

Introspection through Retrospection: A Critical Reading of “The Red Dusk” by Kamala Das

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Kamala Das, aka, Kamala Suraiya, is the most controversial fictionist and poet in Indian-English literature. She straddles both the English and Malayalam literary worlds dreaming in English and thinking in Malayalam with her Malayali pen name Madhavikutty. One of the most notable Malayalam stories translated into English is “The Red Dusk” brought out in *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories*.

What makes up the plot of the story are the painful memories and palliative visions. The story begins at its end breaking up the linearity of its plot and the story gets told through the use of analepsis. This kind of retrospection enables the storyteller here to fill in details of the central character and the main events in his life. Here the breaking up of the tripartite conception of plot fashioned by Aristotle is symbolic of the cultural anarchy or the anachrony in familial life. Here the protagonist, Louis, “the tearful old man”, as the old painter in his new neighborhood has come to be known, lives a miserably lonely life in obscurity displaced and disowned by everything and everyone he admired and adored in life. The atrocities he had committed on his folks haunt him in all their retributive forms. It is the maternal figure unconsciously encapsulated in *The Red Dusk* that alone surfaces to soothe him in his last moment.

What the reader sees here as the storyline progresses is the gradual cultural degeneration that dogs him as fame and fun come his way. He went to Paris with his fellow artist, Sohan to study art. It was here sixty years ago that he painted “Red Dusk”, the portrait of a Chinese woman, although “she was not originally intended to be Chinese”. He tried to redo the eyes and nose but “still the old face reappeared. He did not try to change her again” (29). Here he unconsciously conjured up the

figure of his mother that lingered long after her death.

It was Sohan who had named Louis’ painting “Red Dusk” with a kiss on it. He became a popular painter and poet in Paris where he was “the life and soul of all dinners” and had fallen in love many times. He was the centre of attraction at many parties. Unlike Sohan, he never wanted to die “in those days when he was loved and respected by all.” Sohan, on the contrary, used to tell him, “I want to die now. This is the time for death”(28). He died, as he desired, before the loss of his youth. One is told here, “Sohan who used to get stone drunk and lie face downwards on the floor, won success in life” (28-29). He did not live on to experience the loneliness or lovelessness of old age in obscurity or “the mockery and sympathy of the people on the wayside, and the deformity brought about by age.” He drank away the cultural crisis he had faced “singing through the night without sleep, taking out beautiful women for dances, borrowing money on and on...”(29).

Louis had loved only his mother but lost her as a boy. He hated his father when he remarried, although his “father had always treated him with extreme kindness.” He used to feel suffocated at home during holidays. He would give only monosyllabic replies to his father’s questions. He could not love his stepmother either although she was a pious and loving woman. He caused her only grief all the time she was trying to win his heart. Once when he was getting ready to go back to school, she lovingly gave him a jar full of sweet meat, “He didn’t allow it to be put inside the suitcase. Thinking there wasn’t enough space, she started packing the clothes more closely. It was then he said, “Stop it! You shouldn’t touch them!” (31).

When Louis grew up into a budding artist, he cultivated his head and imagination but left his heart undeveloped. He married three times but hurt them all and broke the tender hearts of his children as well:

He was a great sinner. That was what his first wife once told him. His late son in those days was a plain little child, pale, skinny, with a protruding belly. However hard he studied, he would forget the spellings of words. He thrashed him. He beat him black and blue, pulling out the iron spring used for hanging curtains on the windows. It was then she said, 'You're a great sinner!'. (32)

When he wanted to be consoled, his third wife, Sheela, "rose and went off in anger. Why should she comfort him? After all he was occasionally unfaithful to her too. She was often at home when the love letters of his beloved poetess came. She would weep. Once he said, kicking her, 'Get out of here! You crybaby!'" He never cared about her appearance or her health or happiness. The reader is saddened to see that "Finally, when she fell ill seriously, he caused her death, not giving her the needed treatment." He treated his little daughter too in a cruel and callous way, "He sent their four-year-old daughter Lily to a far-off nun's hostel. That could be the reason why Lily too did not need him now"(33).

Now Louis remembers with tears his life in Calcutta with his daughter. There he had his friends, fans and old flames but eventually his pension got too small for him to keep up his social status in that town. It was with a breaking heart that he heard his daughter speaking to her husband at night in low whispers about him. Louis saw her husband's indifference to him. His grandchildren began to talk back and servants did not care to respond to his calls and obey his instructions. The children of his old friends avoided him on the streets. His plight then would remind one of the displaced and dispossessed Lear in Shakespeare's play.

It was under the circumstances that he moved into this little obscure town. Only the figure of his mother would flash into his view and comfort him. As he once sat in tears in his studio repenting of his brutality to his wife, "a woman stood looking from the wall, sporting a red garment with black dragons sewn on it. Though those hands never embraced him, he could feel that kiss." In that epiphanic moment he realized that "of all those women who were with him, none possessed that peculiar power—the power to set at rest a suffering mind. That was Red Dusk" (32).

The same figure comes again at the end with the fragrance of "Rangoon creepers" to dispel his loneliness with maternal love. The story gives the reader not only a glimpse of the cultural ruin and the repentance of a miserably old man whose youth, reputation and iconic status have vanished like a dream but also the forgiving love of a mother who could reach out to her rejected and dejected son with the offer of peace and inner tranquility. Failure to adhere to the basic values of life results in the kind of anguish and utter meaninglessness that Louis experiences here.

Some of the author's desires and frustrations are displaced into other characters. One sees here the author's strategy of transmuting painfully memorable personal experiences into fictional realities. In *My Story* the author refers to her father as an "autocrat"(91). As a girl she was separated from home and sent to a boarding school like Louis' daughter. In her wedlock she was disillusioned like Louis' wives. One can see in Louis the kind of husband that Kamala herself had. In the same autobiographical book she recalls, "He told me of the sexual exploits he had with some of the maid servants in his house in Malabar" (79-80). Kamala in *The Path of the Columnist* has written: Everyday at least one or two abandoned wives come to me weeping. Yesterday a thirty year old reached me to offer her story. Her husband had been beating her for seven years. Recently he brought a stranger into their bedroom and ordered her to sleep with him. She ran away in utter disgust. (43)

The words of Rita Felski need to be noted here:

The defining feature of the feminist text is a recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of the traditional script of heterosexual romance characterized by female passivity, dependence and subordination, and an attempt to develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity can be located. (129) This is exactly what Kamala seeks to do here in a subtle fashion by making the phallogocentric figure here suffer in old age in proportion to the enjoyment he derived out of the enslavement of his wife and children. Ironically, it is from the figure of a woman that the rejected but remorseful Louis derives peace at the end of his culturally chaotic and socially ostracized life.

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