

# Exploring the Feminist Perspective in the Poetry's of Kamala Das

Varsha Verma

Assistant Professor

JVC Group of Institutions

verma.varsha98@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Kamala Das, through her poetic talent opened domains, in which formally taboo and emotions got unfold which reflected the true voice of women's feelings and established a room for her in the literary world. She was a poetess of feminine sensibility and she strongly speaks about the male dominance and oppression within the family and society. Kamala Das so called icon of Indian feminism established herself as a new and strong voice of women. The aim of this research paper is to explore the feminine perspective in the poetry's of Kamala Das.

**Keywords:** *Love, Betrayal, Freedom, Patriarchy, Suppression, Feminism, Sensibility.*

Das's life experiences have been honestly expressed in her poetry with the power of sentiments. Her feministic concern with her sorrow and passion, sympathy and protest convey the message silently, though its explosive power has been felt by everyone. In an interview she expresses her thoughts in her autobiography *My Story* with Shobha:

No, they did not get shocked. They pretended to get shocked. That is to prove to others that they are innocent, that they have never stepped out of the confines of their sacred marriage. Nobody got shocked. These things have been happening for years and years. I come from a feudal background. I know how men go around at night and walk into the houses of the very poor and ravish the daughters of the poor. If they became pregnant, they were drowned. All these things have happened, and we are aware of that. But this happens only at night. I have never killed anybody, never hated anyone. I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little ([www.rediff.com](http://www.rediff.com)).

Kamala Das talks about the real facts of human behavior. Her thoughtful and bold expressions unhide the human behavior. She talks and writes about the power of love in all her poetry and the appeal of the feminine body.

Das always feels that her personal life's incidents with her life partner can also become a subject matter of her poetry. She writes in her autobiography that:

I learnt for the first time to be misery with my energy spending it only on my writing, which I enjoyed more than anything else in the world. I typed sitting propped against pillow on my wide bed . . . I wanted my readers to know of it. I had realized by them that the writer has none to love her but the readers. She would have proved herself to be a mere embarrassment to the member of the family, for she is like a Goldfish in a well-lit bowl whose movements are never kept concealed (*My Story* 201).

In a society in which we live, a woman would not speak the word sex even among themselves; here was Das saying in her poems, an uninhabited expression to the full range of female experience and desire of a female individual. In her poetry she always talks about love, sex, female body and its hungers.

Gift him all,  
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,  
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your  
Endless female hungers (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 68).

In this poem she explores her view on men-women relationship, gifting him everything that is unique and beautiful about her and which makes her woman. It is a poem to understand and examine the men-women relationship quite systematically even if it is bit ruthlessly. The image reflected in the looking glass is the real estimation of what we are if we accept the truths of life. She presents to the reader the real image of Indian womanhood and the feminist sensibility in this country.

Das was aware of the realities which women face in the universe, family and society. In her poetry the traditional concepts of feminine behavior and socialization vanish and the role of the traditional dutiful wife's was not accepted by her. Das was very sensitive yet realistic about every aspect of womanhood. Das speaks about

women's weaknesses and strengths without inhibitions discussed her own liabilities, and hidden desire. Das poems are an example of feminine sensibility, the hopes, fear, desire and desperation. Keki Daruwalla rightly says,

The intensity of feeling, ably controlled in her better poems, and the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex, immediately won for her a big audience. Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near neurotic world. There is all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love, the lazy animal hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliation are the wrap and woof of her poetic fabric. She seldom ventures outside this personal world. (*Two Decades of Indian Poetry* 22).

When she claimed freedom for herself she was marginalized by society. According to M. Mani. Meitei, "In her poem she has become the mouthpiece of feminist struggle against institutional values imposed on women; and thus she has the authentic female voice demanding Social Justice, sexual equality, equal rights for women" (*Modern Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions* 291). Her poetry is a mixture of her past and present incidents according to her autobiography. Das poetry sometimes deals with unfulfilled love and the celebration of sex. In her poetry we also find the best expression of feminine sensibility. Das feels that love is the central emotion in woman's heart that's why her poetry reflects all the love theme of her own life. Her own experiences and observation, her own un-fulfillment of love and her sexual exploitation gives her frustration that she had suffered in a male dominating society.

