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## Resurrection of the Feminine self: A Study of Structural and Thematic Analysis of the Cycle of Trauma and Rebirth in Kamala Das' "Like a Phoenix I Rose from the Ashes of my Past"

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### Abstract

Through the essay "Like a Phoenix I Rose from the Ashes of my Past" taken from Kamala Das' popular work *My Story*, the writer presents an autobiographical narrative of her failed marriage. The poetic introduction at the beginning of the essay depicts her inner conflict which blends well with the thematic elements of the essay. The paper involves a close analysis of the essay analyzing the fight-flight-freeze mode regarded as a trauma response and defense mechanism which she adopts to cope up with difficult situations in her married life. Kamala Das identifies herself with the 'Phoenix' from the title of the essay; as from being sick like a 'moulting bird', she still rises from the ashes. The writer goes through the cycle of flight, moulting (Shedding feathers) and resurrection which resembles the life cycle of the Phoenix. Finally, her prayers and intense devotion to Lord Krishna add a mystical note to the essay.

**Keywords:** Autobiographical narrative, Fight-Flight- Freeze Mode, Defense Mechanism, Trauma Response

The essay "Like a Phoenix I Rose from the Ashes of my Past" is taken from her most popular autobiographical work *My Story*. Kamala Das, in *My Story* presents a personal narrative by looking back at her life from her childhood days in Calcutta and Malabar to her unhappy marriage to a much older banker, Madhav Das, when she was just fifteen years old. She goes on to describe motherhood experiences at sixteen; her loneliness while her husband remained busy with his work and her dissatisfaction with her marriage, though her husband encouraged her to use her creative talent and continue with her writing endeavours.

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In her autobiography and also in other literary works, she challenges the outdated rules forced on women in a male-dominated society. Although extensively popular, her works remain controversial as she writes fearlessly about taboo subjects like adultery, female sexuality and desire. Kamala Das' rising popularity inspired many female writers throughout India. However, no woman in the field of writing has dared to depict the sexual needs of the female body with such audacity. It is no wonder that *My Story* remains the best-selling and popular book written by an Indian woman.

In "Like a Phoenix I Rose from the Ashes of my Past", Kamala Das begins the essay by writing a small poem and then goes on to narrate her tale of endurance and healing. The poetic introduction in the beginning sets the tone and the mood of the readers and also provides a hint about the deteriorating relationship between Kamala Das and her husband. Through powerful lines, she describes her frustration towards him and the need to release her anger through rebellion. In the following lines:

My world, de- fleshed, de- veined, de- blooded  
 Just a skeletal thing, then shut my  
 Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,  
 Here in your nest of familiar scorn (Das 168)

According to the above lines, in the introductory note of the essay, while taking recourse to poetry, she opens up about her desire to leave the cocoon of fake love her husband has built around her. Morning tea and sweet talk will not flatter her any longer as by now she is fed up of his "tired lust" (Das 168). She dreams of spreading her wings and flying in the distant skies. With her flight in the skies, the foundation of her home will be completely shaken yet she wants to find freedom. She wants to leave her husband behind and so she compares him to the "sad remnant of a root" (Das 168). The 'Root' used in context of her husband's sad plight is clearly related to the Freudian phallic symbol. In the following lines:

"...an object that would in any case appropriately represent a male organ has a further attribute which established it in the clearest fashion as a phallic symbol. Whips, sticks, lances and similar objects are familiar to us as phallic symbols; but when a whip further possesses the most striking characteristic of a phallus, its extensibility, scarcely a doubt can remain." (Freud 388, 391)

Freud explains that any long and protruding object represents the phallus or the male organ. While tall objects like skyscrapers and towers are Freudian symbols of masculinity, the husband visualized as a phallic symbol of the "sad remnant of a root" (Das 168) indicates complete loss of his authority and diminishing control over his family. The patriarch is the 'root' which means that he is at the core of the family and society. But, Kamala Das' flight to freedom has hit his egoistic pride really hard and his powerlessness has withered his masculinity.

