

## A Quest For Identity In Kamala Das's Poetry

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### **Abstract**

Born in the society of traditions and conservative outlook, Kamala Das has distinguished herself as a prominent writer of outspoken character and free out-look. With all her candid expressions about the feminine sensibility, she has come to be recognized as a writer of extraordinary caliber. She has been appreciated as a great writer of her own self. She disclose the, secrets of feminine inner world and startles all those who are accustomed to the traditions prevailing around us. From, physical to spiritual and from spiritual to sublimation appears to be the sole motive of Kamala Das in her writings. Poetic expression helps her in disclosing her inner features faithfully. Due to her novel thoughts about the stark reality of the feminine world, she has been recognized and honoured as a major Indo-Anglican poet. The use of concentrated images and symbols has linked her to the high traditions of English poetry running on both sides of the Atlantic and even in the countries lying far and wide. Such a great name rising from the Indian soil deserves to be remembered for all those things she has done. The poetry of Kamala Das has given, a new dimension to the feminine expression. Her poetry is a kind of feminine ejaculation of a repressed and tortured soul. A close analysis of her poetic sensibility grounded in the feminine inner world will provide a new dimension of thought – a thing which has generally been ignored in the male – dominated society. It is therefore, interesting to record the life circumstances of such a great feminine personality who has struggled through various ups and downs, zigzags and labyrinths of life.

**Key Words:** Images and Symbols, Marginalization, Exploitation, Psychological Exploration and Ambivalence.

In the society to which Kamala Das belongs it was impossible for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke, against a male's sense of superiority because the male almost occupied the position of a God. Das felt that a woman has always belonged to the deprived category of human beings. This kind of gender arrangements must have disturbed her like anything. She realized that woman is not a slave and she has every right to seek freedom. The result was her autobiographical work *My Story* where she successfully threw to the winds her traditional Indian notion of morality. She found pleasure in constantly moving away from the accepted norms of the society. She cannot live her life in accordance with cultural prescription.

Kamala Das wrote about woman suffers in the society. Almost all her works show her concern for the social and cultural construction of gender, raising her protest against marginalization and exploitation of women. Interestingly enough she has also shown that women have no separate existence free from men. This paper is an attempt to have a look at some of the poems of Kamala Das, a quest for identity and see how she treats women in them.

Kamala Das appeared at a time when English poetry by India women had moved on from colonial and nationalist themes to personal experiences. Kamala Das's poetic output covers a wide panorama of themes, more realized settings and deeper feeling, intensity of emotions and speech, rich and full complexity of life. In fact, after the soft and soothing strains of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, the offensive individualism of Kamala Das appears as a shock. Even in this man-made social construct, she voices her feminine quest openly. She is considered to be a subjective poet by critics and her poems are "Product of uncontrollable emotion."

Kamala Das stated her poetic journey through "*Summer in Calcutta*" in 1965 which was followed by: '*The Descendants*' in 1967 and the last one "*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*" in 1973. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar critically examines her poetry and pin-points that, "Love is crucified in sex and sex defiles itself again and again". Always a hit or miss poet who wrote regularly but trusted the muse more than revision, she began to miss more often dealing. Her early poems seem to be an autobiographical odyssey of her self-dealing with marriage, love life, and desire for

intimacy, her guilt fame. Her poems analytically discuss the eternal and universal themes, the new idiomatic devices. Stylistically she develops to communicate the themes in the linguistic discourse of the women to liberate herself from the shackles of flimsy romance and slavery to man.

In '*Summer in Calcutta*' the beautiful images are derived from the world of nature and they visualize the participation in the heady ecstasy and excitement of life. It fascinatingly characterizes the poet's censures, emotional and aesthetic responses to the vibrant spectrum of life at large. The poet's warm response to life echoes not merely sensuousness but also emotive intensity:

"What noble  
Venom now flows through  
My veins and fills my  
Mind with unburied  
Laughter?"

Das's philosophy of life reminds us Rabindra Nath Tagore's view point, "how have the rays of the sun penetrated into my soul this down?" At the climax of her ecstatic involvement in the warm flow of life, all her worries and agonies are relegated to limbo.

Das's passionate demand for love becomes the nucleus of her poems epitomizing the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. Bruce King rightly evaluates the creative impulse of Kamala Das and says :

:In her poetry love and hate are often neighbours just as an assertion of sexual freedom sits near feelings of self-disgust expressed depression. The theatre of Das's poetry includes the revelations, the confessions, the various contradictory bits and pieces".

Das's mode of treatment proves to be dramatic, powerful and iconoclastic:

"I was a child and later they told me. I grew, for I become tall, my limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask for, he drew a youth of sixteen into the bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me. But my sad woman – body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank, pitifully. Then I wore a short and black sarong,

cut my hair shot and ignored all of this womanliness, (*The Best of Kamala Das* : 12),

The woman in Kamala Das challenges the society and chooses to cut short her hair and wear a shirt she wants to forget her womanliness which makes them cry.

The masculinity can be rejected nullified by the woman when she is happily ready to participate in the mirth and merriment of life. Kamala Das discovers this kind of truth in the naturalistic fervour and utters:

'How  
Brief the term of my  
Devotion, how brief  
Your reign when I with  
glass in hand, drink drink  
and drink again this  
Juice of April seems.  
Dress in Sarees, be girl or be wife.  
... Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreler with servants. Fit in, belong,  
said the categorizers.  
Be any or be Kamala. Or, better still be just Madhavikutty. (BKL 12 –  
13)

Kamala Das is popularly known as "Madhavikutty" in Kerala and she continues to write short stories in Malayalam in this name. "Any" is the pet name through which her near ones know her. She wants her critics, friends, and visiting cousins to let her alone and allow her to "speak three – languages, write in two, dream in one."

