

The Dance of The Eunuchs: Insights into the Pangs of the Transgender

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Abstract

Eunuchs are modifying themselves and their status from the objects of ridicule and repositories of shame to responsible citizens of the modern nation-state. They have emerged as subject of research in academia as 'third sex' or 'alternative gender/sex'. But reaching to this destination of 'visibility' was a daunting task for them and the struggle is still going on.

Keywords: Eunuchs, Pangs, Transgender, Identity Crisis.

Introduction

The Dance of the Eunuchs is a significant piece of poetic composition that appeared in Kamala Das's first book *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) which was like a pack of dynamite, blowing up directly in the face of the insensitive world, the themes which were no longer stereotyped, complaining about woman's loneliness and longing. On the contrary, the poems were remarkable for their confessional tones and marked by self-exposure. These poems have a universal appeal because they reveal woman's predicament in the patriarchal world where love and sex in a woman's life is a censored and prohibited, immoral thing to think and talk of, or share it with someone. *The Dance of the Eunuchs* is a poem created by a sensitive woman who sees a similarity between herself and the eunuchs, as both of them are suffering from a fractured identity. Both are living an abnormal life devoid of love, sterile, and full of emotional vacuity. As a confessional artist this is the truth that the poetess admits.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to get an insight into their agonies through the poetry of a very sensitive woman artist who has graphically painted them and their dehumanized condition in the poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs*.

Discussion

Kamala Das is the first Hindu woman to write honestly about sexual feelings and love. "She is a woman poet, acutely conscious of her femininity with all the contradictory demands made on it by the family, society and her radical companions. She is "aggressively individualistic" according to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar; yet full of social awareness, even political awareness to her more careful readers."¹ K. Satchidanandan further, in the end, articulates about the faith that Kamala Das had in love, "Its embrace is truth, it takes you across death to another womb that convulses "to welcome your restructured perfection". Kamala's whole oeuvre thus becomes a declaration of the greatness of love that even while being expressed through the body also transcends the body."²

Such a sensitive, passionate and humane woman has composed this beautiful and pathetic song, *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, which depicts vividly and distinctly the pangs, the poverty, the neglect, the humiliation, that eunuchs have to suffer. The torments which eunuchs have to undergo is beyond imagination. They are dehumanized by the public. The organized threat that eunuchs have to face is fortified by institutions such as family, society, media and medical initiation.

Eunuchs in India have always been objects for gazing and objects of curiosity. They are the invisibles who purposely clap their hands in a peculiar way so that they make themselves visible. In India the sight of eunuchs is very common. They are hyper-visible. Often, we see a group of people, who in their appearance, attire and behaviour look strange, and keep cracking sexually charged jokes with dirty gestures which make them look repulsive. The onlookers are baffled by their behaviour and innumerable questions start arising in their minds like are they male or female? If not then what? What is this third gender, queer gender, unfamiliar gender about which no one speaks, writes or treats as humans? Everyone avoids them, why?



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In Indian society people call them by different names most popular being 'Hijras', 'Eunuchs', 'Neutrals', 'Asexual', 'Middle-sexed' and 'Deviants'. Whatever nomenclature we use, one thing is clear that something is wrong with their sexual organs. They are incomplete, so outcasted. In the poem, *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, Kamala Das projects her own image in the eunuchs. As a woman she feels alienated and estranged from society and family like the eunuchs. She fails to find any fulfilment as a woman. Devinder Kholi writes, "*The Dance of the Eunuchs* objectifies through an external, familiar situation the poet's strangled desire within."³ The poetess suffers from an emotional crisis and her heart is void of love. Similar is the feeling of alienation in the eunuchs amongst the crowd. Though they are surrounded by people and their gaze everywhere, but they have a sense of deep despair and loneliness. In the world of normal they are alone, insecure, the non-normal.

To quote E. V. Ramakrishnan, "*The Dance of the Eunuchs* corresponds to her (Kamala Das's) own feeling of persecution and inadequacy which live in her as a continuous state of personal crisis."⁴ Kamala Das then lets her readers enter into the psyche of these eunuchs through this unique poem. We see in the poem that suddenly eunuchs come in the scorching heat of the sun to entertain people with their dance and songs. This is the only source of their income. This is the means of their livelihood. We get the insights of their mind and heart as we keep watching their dance of madness. Only a woman, who feels incomplete, alienated in the men's world can feel their pangs and convey it to her readers dealing it with pathos, in the exquisite framework of poetry. The very opening of the poem sets the tone of irony and temper of the entire volume.

The poem begins with the entry of a group of eunuchs who have come to dance, moving from door to door. Some of them are dressed up like women, wearing long skirts, anklets, have decorated their long braids with gulmohur, have done heavy eye makeup that enlarges the size of the eyes which flashes and looks scary. They have dressed and embellished themselves in a conspicuous manner by highlighting their cheeks with tattoos and adorned their heads with jasmines. The poetess describes their complexion and tells that some of them were dark while some were fair. She gives a graphic picture not only of their looks and clothes but also of their behaviour and other minute details like their voices and the selection of the songs for this particular occasion:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling. Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced
and

They danced, oh, they danced till they bled..

There were green

Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some

Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lover's dying and of children left unborn...⁵

The songs that eunuchs were singing for the sake of entertaining people were ironically fetching and conveying in its theme the contents of lost love, lovers dying, children who couldn't arrive in this world because before birth, death lay its icy hands on them. Such melancholic strains were sung by them while dancing is quite strange but easily understandable because their own life is devoid of joy and ease, happiness and comfort. They lived an arduous life without any respite.