She tries to search her inner universe of pleasure, the feelings of frustration in love and the relationship which she had with many of her lovers. In her poetic work agony and love support each other through a practically masochist world. For her, love has distinctive shades, longing, affection, and involvement. Her poetic volumes and stories are realistic in tone and sentiments. She has realistically represented the condition of the women who was exploited by the patriarchal society. Das was a frustrated woman and her frustration motivates her to write poetry. Her poetic verse is a mixture of powerful emotions.

"The Freaks" is a remarkable poem from *Summer in Calcutta*. This poem reflects the emotional barrenness and the loneliness that a woman feels while she is engaging in the sexual act.

He talks, turning a sun-stained  
 Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark  
 Cavern, where stalactites of  
 Uneven teeth gleam, his right  
 Hand on my knee, while our minds  
 Are willed to race towards love;  
 But, they only wander, tripping  
 Idly over puddles of  
 Desire... (*Summer in Calcutta* 8)

In this poem she presents a contrast between man and woman thinking, here man only satisfies his sexual desire on the other hand woman longs for emotional satisfaction. She frankly describes here the man-woman relationship in a very bold attitude. Das only problem was with her husband which is that he was only interested in sexual gratification.

Can this man with  
 Nimble finger-tips unleash  
 Nothing more alive than the  
 Skin's lazy hungers? Who can  
 Help us who have lived so long  
 And have failed in love?(8)

Das does not hesitate in calling herself a freak. Das's husband is always interested in fulfillment of his lust. Her husband does not think about her feelings. She admits that her marital life is a failure because her husband does not give any love to her. Her heart has been waiting for her husband's love but sadly it was not fulfilled. Kamala Das analyses man-woman relationship from an anti-romantic angle and protest against womanhood suppressed by ethics and taboos. As she has mentioned in almost all poems her husband's contact with her was usually cruel and brutal. She gives to the readers, very bold pen-pictures of the interaction between man and woman without compromising her femininity. Ramesh Kumar Gupta remarks:

Here is undoubtedly a feminist voice articulating the hopes and oppressions, the concern and tension, of womankind. Explicitly, she writes about love, sex and marriage – all well within her experience and awareness. Her poetic voice imbued with a feminine-cum-feminist sensibility is typically her own and it cannot be confused with anyone else's. (*A feminist Voice - A study of Kamala Das's poems* 45)

Das does not care about the society, friends and critics. Das articulates her female-experience with such frankness and liberty. She feels language is the form of expressing thoughts. Hongsha Phomrong rightly remark:

From a feminine perspective, the writing of Kamala Das seems unprecedented and un attempted before by other Indo-English writers. The uninhibited frankness in her expression with regard to the question of the use of 'language' may be rehighlighted from her well known poem An Introduction. (*Kamala Das the Indian Monroe Feminist Perspective* 103)

Das poems as a whole shows the feminine sensibility, the desire, fears and desperations thoughts in the feminist movement allowed the writers of that time as critics to attack the meaning of sexual difference in the patriarchal ideology. Kamala's works speaks of her determined protest against patriarchal norms and encourage her in continuously digging her own life experiences for material. She mentioned in her autobiography that;

Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shop men and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them, they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is his/her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment. I was emotional and oversensitive. (*My Story*92)

Das famous poem "Jaisurya" shows her intensity of maternal love and feminine sensibility. The theme of the poem is child birth and poet recalls her experience of giving birth to her first child and expresses her deep love for the baby in her autobiography, "My mother lifted the baby from her hands and put him on my bosom and I blessed him with long life, kissing the damp crown of his head and called him Jaisurya."(151) In this poem Das speaks

about her labor pain at the time of child birth. She explains here that a mother is eagerly waiting to see her child even she suffers from an extreme labor pains.

. . . It rained on the day my son

Was born . . . The first labour pain and kept me

Company, sighing, wailing, and roaring

When I groaned so that I smiled and stopped my

Plaints to hear its grief. (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*70)

Das, as a mother forgets the sufferings of her sexual exploitations by her husband. The birth of her first child she was happy when the child emerged from her womb, she felt proud of her son who has been separated from the darkness. Das poems are somewhere personal at the same time universal. Das poetry is rich with the example of body and desire, Das mainly concentrates on sexual love and her women persona, speaks with a sense of confessional urgency.

This is how she could dig deep into herself, resulting in the originality of ideas and expressions. Das poetry is the discharge and outpour of her intense and immediate emotions. In the words of Bruce King, “she opens the areas in which ‘previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling’”. (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*18) Das shows how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the minds of the readers. In this process, she can't keep down any secret facts from the readers, by uncovering her deepest emotions, by sharing her agitation with the readers; she discovers some relaxation from her status of mental disturbance. Her openness and frankness has attracted many readers. She has set another custom in Indian poetry by uncovering her own experiences as a woman.

