ Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of/ Lovers dying and or children left unborn...” (lines 8-10). All these images are ominous and suggestive of the antithetical tunes the eunuchs bring to society. They are treated negatively not only because of their physical deformity but also because their performance is a troublesome experience for the audience. In an everyday Asiatic society, they are generally viewed as the harbingers of nuisance rather than entertainers, and they always struggle to create the significance of their existence in an indifferent social setting.

The eunuchs’ joy and lament are equally barren for the rest of the world, as no one seems to care about their existence. Their screams remain unheard as they are treated like visible non-existents. The rhythm of their “drums” (line 11) is noise to society, not music. They try to seek attention by beating “their sorry breasts” (line 11), but these are demonstrations of infertility and nothing more for the rest of the world. Their lamentation and elegiac melodies sing their pangs, but everything they do is harsh, broken tunes to society. After that, the poet uses the oxymoron “vacant ecstasy” (line 12) to show the amalgamation of emotional states in the psyche of the eunuchs whose joyous celebration is a lamentation of their emptiness too. Their cries commence from their hollowness and fall into the hollow ears of an unjust society that confines their identity, by treating them as dehumanized entities because of their physical deformity. Kamala Das does not show any evidence that talks about their castration and puts a blurred line on how the eunuchs initially get deformed. Many research articles that we studied do not address the differences among eunuchs, transgender, and intersex. Most seemingly, Das presented the eunuchs as a more symbolic and metaphoric device rather than treating them as a biological and gender-related entity.

Moving forward, the poem portrays the abject aridness, dreadful dryness, and famished frailty of the physical condition of the eunuchs. Lack of potent makes them insubstantial to fit in any recognized identity. The poet compares them with “half-burnt logs” (line 13) using a simile and calls them a half-decayed entity. Their limbo-like appearance, their form of being neither man nor woman, makes them the embodiment of “drought” and “rotteness” (line 14). They are a collective symbol of suffering, and each of them is a sign of a drastic desolate despair. The poet again uses an ominous sign to instill anguish and utter silence “the crows were so/ Silent on trees” (lines 15-16). Their scream is lost in the silence of the crowd as no one understands the meaning of their mourning. Nobody comprehends their emotional expressions by neglecting the entire existence of the eunuchs.

The crowd and the children watch them in silence; still, they are invisible to everyone. “These poor creatures’ convulsions” (line 17) have no significance to the audience. For the entire group of spectators, all involuntary and troublesome performances of the eunuchs are mere time passes or nuisances. Like the poem started with an unbecoming foreshadowing, it ends with the same saddening scenario. The horrible images of “thunder” and “lighting” (line 18) show how everything gets destroyed for the eunuchs. Nature also wants to stop their performance and does not want to listen to their music at all. Instead of being a sign of pleasure and fertility, raindrops may start to mock the existence of the eunuchs as the poet calls it a “meagre rain” (line 19). The “meagre rain” is also an equivalent of the tears of the eunuchs, a symbol of unheard screams and intense suffering. The existence of the eunuchs remains confined to “the urine of lizards and mice...” (line 20) as something very disgusting, taboo, and untouchable.

Upon completing the critical study of the text, the researchers find that Das depicts eunuchs as an exploited group for their physical frailty. Although visible, they are rendered invisible; despite their sufferings and screams, their cries remain unheard. Their existence is acknowledged, yet society confines them with the stigma of taboo.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, Kamala Das’ “The Dance of the Eunuchs” is a wonderful poem about the struggles of the eunuch community, replete with insightful spectrums of physical and emotional tumults along with social negligence. It is apparent that the poem visualizes a melancholic dance with ecstasy in disguise, symbolizing a conflict between external appearances and the internal sufferings of the eunuchs. The study finds the eunuchs as symbolic incarnations of the existential crisis through social dogma, confining their sense of identity. However, this research emphasizes the unfulfilled yearnings, social dehumanization, and the upsetting juxtaposition of external appearances and internal sufferings of the eunuchs. Moreover, this article unfolds the gender issues, identity crisis, and social suppression confronted by the eunuchs. Das’ emotive depictions of the eunuchs trigger a temptation to protest against social ignorance as well as oppression that causes existential confinement. However, the findings and recommendations from this study are expected to provide valuable resources for future researchers.

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