Further, while out of her home, she experiences immense freedom but she also has to face the harsh realities of life. She now feels like a skeletal thing living in a de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded world. She has now understood that the world is a dull place and it has nothing to offer so she settles down in her husband's home which for her is "the nest of familiar

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scorn” (Das 168). The poem placed at the beginning of the essay conveys the emotions of the female speaker who lives in an unhappy relationship with her husband. Although she frees herself from his clutches, she is forced by societal obligations and circumstances to come back to him again.

Although the poem in the beginning of the essay brings female expression to the forefront, yet the meaning of these lines can be interpreted through the perspective of the psychological state of trauma victims and survivors through the striking resemblance with the fight- flight- freeze mode of trauma response. The following lines explain her ordeal by throwing light on her psychological condition:

Evolution has endowed all humans with a continuum of innate, hard-wired, automatically activated defense behaviors, termed the defense cascade. Arousal is the first step in activating the defense cascade; flight or fight is an active defense response for dealing with threat; freezing is a flight-or-fight response put on hold; tonic immobility and collapsed immobility are responses of last resort to inescapable threat, when active defense responses have failed; and quiescent immobility is a state of quiescence that promotes rest and healing. (Kozłowska et al.)

It has been observed that a cascade of emotional defense mechanisms usually tackles traumatic situations. These behaviours are involuntary and rooted in our psyche which play a great role in influencing defense behaviours. Our fear of threat pushes us to face the danger and fight or even take on the flight mode. After all attempts have failed, one resorts to tonic immobility and if the situation gets worse a total freeze or collapsing and fainting condition saves the whole situation.

The fight- flight- freeze model can be applied easily to Kamala Das’ life and poems. In her poem “The Stone Age”, it can imply that there was an arousal or provocation to fight when her husband talks loudly and disturbs her sleep. It shows lack of concern for her need to sleep and rest so she imagines that he has stuck his finger in her dreaming eye. Of course, many instances must have created a rift between them. Coming back to the essay, a reading of the poetic introduction implies that after fighting with her husband and her own self, she decides to take on to the flight mode and escape to the skies. Thus, it shows that the problems between them were so frustrating that from the fight zone she moves on to the flight mode. As the essay progresses, she goes into the freeze mode and collapses when issues go out of hand. However, the fainting/ collapsing/ freezing would help her to calm her mind. So, the metaphoric and psychological journey from the fight to freeze zone initiates self- discovery and fulfilment.

The title “Like a Phoenix I Rose from the Ashes of my Past” is greatly significant because she transforms herself into a metaphorical bird when she decides to take on the flight mode. She identifies herself with the ‘Phoenix’ from the title of the essay. According to mythology, the Phoenix is depicted as a beautiful bird with bright gold, red and purple feathers. In the essay, Kamala Das compares herself to the Phoenix – a bird that is said to have the ability to rise from its own ashes.

In the essay, she takes us back to that point of time when she was almost bedridden and was about to die but it was her courage and will- power to live that brought her back to life.

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She puts forth that her sickness had almost turned her to ashes. She had lost all hope because she looked older than her years. She felt that she looked like a moulting bird. Her skin had turned dark and scaly and her voice had turned into a whisper. However, it took a lot of mental strength for her to recover from her illness resembling the Pheonix's strong will power to rebuild her life again.

In the essay, the speaker describes that her husband constantly feels insecure about their relationship. When she was almost bedridden, he laments that she does not come out with him for a walk. He notices that she has changed completely but he does nothing to stabilize their relationship. He asks her, "Do you hate me?" However, when she is hospitalized and she needs him the most, he is nowhere to be found. Her friend, Shirley nurses her back to health. Also, when she is discharged from the hospital, she can barely walk. Shirley's brother-in-law then wraps her in a rug and carries her upstairs. Therefore, it can be concluded that her husband was not with her during the worst phase of her life. The writer while discussing her husband's toxic masculinity which is indeed destructive throws light on the good attributes of positive and healthy masculinity represented through the character of Shirley's brother-in-law.