When she requested love from her husband not knowing what else to ask, he took the sixteen-year-old girl to his bedroom. He didn't beat her, but her female physic felt so beaten. This is an extremely earnest articulation of Das how unprepared body of a sixteen-year-old is feeling ashamed of her femininity. Anna Kurian observe that, “her poem shift from one mood to another, from one sphere of life to another and through these shifts Kamala Das

emerges as someone whose universality is marked by the particularity that makes her 'self'"(*Texts And Their Worlds I: Literatures Of India An Introduction*121).

Das likes and dislikes her body because she speaks that her parents never told her that they were disappointed by the skin color of Das, She has mentioned in her autobiography that, "I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses" (*My Story* 9). She remembers one incident of her father when he asked her grandmother to apply turmeric and oil on her skin. Das wanted her father's love and affection but she did not get it in the way she wanted. She was dark with ordinary feature. She again mentioned that her father was "not of an affectionate nature" so she grew up more or less as a neglected child.

Before Das no other Indian women writer could bring to the forefront the universal female psyche in an uninhibited manner. Sometime she feels that both herself and for other Indian women was broadly similar situation at that time. In her poetry Das expresses every women desire. She rebels against the exploitation of women in a male oriented world. Her verse set apart with stunning rebellion against the prohibited sexual openness, without any doubt she uncovers the hidden reality of the society with a fearless attitude.

No doubt Das was the greatest women poet in contemporary Indian English literature. Das display feminist ethos in her poetry with confessional mood. Das main purpose of her poetry is concentrating upon the inner quality of being women appears to be associated with analyses revealing the collective feminine psyche in its response to the external realities in which it is nurtured. Throughout her poetry she shows a longing for an emotionally stable life, can be achieved only through true love. She expresses her need for love uninhibitedly:

O sea, I am fed up

I want to be simple

I want to be loved

And If love is not to be had

I want to be dead, just dead.... (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*35)

Emotional love is so important for her, that without love she feels dead. Z. F. Molvi mentioned that, “love is the essence of her life but in real life she has to wear the mask of a happy woman and wife in the male-dominated, urbanized Indian society.”(*Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum*97).

It is to be noticed that the love and lust are the part of love and expression. Love and lust run together. In this concern, one can't separate the love from lust, but it is remarkable to notice that socialization of man makes differences. She mentioned in her autobiography that; “love has a beginning and an end, but lust has no such faults.”(*My Story* 178)This distinction is the request of the poetess. Woman is an eminent part of our society and this class should not be suppressed. Although she wants to run away and escape, traditions and customs of her society bind her. She is helpless, trapped in the prison of marriage. She is held a convict under false pretences, and she yearns for her release. Hope is the only key that keeps her struggle on, helping her survive. K R Srinivasa Iyengar writes "Kamala Das's is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world" (*Indian Writing in English* 680).

Kamala Das proclaims the genuine need of woman class. Love and Sex are central emotions of the poetess. It is striking point of her poetry. One cannot deny the fact that Kamala Das has expressed her ideas in the matrix of love and sex. The most remarkable and the most striking point of Kamala Das as a poet were her sexual dissatisfaction and the disappointment of her marriage life. The disappointment of a woman to achieve happiness through her sexual relationship with her better half and even through a comparable relationship with other men, repeats in many poems by Kamala Das. The dissatisfaction coming because of aggregate disappointment of her marriage and search for happiness through indiscriminate sexual relationship with other men constitutes a substantial segment of her poetry.

All of us have an intense desire to be loved and nurtured, which is considered to be one of the most basic fundamental needs of every human being. Kamala Das universalizes the suffering of women and seeks freedom, love and identity. The poem become a statement on gender differences and a move to transcend the restrictions imposed on a woman by seeking individual freedom, love that allows the body to come to terms with its own needs and a self that is allowed to celebrate love's true glory. She writes that she is not influenced by any poet in this matter, that she hardly read anyone's poetry. She shows how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself

in the minds of the readers. In the words of N. D. R Chandra, “Kamala Das poems are an event of writing set against the kind of stereotypical representation of women by men in both culture and literature”. (*Modern Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions* 290).

