

# KAMALA DAS – CRAVING FOR DEATH

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## Abstract:

“I feel a kinship  
 with death,  
 an aseptic death,  
 I need no prop” (He Is No Surgeon:54)

*Kamala Das is one of the most influential post-independent modern Indian woman poets who struck the core of the society with her very free and frank submission about her very personal longings and sufferings through her poetry. No other Indian poet could show such intensity of personal thought the way Das presented through her writing of verse. Her aggressive confession of her emotional and sexual life was unprecedented in Indian society during the 60's and even today. She writes about herself to challenge the conventional ideas of the feminine identity by altering the collective view of the concept of womanly appeal. She efficiently dismisses the prevailing social power structures to create for herself a domicile in the male subjugated culture. She changes her existent ostracized place and decides to take her accurate role as a noteworthy part of the society. However, Death is one of the major themes of the poems of Kamala Das. At times she seems to be very much obsessed with the idea of death that she writes about the end of life opulently in a number of her poems in such a fashion that no other poet could express the same such penetratingly. Death serves to her as a liberating force from the sufferings of this man-made world.*

**Key Words:** Kamala Das, Feminism, Death, Confessional Poetry.

## Introduction:

Kamala Das is essentially a confessional poet. In the introduction of the book Selected poems by Kamala Das, Devindra Kohli remarks “*Kamala Das's poems offer no resolution or closure but it breaks the traditional silence instead of mirroring it*” Through her honest and aggressive confessions, the poet finds a way to relieve her stress and anxiety which is a result of her being trapped in a male dominated world. She always feels uprooted from her patriarchal environment where she was born and brought up. Her life in the cities after her marriage turned out to be very much oppressive and she always felt the hollowness of such a society where everything of a woman is determined by the male counterpart. She felt overruled in the loveless marriage but the society never tried to recognize her pain. On the contrary, they told her to accept a submissive role by changing her own identity by transforming herself to a mere housewife. The society forced her to remain a stereotype woman by wearing sari, talking timidly and quarrelling with the servants like any other common woman does in a patriarchal society. But she is a rebellious woman by nature. She cannot accept the so-called prescriptions of the society to be a ‘good woman’ in their eyes by forsaking her own identity. So, she became desperate to find true love in other men. But most probably she forgot that she, after all, belongs to a society where women are reduced to merely an object of pleasure and lust. So, it was obvious that she failed in such a mission and attained no peace in her life. She felt alienated and helpless. Life seemed to her as a course of suffering. So often the idea of death popped up in her poems for death became the symbol of freedom from the painful experiences of life.

## Objective of the Study:

The objective of this paper is to study Kamala Das's poems to find out her consciousness and idea of death in the context of her painful experiences as a woman in the man-made world. In her poems she strongly expresses her own sufferings as a woman when she realizes that Indian women are pushed to a derogatory and a petty condition. The discrepancy amid her acquainted safe and affectionate home and the life she lived after marriage is apparent in her poems. Her wishes, melancholies and pejorative condition bring out a scruffy image of the helplessness of downgraded women of India. She reveals her assessments on conjugal life, maternity, feminine desires and the role of females without any embarrassment. This paper decodes some of the poems of Kamala Das where the poet holds her pen to relate the psychological sufferings women face in a male dominated society.

## Methodology:

The methodology to be followed in this study shall be accentuating primary sources like *The Best of Kamala Das*, *My Story*, *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Old Play House and Other Poems*, *Alphabet of Lust*, *The secondary sources include books including Poems of India*, *Indian Verse in English: A Contemporary Anthology*, *As Moderns II: Kamala Das. The Fair Voice: A study of Indian Women Poets in English*, *Modern Indo-English Poetry*, *Hers: An Anthology of Poetry in English by Indian Women*, *As a Poet of Love and Sex*, *Kamala Das and Her Poetry*, *Indo-Anglian Poetry*, *Kamala Das: Selected Poems*, *The Endless Female Hungers: A Study of Kamala Das*, *Kamala Das: The Voice of Rebel*, *Facing Four* (Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Suniti Namjoshi, Bharati Sarabhai) etc. The methodology of the present work shall be descriptive and analytical based on the above and cited sources.

## Craving for Death:

According to Sunita B. Nimavat "*She feels that loneliness is an eternal phenomenon in human life. Pain and sufferings are permanent companions of mankind*". Many of the poems of Kamala Das centre on the feeling of death as a result of her unrequited desire of real love. In such futile pursuits every time she finds herself abandoned in the hands of her destiny sanctioned by the male domain that only takes a woman as an object of physical pleasure by completely ignoring the emotional facet of womanhood. Consequently, her poems are full of sun-scorched desolation in a humid realm with the odor of rotting junk and death. A.N. Dwivedi remarks "*The obsession with 'the idea of death' made her a spent force, almost a dead wood, even in the midst of resourceful persons and modern amenities of life*". In '*On Aging*' Das articulates her anxiety about her getting old and the thought of death. The idea of death comes to her mind and she feels she cannot evade or ignore death which is inevitable. While she thinks about the advantages of being old, the thought of death trespasses into her mind. '*Thrombosis*' reveals the poet's realization about disease and death. She says that her sickness melts all the barriers of her past and the present. Now she is prepared for death and bids goodbye. She believes there is no isolated existence of pleasure and grief in the time of death and one becomes his own 'collapsing axis'. In '*He Is No Surgeon*' she tries to find her lost days of seclusion desperately for she loves to be in isolation, emerging in her own world. In sleep she feels inestimable freedom. She asks whether this escape in the sleep is the right way to attain a happy life, a life embellished with slogans, a life that resembles a political campaign. She shrinks away from everything living and feels an intimacy with a sterile death. She asks herself if she needs to buy a new soul to replace the old.