Kamala Das in her autobiography calls herself the most fortunate person to have Shirley as her friend. She describes her as probably the most loving of women in the country. She had long brown hair, which she always wore in a thick plait, and an innocent smile. When there was no one with her, she visited her at the hospital every day to change her clothes and helped her to wash her hair. She thrust a large basin under the bed and while she lay still and shampooed her hair. The writer wanted to cut her hair short but she disagreed with her. She always instilled hope in her when she said: "You are going to get well. If God wished you to die so soon he would not have given you the gift of a beautiful baby"(Das 169) . This argument soothed her. When her feet had become rigid and numb with the long illness, Shirley rubbed cold cream gently on them to soften the skin. It made the writer weep with gratitude. She kept her away from the morgue. While she could hear women moaning or grieving over the death of some relative, Shirley would come to her and tell her that a child had fallen and hurt himself slightly. Thus, in her essay, Kamala Das honours her friend, Shirley by acknowledging her kindness.

The action of one woman combing another woman's hair is quite symbolic. While in sickness, her hair is a burden to the writer. However, Shirley, through the act of combing, disentangles the knots of her hair and of her life. While a man backs out and leaves a woman in such testing times of ill-health, women fight back this egoistic attitude by being there for each other. The character of Shirley demonstrates that women are more responsible than men as they never run away from such situations.

Another important aspect is the mystic note in her writings. In the essay, as she is almost sick and dying, she keeps on chanting the name of Lord Krishna. The name of Lord Krishna was on her lips all the time. She gained spiritual solace by chanting his holy name. The power of prayers and her own determination helped her recover from her illness. She felt like the Phoenix- a symbol of resurrection and rebirth as she rose from the ashes. However, after regaining health, she forgot her god. She mentions that she applied lipstick on her lips that

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chanted the holy name of Lord Krishna. She, slowly, started feeling guilty about it and she felt that she was turning away from God.

Although applying lipstick has nothing to do with the goodness of the soul, it suggests the working of 'internalized misogyny' (Evtveeva 83), a term used by Steve Bearman in 2009 to depict the influence of pessimistic ideas among women about their own bodies but they also extended their purview to other women's behaviour. Kamala Das, like many other misogynist women, unconsciously associates physical purity of her lips to the purity of the soul. The biased judgement of her own relationship with god through the cosmetic appearance of the outward self is indeed self-depreciating indicating low self-esteem due to her failed relationship with her husband.

While going through such spiritual turmoil, she felt dissatisfied with her husband. She wondered why she could not find peace in the arms of her husband. She felt like a civet cat that walked up and down in her cage biting her nails. Animal imagery used here depicts how people reduce her to a creature and force her to shut her down the storm of her feelings. Also, her mind was in dire conflict as she wanted an executioner to cleave her head into two. This sudden outburst happens due to the problem of living with conflicting dual identities.

Her desire for self-validation is observed when the writer says that she wanted an ideal lover. She knew that she could not find true love anywhere in the world except in the worship of Lord Krishna. Thus, the mystical approach towards life helped her attain immense spiritual strength. The following words describe a mystic who desires unification with divinity:

(It is) unification of consciousness upon high levels which alone can put a term to man's unrest. The heart that longs for the All, the mind that conceives it, the will that concentrates the whole self upon it, must all be called into play. The self must be surrendered: but it must not be annihilated... It only dies that it may live again. (Underhill 68)

The mystical element in the essay connects strongly to the bird imagery as she grows wings to soar high in the skies. However, the descent is painful and the joy of being independent and free is no more but instead she has to face the trauma of "familiar scorn". After enduring all the issues that wrecked her marriage, she falls sick and is hospitalized. When she comes back home, her condition becomes so worse that she compares herself to a 'moulting' bird, shedding its feathers and peeling itself. Such images are symbolic as they point out to the last stages of the life-cycle of the phoenix bird when it is ready to die and begins to detach itself from worldly life by shedding its feathers. She, therefore, feels as if her whole persona has been reduced to ashes. But, as mentioned in the above quote, it is only the name of Lord Krishna that brings an end to the unrest in her soul. Thus, through her mystical approach, she redeems her troubled soul through her yearning for Lord Krishna and self-surrender to divinity.

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