

Confessional Poetry of Kamala Das

Ananda Kumar

Ph.D. Scholar

Dept. of English

Monad University, Hapur. UP

Dr. Kavita Rani

Associate Professor

Research Guide

Dept. Of English

Monad University, Hapur. UP

Kamala Das is widely regarded as one of India's most prominent living female writers. Das has written extensively in both English and his native Malayalam, including multiple autobiographical works and novels, several volumes of well-received English poetry, countless volumes of short stories, and articles covering a wide range of topics. Since her first poetry book, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), was published, Das has been recognised as a leading poet of her generation. She represents a radical departure from traditional forms of literature by adopting a uniquely Indian voice and style rather than that of the English modernists. The self and female sexuality, city life, women's roles in traditional Indian society, postcolonial identity, and the political and psychological problems of marginalised people are all topics that Das addresses head-on in her thought-provoking poems. The P.E.N. Philippines Asian Poetry Prize (1963), the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for her writing in Malayalam (1969), the Chiman Lal Award for fearless journalism (1971), the ASAN World Prize (1985), and the Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry in English (1985) are just a few of the many awards and honours bestowed upon Das. The Nobel Committee considered her for the award in 1984.

Das was born on March 31, 1934, in Malabar (now Kerala), India, to a wealthy Nair Hindu family. The Rajas were a caste of Hindu aristocracy that her maternal ancestors belonged to. Her early passion in poetry was fostered by her famous great-uncle Narayan Menon and her mother, the well-known Malayali poet Balamani Amma. The religious writings of the matriarchal Nairs group, notably their poetry, also had a great impact on Das. Although Das's father was the managing director of a British automobile, he was born into poverty and supported Gandhi's austerity and nonviolence. Das experienced feelings of inadequacy and estrangement as a result of colonialism, its pervasive racism, and his dual "royal" and "peasant" identities. Das, who was born in Malabar and raised in Calcutta and went to school there, wrote her first poem when she was fourteen years old, and P.E.N. India published it. She did not attend college, in contrast to the rest of her family. She married Reserve Bank of India officer Madhava Das in 1949; he afterwards joined the UN. At the age of sixteen, she gave birth to the first of her three kids, and at the age of eighteen, she started writing frequently. The couple was romantically inappropriate due to his homosexual liaisons and her adulterous escapades, according to Das's 1976 autobiography *My Story*, but Madhava nevertheless supported Das to write. The metropolitan culture they encountered in Calcutta, New Delhi, and Bombay as well as Das's own experiences there influenced her poetry.

In addition to writing poetry, fiction, and autobiography, Das edited The Illustrated Weekly of India's poetry department twice, from 1971 to 1972 and again from 1978 to 1979. In 1981, Das and her husband retired and relocated to Kerala. Das made an independent bid to join the Indian Parliament in 1984. After the passing of her husband, Das converted to Islam and changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya. She currently resides in Kerala, where she writes a syndicated weekly offering cultural and political commentary.

At the young age of fifteen, she wed Madhava Das, a bank officer, and with his help, she started publishing books in both Malayalam and English. The 1960s in Calcutta were a volatile time for the arts, and Kamala Das's poetry was published in cult anthologies at that time, along with that of a generation of Indian English writers. She was well-known for both her short tales and poems in Malayalam and English. Das's columns were widely read and circulated. Although she claimed that "poetry does not sell in this country [India]," her candid works were extensively read due to her views on a variety of subjects, including politics, women's rights, and child care.

Das's first book of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta*, was a breath of fresh air in the tradition of Indian English poetry. She mainly concentrated on the hurt caused by love betrayal. In her second collection of poetry, the descendants, Ms. Das rejected the safety provided by an outdated and somewhat sterile aestheticism in favour of a freedom of mind and body at a period when Indian poets were still constrained by "19th-century diction, sentiment, and romanticised love."

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 ..." - *The Looking Glass*

The frankness of her writing style drew analogies to those of Sylvia Plath and Marguerite Duras. At the age of 42, she published a controversial autobiography titled *My Story*, which she had previously written in Malayalam and then translated into English. Stories by Kamala Das that are particularly well-known include *Pakshiyude Manam*, *Neypayasam*, *Thanuppu*, and *Chandana Marangal*, while her novels include *Neermathalam Pootha Kalam*, which was well-received by readers and critics alike. Her works have been translated into French, Spanish, Russian, German, and Japanese, and she has read her poetry at venues as diverse as the South Bank Festival in London, the South Bank in Montreal, Canada, the Adelaide Writer's Festival in Australia, the University of Kingston in Jamaica, Singapore, and the South Bank in London, among many others.