These eunuchs were dancing continuously, without stopping for a moment to take rest or to breathe. They were the epitome of suffering, divine injustice and melancholy. Very pathetically and beautifully the poetess has depicted their body which actually had no charm at all. Their limbs were dried up like the logs which are left unburnt in the funeral pyre. We can see the rottenness, barrenness and worthlessness in each of them. In order to hide their incompleteness, the wrong done to them they were showing the opposite emotion of happiness in singing, whereas, their heart had never experienced the joy of living a normal life:

Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts

And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry, like half-burnt logs from

Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness

Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed, still;

All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions.⁶

It is the unfulfilled desires of the eunuchs, their haunting sense of incompleteness that becomes the stimuli for the songs and dance performed by them in public. Some eunuchs were beating their underdeveloped breasts while some were beating the drums in ecstasy, if it was ecstasy ever? No. This was not, nor could be ecstasy in any way. Rather Kamala Das clarifies that it was madness caused by their fractured identity. The crows on the trees and children were looking in surprise and shock at these strange creatures, differently created by God. Their ecstasy was vacant and more of a convulsion because their feet started bleeding. The jingling and jingling, round and round is like spinning in a frenzy, a madness caused by existential crisis.

One is confronted with rhythmic explosions of the contrast between the frenzied dance of the eunuchs and the cymbals clashing loudly; between the jasmines in their hair and their melancholic songs; between their flashing eyes and sexual rottenness. Professor A.N.Dwivedi writes, "What is to be noticed here is the fact that within a space of, say, three-four lines the poetess has spoken of no fewer things or persons---the season being 'hot' summer, the 'eunuchs' coming to dance, their skirts following their motions, their cymbals producing sweet sound, and their anklets jingling in their dance. This kind of

description of varied details in such a small place is actually a gift of our scientific age,— a gift which is hardly witnessed in the previous eras.”⁷

By the end of the poem the poignancy of the pangs of the eunuchs are heightened to such an extremity that the thunder and lightning cracking in the sky is imagined to be sharing their grief and crying for their pitiable, miserable, sorry predicament which has become their fate; a destiny written by a pen dipped in ink of sorrow sans end. But the rain that started was merely in drops, so meagre, that instead of bringing down the temperature of the atmosphere and giving some relief, it rather augmented the misery caused by the heat. Their barrenness, thirst for comfort could not be quenched by the scanty rain. This meagre rain has increased the stink in the attics which was full of filth done by lizards and mice.

The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice...⁸

Here I am tempted to quote Professor A.N. Dwivedi in support of the versification of this poem and its diction which helps to express the physical, mental, social and emotional sufferings and pain which eunuchs have to undergo. Professor Dwivedi writes, “For the vigorous and sweepy expression of her verse, she did not need the artificial and gaudy technique of the school of Pope nor did she require the languid air and the love-lorn language of the Romantics; she rather needed the immense liberty and flexibility of the Moderns like Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, the Sitwells, E.E.Cummings, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. She, therefore, took resort to *vers libre* or free verse, which allowed her ample freedom of utterance in verse form, without letting the emotions slip off or their intensity slide off.”⁹ In her poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, Kamala Das has applied the above-mentioned poetic tool and technique, that is *vers libre*, in the texture of the poem.

Historically there are evidences that prove that eunuchs were present in India since Vedic period. The origin of eunuchs (hijras) is traced back in the mythology of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Shikhandi : And Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, gives us an evidence that “In Veda there is a line ‘*vikruti evam prakruti*’ which can be translated as ‘all things queer are also part of nature’.”¹⁰ Their traces are also found in the writings dealing with the ancient history of Homeric Greece, Europe, Syria, and during African trade slaving era. Eunuchs in the past were used for various tasks. The very word ‘eunuch’ has been derived from the Greek word ‘eune’ which means ‘bed’ and ‘ekhein’ which means ‘to keep’. Together it means ‘bed keeper’ which indicates that they were used as slaves for various domestic purposes. They were castrated to make them trusted and reliable servants. Eunuchs, in the period of Moghuls were also used in harems or *janankhana* to serve and guard royal ladies. They

were used as messengers, watchmen, attendants and guards of palaces. Often their intelligence was used in the court as advisors. In imperial palaces they had an organized hierarchy, their chief being the ‘*Khawaja Saras*’. In spite of their loyalty, they were easily replaced or killed without any remorse. Gayatri Reddy writes in the General Editor’s Foreword, *A Tale of Izzat*, “Academically, they(eunuchs) have often been reduced to little more than site markers of non-binary gender systems, symbolic of a liminal space between “men” and “women”, and confined to the realm of gender and sexuality studies.”¹¹

Conclusion

To conclude, all that I can say is that we, the educated people of the twenty first century, should not forget that eunuchs are human beings like us. Though God has made them differently but that doesn’t mean that they don’t have emotions and feelings like us. Physically they are different but in emotions and feelings they are similar to us. Actually, we see them through the lens of gender and sexual difference. They do not fit in our lens of two sexes male and female. Therefore, they become gazing objects for us. We treat them inhumanly and cast atrocities towards them. But now they are becoming conscious of their rights. Their optimism is seen in what a hijra declared in a conversation, “In the Kaliyuga, we [hijras] will become kings and rule the world.”¹² Again, read the slogan that they have picked up for themselves today is, “You don’t need genitals for politics. You need integrity.”¹³

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