Kamala Das is without a doubt a sensitive and painful soul in Indian poetry in English. Her poetry introduces the picture of her feminine self as tormented youthful women. Das poetry mainly related to her own self, poet's intense passions to the world by beginning with the self. Her poetry appeals to the reader directly.

In India the social and domestic condition of a woman was like a colony under a colony. All women were bound to tolerate the pains of domestic and social marginalization. Her bold and open expression makes her the literary artists of India. Sex word was the taboos to the Nair family but Das mentions it with bold attitude and she break the traditional rule of Indian family that's why she had a unique kind of personality. In the poem “Convicts” she portrayed the theme of lust. The convicts are the lovers and their desire is universal. The lovers have lost their separate genders in the heat of lust. She writes, “When he / And I were one, we were neither / Male nor Female.” (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 69) The destruction of individual identities in the clout of desire takes the distinguishably hard state of a powerful pride.

That was the only kind of love,  
 This hacking at each other's parts  
 Like convicts hacking, breaking clods  
 At noon . . . (69)

Her poetry is overloaded by intensity of passion. Das articulation of dialect gives to the readers a true and silent picture of love which she expresses in all her poetry. In the words of Aroonima Sinha,

It is of course the sexual frankness of Kamala Das that shocks and amuses the general reader. She talks nonchalantly and uninhibitedly about love and sex. But a closer look at her poems makes us familiar with the restlessness of her soul and desire to be loved and wanted. (*Indian English Poetry and Fiction: Critical Elucidations* 47)

She actually feels that they are the bondage of slavery in man dominated society. She expressed her feminist movement through her poetry. She has become the mouthpiece of all women's of that time. The innocence of her childhood got shattered by the terrifying experience of the adult world. She shows that only true love can give a person emotional and spiritual satisfaction. She was sexually abused and misused by those whom she loved and were known to her. O. J. Thomas commenting on that, "Her search for love and kindness ends up in a barren wasteland, where there is neither life nor hope. She spends her life in agony and frustrations, repenting and weeping most of the time" (*Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum* 42).

Desire of affection and to be cherished leads the woman on the way of disappointment. Kamala Das over and over express her feminine attention to it. The country of woman is the socially built one. The traditions customs and standards of male arranged society forced woman to acknowledge the negative and inactive part. For the sake of affection she is sexually abused through the institution like marriage. Testing these custom Kamala Das progressed toward becoming agitator and nonconformist. By her poem she universalizes her own encounters as the sufferings of the whole womanhood.

Kamala Das is a women's activist of Indian brand. Her verse shows the view that both man and women are correlative to each other. She thinks that manmade system is the reason for exploitation, enslavement of woman. Her poems are marked as protest against the male dominated society. The subject of love underlines the man-woman relationship, female physical experiences, mythological allusions, feminine sensibilities and her search for identity. Her decision to show these pictures in her poetry communicates her feminine consciousness.

She was vanquished by her husband and lovers in various ways. Who so ever she loved them never understand her feelings and desire what she wants from all of them, she is tired looking for affection. It was a painful journey of her life. Everybody cheated her so badly. They have a solid feeling of pity for her. Her unsecure and tormented body feels the need of the warm arms of a man. She needs to be free from this unfaithful relationship. Her spirit turns humble for change. She can find for herself the free space of her own self where she achieves mental relax. Continuation of such sort of physical torment made her feel that love and affection was not true to her. Heartbreaking experiences demolished her internal world.

**Conclusion:** Das reveal her private life incidents in front of the readers. The tone of the character is without a doubt the tone of the poet; by one means or another misuse of the self is secretively done. Kamala Das is a fervent feminist she emphasis the plight of being a women through the medium of poetry. She protest against male domineering society and expresses the anger for exploitation of woman by male. Kamala Das advocated women to voice for their inherent right and protest against the society if they hinder the growth of her personality.

Kamala Das protested against the patriarchal society as a feminist she tried to recover the character of woman. Her works of literature gave a voice to female feelings and emotion. She opened new avenues to poetry by boldly writing about sex and sexuality. She exposed the male dominance and promoted discovery of literature of woman. Her literature made the earnest impression in the Indian English Literature. She is a rebel and voiced against the restraint in the manmade world. In many of her manifestation she gives the impression of feminine sensibility. She wrote many of her experiences she faced as a woman. She engraves her childhood as neglected and then her disaster early marriage. She gives the impression of frustrations and failures in male dominated world in her poems collection as well as her autobiography.

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