"If there had been a soul  
it is wrinkled  
as a raisin  
lying in the sun". (*He Is No Surgeon*: 54-55)

In '*A Relationship*' the poet says the man can never betray her physically. But she does not pay any heed to the wounds of words because her perception says she will find her peacefulness, her sleep, her harmony and even her death in her betrayer's arm. In '*My Morning Tree*' the poet despondently hopes that one day she will see a red flower on the branch of the tree and welcome her death with a smile. '*With Its Quiet Tongue*' she describes her heart 'wretched' and 'cold' like the 'pale green mirrors/One sees in corridors'. The poet mocks those who come to her life with their 'happiest smiles' and hunger for sycophancy before they walk away. But she is not willing to break into tears for she questions the rationality of loss and gain in a love-affair. According to her, the death of passion is not a death 'but a sleep'. '*The Suicide*' is a very reflective poem of Das and her concern with the inevitability of death is revealed in this poem. Das explains how the body without a soul shall remain so incomplete. She downheartedly asks which of these two is more dead, her body or her soul. The following lines reveal the poet's aversion for fleshly love for she is worn-out of the physical intimacy that is unable to yield genuine love of the soul...

‘I throw the bodies out  
I cannot stand their smell’ (*The Suicide:39*)

She has enough courage to accept death but she cannot disobey him who has asked her not to die and hurt him ‘in a certain way’. The poet longs to be simple and be loved and without love her life has no meaning. Rather, she wants to die if she is not loved. In her dream she finds her body drifting away and as she goes down even deeper with joy...

“Bereft of body  
My soul shall be free.  
Take in my naked soul” (*Suicide:43*)

In the subsequent stanza the poet still dwells in her dream swimming in a euphoric mood. The word ‘happy’ is repeated to show the nature of happiness in her mind. She repeats that without the soul the body will be liberated. She asks the sea to take her stripped soul...

‘That he knew how to hurt’  
‘Only the souls know how to sing  
At the vortex of the sea.” (*The Suicide:43*)

In ‘*The Doubt*’ the poet questions whether after death a man or a woman is called not by his or her name but with the pronoun ‘It’. The poet questions whether this means that only souls have sex and ‘sex is invisible’. Then she turns to a scene where after love making the male sincerely prepares the bed as if, to the poet, it seems like a murderer who, with his ‘Finicky hands’, omits the evidence of the homicide. In ‘*Composition*’ the poet is traumatized by the emotion and wants to seek relief by taking a long walk ‘into the sea/ and lie there, resting, / completely uninvolved’. But beyond her desire to rest there is the desire of death, ‘To crumble, /to dissolve’. She finds herself stuck in the thought of immortality where death only can provide her the final freedom from this painful life. In ‘*Requiem for a Son*’ the poet poignantly writes that death is very commonplace for living seems to her more challenging...

“on an earth built upon layers and  
Layers of bone requires an extraordinary  
Courage”. (*Requiem for a Son:101*)

‘*Death Is So Mediocre*’ is written in the same fashion. She sadly divulges that death is something mediocre for anyone can access relief from the discomforts of life by a quick death. In self-disgust she admits that her suffering still is retained in the act of infidelity, which has no aesthetics for such a thing has become repetitive and dull...

"I shall go too in silence leaving not  
Even a finger print on this crowded earth,  
.....  
The hundred misunderstandings that destroyed  
My alliances with you and you and you..." (*Death Is So Mediocre: 109-110*)

In ‘*The Sensuous Woman*’ her relaxed state of being omits the barrier between life and death and she ‘straddles/The handless clock face of eternity’. In ‘*The Cart Horse*’ Kamala Das articulates sudden death as a lucky thing for not everyone has the freedom of getting relief from life’s agonies so effortlessly by death. In ‘*I shall not Forget*’ Das talks about her own sickness which wove a grey burial raiment for her. Her body turned into a blighted seed, withering in hopelessness, rotting to the core. Her inner conscience fails to see something positive ahead. She dreams of strange dreams like the night, like a black bird drawing a tattoo on her courtyard with its feet when the dark ocean holding its white hand of death on her gate suggesting her fondness for death. But still the poet doesn’t want to give up her hope for...

“I have seen death  
And I shall never forget...” (*I Shall Not Forget: 115*)

‘*The Ferry Hour*’ also expresses the poet’s consciousness about death. She attempts to obliterate her regretful remembrances of the past. The ferry hour symbolises the coming death when she would be sailed away by a vessel to the sea which suggests death. In ‘*Anamalai Poems*’ the poet sounds very enthusiastic about death and rebirth. She finds

that God ultimately brings an end to the sufferings of a wretched person with true love through death. According to Bruce King, “*There is a dualism in her writing, in which soul is contrasted to body. She seems to imagine overcoming this dualism only through death; her poems are filled with longings to die, especially to drown in the sea, water being associated in her mind with all-encompassing, universal calm, a formlessness in contrast to the conscious mind and body of the anxious individual*”.

### Conclusion:

Death has become a predominating theme in a number of poems of Das’s poetry. Craving for death turns out to be very prominent in the subconscious of the poet. She finds comfort in the thought of death in the utmost dejected state of her mind. She attempts to escape from the painful experiences of life by embracing death. The disparity between the warm atmosphere of her ancestral house and the post-marital life in the cities become overwhelmingly traumatic to the poet and she attempts to overcome this feeling of rejection only through death. She disastrously ends up involving in extra-marital relationships in the pursuit of true love and consequently a terrible feeling of rejection fills her heart to the core. She develops abhorrence for her own existence which she often resolves to redress by embracing death in her mind.

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