

**Emptiness and Void in Heart: A Study of *The Last Labyrinth*,
The Binding Vine and Other Poems by Kamala Das**

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Postmodern Indian English novel often resonates with the character of an alienated individual. Arun Joshi (1939-93) wrote five novels in which there is a tendency to discover an 'authentic being'. The novel *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) won him Sahitya Academy Award. The novel has been woven in the intricate complexities of finding meaning in a meaningless world and exercising freedom as an act of authenticity. The protagonist of the novel, Som Bhaskar, is a disoriented man despite being a successful rich businessman. Anuradha becomes the center of his existence and he ventures into an extra-marital affair. His life takes a turn from a stable relationship of a married life to the turmoils of wanderings. He can associate Anuradha with his adolescent desires and feels inevitable attraction towards her.

Bhaskar, being a non-believer in God, refuses to turn to God for help whenever he confronts problems in his life. Life becomes more and more absurd for him and he cannot understand how people can keep such strong faith in God. He feels irritated when people talk about unseen worlds and he thinks that he can never become like them. The emptiness or void in his heart persists and it cannot be filled by God. Going to Aftab's Lal Haveli at Benaras brought a complete sense of wonder to his otherwise monotonous lifestyle. Bhaskar wanted to buy all Aftab's shares of a plastic company but Aftab was unwilling to sell them. Bhaskar wanted to convince Aftab to sell his shares as a profitable deal. It was at Aftab's house that Bhaskar developed a bond with Anuradha, who lived with Aftab but was not married to him.

The aim of a business deal turned into a mystical experience for Bhaskar as the Haveli was mysterious and forced even a materialistic person to think about the dark corners of life. The strangeness of Haveli had released intense sensuality in the air. The various layers of the house made Bhaskar curious about the innermost labyrinth. Was there death in it? After the various layers of existence, only death could reign in the last labyrinth. Death was the culmination of all experiences. Lal Haveli forced Bhaskar to think about the deep secrets of life. He remembered when he was in school and he had got news of his mother's death. The emptiness in his heart had persisted since that time. In Benaras, he could come out of the shell of materialism and think about spiritual world. The whole environment had casted a magical spell on him. The restlessness in Bhaskar's soul always increased when he saw people having complete faith in God. This restlessness had led him towards many flirtations and extra-marital affairs. At last, Anuradha had become his 'Shakti'. After Anuradha left him, he realized that there was nothing left to fill the void of his heart. Arun Joshi highlights the postmodern condition in which there is loss of faith in unseen powers, and disorientation is a part of life.

Kamala Das, a celebrated woman writer and poet, wrote her poems by explicitly expressing her strong feminine desires and longing for true love. Her frank and bold verse raises voice against patriarchy and she challenges male domination in various forms. She celebrates the very notion of being a woman, and lays emphasis on her emotions, her identity, and her desires. In the male dominated society, a woman has to suffer on the account of being a woman. She has to become the victim of lust of man and is accused for no fault of her own. Kamala Das longs for love that can bring satisfaction to her soul, can provide her identity, and can free her rather than bind her in chains. She writes in her poem, 'My Grandmother's House': I who have lost my way and beg now at stranger's doors/ to Receive love, at least in small change.

Kamala Das writes that a woman is expected to fit in a particular role after marriage. She felt like a puppet after marriage. She writes in the poem 'An Introduction' that

when she asked for love, she only found her husband's lust for body. She was expected to dress in sarees, become an ideal wife, and know the art of embroidery and cooking. She became fed up and her heart longed for love. Only love could bring meaning to her life but it seemed like an endless search. Petra Kelly writes in her essay "Women and Power" (1997) that "Men's domination of women is deep and systematic, and it is accepted around the world by most men and many women as "natural," as something that somehow cannot be changed" (Warren 112). The oppression of women is deeply embedded in societies. The system of giving privilege to men is prevalent throughout the world. There is a need to transform the structures of male dominance. Women also need to gain power and to shun their powerlessness. They must refuse to remain victims.

In *The Binding Vine* (1992) written by Shashi Deshpande, Urmi's two year old daughter Anu has died and Urmi is unable to cope with this grief. The void in her heart takes her to the state of depression. She wants that the pain of Anu's death should remain with her forever because that is the only way to keep her memory alive. Urmi remembers her childhood when she could find happiness in all situations. But now there is no escape to happiness. In her dream, she finds herself running along the sea. At one time, it becomes difficult for her to run and the sand starts pulling her. Urmi also suffers from an attack of asthma later.

Urmi feels that she would be able to recover from her condition by being strong enough to deal with the situation. But the present time only brings emptiness in her heart. She cannot bear the fact that Anu has died. Another character Mira in the novel also suffered from the same feeling of void in her heart. She had died at a very young age after giving birth to her son. As a young girl, she was very intellectual but after marriage she had found all her dreams crushed. Marriage brought the death of her intellectualism and the physical relationship with her husband only increased her

loneliness. She was in need of love and did not want to only survive like other women. In one of her poems, she writes:

Desire, says the Buddha, is the cause of grief;
But how escape this Cord
This binding vine of love? Fear lies coiled within
This womb-piercing joy. (136-37)

Another character in *The Binding Vine* who undergoes through the same state of heart is the poor woman Shakuntala. Her daughter Kalpana has been raped by someone and she doesn't know anything about the culprit. She even doesn't want to report the matter to police as she has to think about the marriage of another daughter. Kalpana is seriously injured and is lying unconscious in hospital. The trauma of her daughter's rape in Shakuntala's life is unbearable and brings forth to mind the animalistic behavior of some men. Women have to tolerate the exploitation by men in married life also as they feel the need of being sheltered by men and cannot leave them. Shakuntala cries, "Why does God give us daughters"?

Who is a woman? After numerous feminist discourses, how much has changed in women's lives in postmodern time? Such questions linger in mind when incidents of brutal rapes and domestic violence against women are reported. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) still seems relevant even after seventy years of its publication. Beauvoir gives a hint from the play *Medea* written in the ancient Greek period, in which Medea takes revenge after Jason betrays her. The cleavage between the two sexes has been a major theme in literature since Greek and Roman times. "Now, woman has always been man's dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" (Beauvoir 20).

Beauvoir raises a question on the historical time period when superiority of men became a part of culture. She also probes into deeper realities of a woman's life and analyses the natural processes like menstruation that can disrupt the smooth flow of her

life. "The woman is more emotional, more nervous, more irritable than usual, and may manifest serious psychic disturbance" (Beauvoir 61). Beauvoir investigates the role of bodily functions in making man superior than woman. She argues that it becomes a misfortune to be a woman and she is burdened with different roles that she has to perform without complaining. In her heart, longing for true love remains lurking, always waiting for fulfillment.

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