Kamala Das coup de grace is delivered by "Introduction" which articulates her quest and vision of truth. She exploits the world boldly, "Speaking in a manner in which people not spoken before."

For Kamala Das there is no coming back, no recovery from the lost state. She accepts the present unquestioningly as if it were her preordained fate. Something as final as –

I asked for love, not knowing  
What else to ask

For he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
Bedroom and closed the door.

(Introduction)

In fact, it is both psychological exploration of the self and a social assertion of one's individuality in straight forward terms. The poems begins with the conversational tone and end with nervous urgency. The poet scrutinizes the linguistic differences of English used in everyday life. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" voices here authentic feelings of agony, albeit in an oblique manner.

"Serve beat their drums, other beat their sorry breasts  
And wailed, and wailed in vacant ecstasy."

Her personal life is solely responsible for her head-long plunge into the uncharted sea of sexuality. She finds that adultery is a very common sight in city life. Her husband does not create any hurdle regarding free love and sex life. Das boldly and honestly utters in "*The Stone Age*".

"Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind, Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment. Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, granite dove."

These lines are bristling over with pathos which evoke the image of sensitive feminine soul for freedom and redemption. The high pitch of her tone may appear hysterical but rather it is revelatory. This, however, reminds us of what Juliet Mitchell says in connection with the discourse of hysteria :

"Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, with in patriarchal discourse."

The cohesion between the particular and the general, the local and the universal detects in her the character of the whole humanity, and her humanity is replicated in other women.

Like Shelley, who spent his life in the quest of ideal love and ideal beauty, over-turning citadel of convention, Kamala Das keeps herself busy in search of alternate moods of hope and despair, of glow and gloom in her odyssey for authentic, lustless love. Her disenchantment with married love or extramarital love finds fuller utterance when she says :

Love  
 I no longer need,  
 With tenderness I am must content;  
 I have heart the friendship  
 Cannot endure  
 That blood ties do not satisfy."

(*The Old Playhouse*)

Kamala Das's "*Realms of Gold*" are brimming over with sexual love and passion within orbit where she explores her personality. Wilson Knight critically examines that the wisdom of a poem should not be the wisdom of the poet who creates it. In case of Kamala Das it is difficult to disentangle Kamala the poet, from Kamala, the woman, who suffered and wrote. Nevertheless, "Writing is a means of creating a place in the world, the use of the personal voice and self-revolution are means of self-assertion.

The poem "*Advice of Fellow-Swimmers*" might be taken as one where the poet has a message for her "fellow-swimmers" who naturally should include women. Her advice to them is to take challenges.

Das's sympathies are for the Devadasi when she says.

And you sit on the temple steps  
 A Silent Devadasi, lovelorn  
 And aware of her density.....

(*Lines Addressed to a Devadasi* : 101)

Kamala Das is often described as the first Hindu woman to write honesty about sexual feelings and love. Her poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who attempts to free herself in all possible ways. In her first novel "*Alphabet of Lust*" we find Manasi, the heroine asking her husband what he had given her "during the twenty years of marriage except the two principal meals of the day and a few inexpensive bits of clothing to cover her nakedness" (1976 : 13).

Kamala Das is more than frank and at times full of anger when she projects and hits out at the male domination. Iyenger has observed that Kamala Das has "a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts. It has

received in an insensitive largely manmade world" (680). It is this feminine sensibility that makes her write in *"Next to Indira Gandhi"* :

Father, I ask you now without fear  
Did you want me  
Did you ever want a daughter  
Did I disappoint you much  
With my skin as dark as yours.

(Only the soul knows How to Sing: 118)

Kohli maintains that "her poetry is in the final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman" (1980; 1990). She is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman's ambivalence, giving expression to it more openly than any other Indian woman poet. Thus in her poem *"My Predecessor"* she says :

My love is old but love is older still.  
He said we had been busy all his life and that he had.  
He had no time for play. How shall I believe this man?

(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing : 188)

In her poem "A Feminist Lament" Kamala Das makes certain observation which should open the eyes of those who claim that they are feminists.

"An ideal woman, they said, was but a masochist. Trained from infancy to wear the flannels of cowardice next to her skin, trained to lie inert under a male committed by vows to feed her I clothe her and buy for her the 1000sq. ft flat with a loft for storing the debris of passing years.

She maintains that she never had that ideal dream. What remains of her is :

Widowed and diabetic  
Wrinkling like a bitter ground.

Infidelity, it is implied, can be made the rule by the ordinary morals.

For you  
and me, life is too short  
for absolute bliss and much too long  
alas, for constancy

*(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing : 132)*

Kamala Das' since qua non, however, in her vocabulary, choice of verbs and some syntactical construction are part of what has been turned the Indianization of English. This accomplishment is suggestive in the growth and maturity of national literature that the writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech.

In a nut shell, coverage and honesty are the features that mark the poetry of Kamala Das. She takes a rather independent view of things and never wants to idealize woman. Sometimes her woman celebrate love outside marriage and some other times they suffer for the simple reason that they are married. Most of the time woman in her poems challenges the established norms of the society and asserts herself. But in some of her poems men are more then conspicuous and inevitable partners of women. On the whole the picture of women that emerges from her poems is not a monolithic one. Kamala Das's attitude can certainly be described as one of ambivalence. As Kaur has rightly observed "Kamala Das's name tops the list of the writers who have shown serious concern with the depiction of women in literature and have expressed restlessness with the traditional positioning of women". (1995 : 118).

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