She has also held positions as vice chair of the Kerala Sahitya Academy, head of the Kerala Forests Board, editor of the magazine *Poet*, and poetry editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. She is currently the president of the Kerala Children's Film Society. The *Times* referred to her as "the mother of modern English Indian

poetry" in 2009, despite the fact that she had first drawn criticism for being overly flashy. She is now considered as a pioneer of modern Indian English poetry.

From 1965 until 1985, Das wrote six books of poetry. Das writes of deeply intimate experiences, such as her development into womanhood, her unsuccessful search for love in and outside of marriage, and her existence in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home, drawing on religious and domestic images to explore a sense of identity. Das has gained notoriety with the release of *Summer in Calcutta* and is renowned for her unique visuals and candour. Das explores her sexuality and her search for fulfilment in poems like "The Dance of the Eunuchs" and "The Freaks," which both reference the exotic. Das makes previously private experiences public in "An Introduction," arguing that women's individual experiences of longing and grief are a part of the common experience of womanhood. The poetry "The Looking-Glass" in the book *The Descendants* (1967) indicates that women are expected to contribute the very things society deems taboo. The poem "The Maggots" weaves the grief of lost love with ancient Hindu stories. Poems like "The Inheritance" discuss the integrity of the artistic self in the face of religious fanaticism, while "Substitute," "Gino," and "The Suicide" examine the failure of physical love to provide fulfilment, escape from the self, and exorcism of the past. Das uses Krishna to explore the conflicts between physical love and spiritual transcendence in *Tonight, This Savage Rite: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Prithish Nandy* (1979). The Tamil akam ("interior") poems, which juxtapose the magnificence and permanence of nature with the transience of human history, are reworked in *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), a collection of brief poems written after Das was defeated in the parliamentary elections of 1984. Poems like "Delhi 1984" and "Smoke in Colombo" refer to the Sri Lankan civil war and the Sikh massacre, respectively. Das describes her adulterous affairs and her terrible marriage to Madhava Das in *My Story*, which was first published in serial style. *The Alphabet of Lust*, a novel she wrote in 1977, and many collections of English short tales are among her other works. Das has released a large number of books in the Malayalam language under the name Madhavi Kutty.

Das's outspoken poetry has rarely elicited cool responses from critics, who have a close relationship with their perceptions of her politics and personality. While praising Das's early poetry for its passionate originality, provocative imagery, exploration of feminine sexuality, and profoundly personal voice, critics bemoaned the lack of artistry and attention to form. Researchers including Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar have discovered strong feminist images in Das' poetry, focusing on criticisms of motherhood, marriage, women's relationships to their bodies and control over their sexuality, as well as the roles that women are given in traditional Indian society. Many commentators have described Das as a "confessional" poet who writes in the vein of Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Though they have also complimented Das's arresting visuals and distinctive style, several academics, including Vimala Rao, Iqbar Kaur, and Vrinda Naur, have criticised her poetry, autobiography, and essays as being frustratingly inconsistent, self-indulgent, and ambivalent. According to such commentators, Das is both overexposed and overrated. The emphasis on the self in Das's work has been linked by other scholars, like P. P. Raveendran, to more extensive historical and cultural settings and complex, evolving postcolonial identities. The relevance of Das' decision to write about her experiences as an Indian woman in English has divided Indian critics; some

academics contend that by eschewing conventional artistic form, Das has invented a new language for the presentation of colonial contradictions. Although critics vary on the artistic merits and coherence of Das's body of work, they all agree that Das is a significant author whose unflinching candour has revived Indian writing in English

The ability to write in an Indian English, however, is Kamala Das's crowning achievement. Kamala Das once said that she tried to imitate her mother Nalapat Balamani Amma (born 1909), who was a well-known poet writing traditional poetry in her mother tongue which was Kerala. Already at an early age, Kamala Das turned to writing poetry influenced by her maternal granduncle, the scholar-poet Nalapatt Narayana Menon. Balamani Amma translated a small collection of her poetry into English and wrote in her foreword: "My life that slowly unfolds its petals amidst the dazzling light is honeyed with poetry...I have tried my best throughout these poems to keep my optimism undimmed" (in Sanjuhta Das 1978, 196). Her daughter's poetry stands in sharp contrast to this sweet and sublime view. Kamala Das's first publication in the early 1960s caused a breakthrough for confessional poetry by women written in a seemingly colloquial English language. In *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Bruce King stakes a large claim for Das's poetry: Kamala Das's most remarkable achievement, however, is writing in an Indian English. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of a national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech; and it is especially important for women writers.

