

## Feminist ethos in the poetry of Kamala Das

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### Abstract

Kamala Das, a contemporary Indo- Anglian women writer, has a feminist ethos in her poetry. She wrote under the pseudonym of Madhavikutty in her mother – tongue Malayalam and as Kamala Das in English. Through her poetry she gives expression to the feelings of love, betrayal and the consequent anguish which she had experienced in her life. Her poetry vividly shows that she lived an unhappy and dissatisfied since her childhood due to patriarchy and gender discrimination. She was amongst those writers who wrote about personal experiences instead of the colonial ones as the time demanded. She was born in a conservative Hindu Nair family but latterly converted to Islam on December 11, 1999 being 65 years old and assumed the name Kamala Surayya.

**Keywords:** Kamala Das, feminism, personal feelings, patriarchy, suppression

### Introduction

Kamala Das is beyond doubt the greatest woman poet of Indian Literature. Being a confessional poet she emphasizes the Feminist ethos in her poetry. She very frankly talks about her own predicaments in life, the things she went through because of being a women or I would say an unprivileged gender; be it at her parent's or at her husband's home. For her poetic genius she has bagged many awards, like the P.E.N Asian Poetry Prize, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award etc. She was even short listed for the prestigious Nobel Prize along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Godimer. Her poetical collection includes: "summer in Calcutta" (1965), "Collected Poems 1" (1984), "The Best of Kamala Das" (1991) and "Only the Soul Knows How to Sing" (1996). Her poetry has been translated in many European languages like French, German, Swedish and Serb-Croat.

The collection of Kamala Das's poetry, in fact, is a systematic and chronological study of her life. Kamala Das experienced psychological and emotional trauma since her childhood as her parents were the perpetrators of patriarchy and thus suppressed her individuality by not even allowing her to receive proper education. Although she belonged to a well-educated family yet she was married at the age of 15 only. Even in her marriage she was unloved and uncared by her husband. Being a stereotype husband he neglected his wife proving himself to be an unsympathetic and insensitive man. He devoted his maximum time to his business and work, thus ignoring the emotions of her wife. Kamala Das herself writes about her married life in one of her prose works:

"My husband was immersed in his office work, and after work there was the dinner followed by sex. Where was there any time left for him to want to see the sea or the dark buffaloes of the slopes?"

She complains about her such an early marriage in the poem "Of Calcutta":

"I was sent away, to protect a family's

Honor, to save a few cowards, to defend some  
Abstraction, sent to another city to be  
A relative's wife"

Another blow to her ego, in her married life, was her husband's willingness to let her engage in sexual experiences with others. The Indian women poets writing before her had adjusted themselves to the situation showing neither remorse nor any feeling of revolt. But Kamala Das was strong and rebellious enough a raise a voice against this system of patriarchal domination. She rigidly condemned the traditional role assigned to a women by patriarchy. She shows her remorse on this issue in her poem

"Introduction":

".....then I wore a shirt  
And a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of  
this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife,  
they cried. Be embroiderer, cook or quarreler  
With servants."

In the beginning she feels excited about her love moments with her husband yet they are accompanied by disappointment. She realizes that her lover is not able to satisfy her in love or to give her the love which she deserves. That love cannot provide her the blissful experience which she expects and dreams of. Thus she expresses her frustration in the poem

"The Freaks";  
".....Can this man with  
Nimble finger-tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers?...."

In many of her poems Kamala Das desires for the protection of her identity which was trampled under the so called principles of culture and tradition. In fact she considers patriarchy to be the reason behind such a treatment of women because of which she completely loses her identity. And

through her poetry she expresses her rebelliousness and a demand for the emancipation of women from such oppression. She openly expresses her failure in getting love from her husband because of which she had to knock at other people's doors. In the poem "My Grandmother's House" she herself says:

"I who have lost  
My way beg now at strangers doors to  
Receive love, at least in small change."

This is main feature of her poetry where she constantly discusses the sexual urges of a female and that too in an unusual language. She also frankly talks about the fact that in today's material world love is just a physical craving. At the same time she is aware that desire for each other should better be called lust instead of love. In her poem

"Love" she says:  
"....this skin -communicated  
Thing that I dare not yet in  
His presence call our love."

Das's poems focus on the real satisfying love and the carnal one. And she believes that men may enjoy the carnal love but women only longs for satisfying and fulfilling love. In the poem "An Introduction" she could feel shocked and humiliated due to the hasty and aggressive attitude of men even in love:

"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 and wombs  
crushed me. I shrank  
Pitifully."

Das is a rebel in the literal sense of the word as she did in Indian poetry which was still undone. She, through her poetry tried to break the shackles of society and its old-tradition of treating women as a sheer commodity. Through her poetry she courageously attacks the hypocritical society and thus demands a complete liberation of women from the ruthless age-old traditions suppressing woman and her desire, be it physical or mental. The kind of revolt which she raised through her poetry, against power imbalance shook the Indian society as during those time feminism has yet not made sufficient inroads in the consciousness of the common man. Therefore Kamala Das is a poet concerned with the personal experience of love. And most importantly a feminist who through her poetry ties to resist the male dominance and also to awaken the Indian women to fight for her position. She also focuses this point that in Indian society women is treated as inferior to men because of some religious reasons as well (as believed by Imtiaz Dharker) as all of religious scriptures are written by men themselves. Therefore there is no doubt that what Kamala Das did for Indian poetry and Indian women made her surpass writers like Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu. With her poetry she brought about some hope for the women inspiring them to revolt against any kind of oppression. Thus Kamala Das proves herself to be a poet of fiery feminist sensibility who dares uninhibitedly to articulate

the wounds inflicted upon the female sex by the man – made world. Her poetry reveals her feelings of anxiety, alienation, futility, and alienation and more importantly a loss of identity within her own world. She vividly presents the modern women being ambivalent to her surroundings. She is a woman of combination as she has a good deal of conventionality within herself as well. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is a need to assert, conquer and to dominate. If she describes her longing for a man to fill her life with love, she at the same time is proud of her being a seducer.

## References

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