Such a development is not a matter of national pride or a linguistic equivalent of 'local colour'; rather it is a matter of voice, tone, idiom and rhythm, creating a style that accurately reflects what a writer feels or is trying to say instead of it being filtered through speech meant to reflect the assumptions and nuances of another society. According to Eunice de Souza in *Nine Indian Women Poets – An Anthology* (1997), women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. "She mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms". Kamala Das writes about previously forbidden or ignored emotions, sexual needs within and outside marriage, suffering and shame caused by freedom and honesty. Other topics are the power politics in relationships, the instability of feelings, disappointment and depression caused by the division between body and soul, sexuality and love, and she often writes about death. Alongside these seemingly self-centred investigations, she expresses her sensibility for social injustice. Like her poetic foremother Sarojini Naidu, she moved from poetry to politics in the cause of social concerns.

Kamala Das's mother was largely absent from her life; she watched her mother "write poetry lying on her bed all day long," and her maternal grandmother took over as the primary carer and provider.

The poetry of Kamala Das exhibits a daring, genuine examination of women's individuality and emotion. The poems display the brutal candour that distinguishes her body of work. The aim of "Kamala Das" pro-feminist stance was to observe how power is used in a patriarchal culture and to discover a growing number of instances of injustice against women.

Kamala has undoubtedly outgrown Victorian ideals and recognised that sex and sensuality are an essential component of poetry. Numerous of her poems are infused with the warmth and passion of unrequited love and unmet longing. The repeated use of the theme of love might annoy nuns and spinsters and make general readers bored, but like Sappho in Greek literature, Elizabeth Barret Browning in English literature, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath in contemporary American poetry, Mrs. Das provides us with a feast of vivid images of love couched in lovely language. Her forte in poetry is without a doubt love.

Similar to the British Classic Poets, who were obsessed with writing epic, Kamala is obsessed with penning autobiographical poems that are, in Lyengar's words, "aggressively individualistic," in Walsh's words, "self-centered," and in Elias's words, "rather the Nair maiden unburdening her collective nightmare." She is known as Kerala's "Queen of Erotica" for being open and honest about her sexuality and gender identity. Her "desperate obsession with love" (Sarang) or "more appropriately with intimacy" (Raveendran), as described by critics, has been extensively discussed. Due to this, she became "a prisoner of her loneliness," according to Dwivedi.

I also know that by confessing by peeling off my layers I reach closer to the soul... I shall some day see my world de-flashed, de-veined, de-blooded...

As the aforementioned lines demonstrate, Kamala Das is a confessional poet whose works have been likened to those of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, etc. Her poetry is self-centered and overtly sexual, yet William Walsh claims that the poet finds her sexuality more fascinating than the fact that it is sexual. M.K. Naik also refers to her confessional poetry as "sex dominated" and refers casually to "the musk of sweat between the breasts" and "the warm shock of menstrual blood." She speaks of her sexual encounters in a tone that "you cannot believe darling," which is both self-indulgent and truculent. She repeatedly criticises her husband-lover in her poems and expresses her fervent wish to escape herself from his control. She acknowledges that, as a result of her husband's lack of love,

"Love became a swivel-door When one went out, another came in Then I lost count, for always in my arms was a substitute for a substitute".

Her husband's kisses are like "maggots" crawling over "the corpse" as they land on her cheeks. She just understands 'physical' love; she makes no attempt to communicate with her on an emotional or spiritual level. Rarely is another Indo-English lady poet to be found with this level of "openness and frankness." The resulting image is an unaltered, living biological reality of a man or woman made of flesh and blood. As a poet of love and sex, Kamala is obviously at her finest in this piece, as Lyengar notes: "Her poetry is aggressively individualistic."

Love and "the body's wisdom" are two topics that Kamala compulsively muses over in her confessional poems. Like Whitman, she writes poems about the pelvic region, which is why Lyengar refers to her as a "Femme Fatal." Love plays a variety of functions in her poetry, including "skin communicated thing," overwhelming force, escape, longing, and desire that ends in satiety. She is undoubtedly a proponent of the human body, and Dwivedi observes that "her poetry is overflowing with images and symbols of love and lust." The confessional poetry by Kamala reveal that she represents "every woman who seeks Love." She expresses her "endless female hunger," "the muted whisper at the core of womanhood," and is "the beloved and the betrayed." A confessional poet frequently writes about devastation, illness, and death. Additionally, Kamala Das has produced numerous poems about degeneration, illness, and death.

Although Kamala Das, a confessional poet, can use any topic for his work, he mostly sticks to the realm of his own experiences. In contrast to Wordsworth and his group of followers, he rarely writes about "old, unhappy, far-off things," which is why confessional poetry seems so alluring and convincing. Kamala's verse is a brilliant example of how it constantly turns to the personal shortcomings and mental instability of its author. The following lines appear in My Grandmother's House and click:

“.....I who have lost my way and beg now at strangers' doors to Receive love, at least in small change”.

In addition, Kamala is not a confessional poet like Sylvia Plath, according to Nabar. However, Kamala's poetry bears a striking resemblance to Eunice de Souza, whose poetry "has the anger, the frankness, the willingness, to confront unpleasantness in social as well as personal relationships" again, like her. However, "the most striking single aspect of Kamala's writings is the need to bare her, to hold nothing back as it were, to erupt in an intimate, confessional frenzy, to "have no secrets at all" from the reader" (Kamala Gupta). In *The Fair Voice*, (Nabar) Sunanda Chavan notes that the experience of personal love is "almost exclusively" addressed in her poems. The same idea is emphasised by Varinda Nabar in *The Endless Female Hungers*, who claims that Surayya's later poetry "withdraws increasingly into a world of purely personal grievances..., because they are what her love poetry embodies" and even expresses irritation at the poet's wearisome attitude and propensity for role playing. Because of her particular position among Indian women poets, it would be wrong to limit that poet to a narrow confession while disregarding other important characteristics that demand special treatment. Because poetry "doesn't sell in this country," as she observes, Kamala, a versatile lady who has dabbled with numerous types of art—poetry, fiction, drama, painting—has moved on to being a newspaper columnist, a "professional writer," in order to exist.

Kamala Das is a pioneering writer of Indian English poetry who emerged after the country's independence and made a significant contribution to the expansion and advancement of contemporary Indian English poetry. She is one of the modernist authors in Indian literature to express her humanity as a woman; she has developed a cult following in her native state and is a major inspiration and role model for women with aspirations in the arts. Her life has been a protracted struggle against a religious and cultural orthodoxy that disapproves of the relatively solitary lifestyles of his obviously outspoken people. In conclusion, Kamala Das is a typical confessional poet who pours her heart into her poetry, most of which is subjective and autobiographical, tormented and tortured, allowing us to see into her struggles and damaged psyche. It is because of her that current Indo-English poetry at last has a dependable poetic voice. According to Dwivedi, Mrs. Das is a Confessional poet of the highest calibre because of the significant autobiographical element in her work

Overall, Kamala is a pioneering writer of Indian English poetry who emerged after the country's independence and made a significant contribution to the expansion and advancement of contemporary Indian English poetry. She is one of the modernist authors in Indian literature to express her humanity as a woman; she has developed a cult following in her native state and is a major inspiration and role model for women with aspirations in the arts. Her life has been a protracted struggle against a religious and cultural orthodoxy that disapproves of the relatively solitary lifestyles of his obviously outspoken people. In conclusion, Kamala Das is a typical confessional poet who pours her heart into her poetry, most of which is subjective and autobiographical, tormented and tortured, allowing us to see into her struggles and damaged psyche. It is because of her that

current Indo-English poetry at last has a dependable poetic voice. According to Dwivedi, Mrs. Das is a Confessional poet of the highest calibre because of the significant autobiographical element in her work

Bibliography

Rosenthal, M. L. . Poetry as Confession, The Nation, 1959

Guleria, S. "On the Sub Version of Patriarchy in Indian Women Poetry in English" (S. K. Paul & A. N. Prasad, Eds.). Indian Poetry in English Roots and Blossoms (Part-1 ed., Vol. 1, p. 272). New Delhi: Sarup & Sons. 2007

Sexton, A. (2004). Anne Sexton: A self-portrait in letters. Ed, Sexton, L. Gray and L. Ames, New York: Mariner Books.

Das, Kamala (1988). My Story. New Delhi: Sterling, 1988

---. The Invitation. Calcutta : Writer's Workshop, 1967

---. My Story,(New Delhi: sterling publishers pvt.ltd,1976)

---. Old Playhouse and other poems. Madras: Orient Longman Ltd. , 1973

---. Summer in Calcutta., New Delhi: Everest Press, 1965

Peeradina Saleem, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English. Madras: Macmillian, 1972

Dwivedi, A. N. 2000. Kamala Das and Her Poetry; New Delhi, Doab; House 1983

Robert Phillips, The confessional poets, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University. Press, 1973.