

## KAMALA DAS AND HER POETRY

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### INTRODUCTION:

Kamala Suraiyya sometimes named as Kamala Madhavikutty ( 31 march 1934 – 31 may 2009) was a major Indian English poet and litterateur and at the same time a leading Malayalam author from Kerala, India. Her popularity in Kerala is based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography, while her oeuvre in English, written under the name Kamala Das, is noted for the fiery poems and explicit autobiography. Her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt, infused her writing with power, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation. On 31 may 2009, aged 75, she died at a hospital in Pune, but has earned considerable respect years.

### EARLY LIFE:

Kamala was born in Punnayurkulam, Thrissur district in Kerala, on 31 march 1934, to V.M. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely circulated Malayalam daily Mathrubhumi, and Nalapat Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poet. She spent her childhood between Calcutta, where her father was employed as senior officer in the Walford Transport Company that sold Bentley and Nalapat ancestral home in Punnayurkulam. Like her mother, Balamani Amma, Kamala Das also excelled in writing. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon, a prominent writer.

At the age of 15, she got married to bank officer Madhava Das, who encouraged her writing interests, and she started writing and publishing both in English and in Malayalam. Calcutta in the 1960s was a tumultuous time for the arts, and Kamala Das was one of the many voices that came up and started appearing in cultural anthologies along with a general of Indian English poets.

### LITERARY CAREER:

She was noted for her many Malayalam short stories as well as many poems written in English. Das was also a syndicated columnist. She once claimed that that “poetry does not sell in this country (India),” but her forthright columns, which sounded off on everything from women’s issues and child care to politics, were popular.

Das’s first book of poetry, “Summer in Calcutta” was a breath of fresh air in Indian English poetry. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Ms. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and anybody at a time when Indian poets were still governed by “19<sup>th</sup>-century diction, sentiment and romanticized love”. Her second book of poetry, *The Descendants* was even more explicit, urging women to:

Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
Long hair, the musk of sweet between the breasts,  
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your  
Endless female hungers...”—*The Looking Glass*

This directness of her voice led to comparisons with Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath. At the age of 42, she published a daring autobiography, ‘My Story’, it was originally written in Malayalam titled *Ente Katha* and later she translated it into English. Later she admitted that much of the autobiography had fictional elements. Kamala Das wrote on a diverse range of topics, often disparate from the story of a poor old servant, about the sexual disposition of upper middle class women living near a metropolitan city or in the middle of the ghetto. Some of her better-known stories include *Pakshiyude Manam*, *Neypayasam*, *Thanuppu*, and *Chandana Marangal*. She wrote a few novels, out of which *Neemathalam Pootha Kalam*, which was received favourably by the reading public as well as the critics, stands out.

She travelled extensively to read poetry to Germany’s University of Duisburg-Essen, University of Bonn and University of Duisburg universities, Adelaide writer’s festival, Frankfurt book Fair, University of Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore, and South Bank Festival (London), Concordia University, etc. her works are available in French, Spanish, Russian, German and Japanese.

She has also held positions as Vice chairperson in Kerala Sahitya Akaemi, chairperson in Kerala Forestry Board, President of the Kerala Children's Film Society, editor of poet magazine and Poetry editor of illustrated Weekly of India. Although occasionally seen as an attention-grabber in her early years, she is now seen as one of the most formative influences on Indian English poetry. In 2009, The Times called her "The mother of modern English Indian poetry".

THE OLD PLAY HOUSE AND OTHER POEMS:

This collection of poems came out in 1973 and contains 33 poems in all of these, fourteen are old Culcutta and rice from. The Descendants the poems reprinted from summery in Cucutta are: "The Freaks", "In Love", "Summer in Culcutta", "An Introduction", "The Wild Bougain.".

- The Freaks
- In Love
- Love
- Summer in Culcutta
- I Shall Some Day
- An Introduction
- The Wild Bougainvillea
- My Grandmother's House
- Forest Fire
- A Relationship: and those from 'The Descendants' are;
- Composition
- The Suicide
- Huminol
- Convicts
- Palam
- The Snobs
- Corriclors
- Loud Posters Drama

The Descendants thus the collection has only thirteen new poems to be considered here.

The tittle piece "The Old Playhouse", tells us that love is perhaps no more than a way of learning about one's self or the completion of one's own personality. It is addressed presumably to the husband, and id largely personal. It lodge a protest against the constraint of the married life; The fever of domesticity, the routine of lust artificial comfort and male domination. 'you' in the poem is possibly the husband. Who wants to the swallow who is the women and thus deprive her of her natural freedom. As a result of his egotism, she feels emplied of all her natural mirth and clarity of thinking:

.....you called me wife,

"I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
Because a dwarf I last my will and reason to all  
Your question I mumbled inwherent replies".

Here the woman suggestively protests against the male ego and assertion. A different kind of protest against the fanaticism of religion is obvious in "The Inheritance". This poem is bitter, ironical, but not cynical. In deals with the hatred and intolerance that goes in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity or Hinduism. What man has inherited is not love but hates, not wisdom but babble: "this ancient virtues that we nurtured in the soul...."

"Blood" is the only new poem in the longer genre like "Composition" and "The Suicide". Here the onrush of emotion is admirably restrained. It is largely autobiographical, and the poet's's nostalgia for the old house and for the great grandmother who lived who lives in it is convincingly evoked. Mrs. Das does not idealize the house and the people associated with it, she also does not attempt to reach out into the history of the house of three hundred years. Beyond what she herself knows of it. Presently, it is and old house with the walls 'cracked and from and moistened by the rains, and with the fallen tiles, the whining windows and the rats scampering past the door. The grandmother, who is 'really simple', 'fed of God for years', and proud of her 'oldest blood' is portrayed with houmouer and detactment.

More than the pathos of the memory of the grandmonther, the poem is concerned with the pet's sense of death and decay. Its short and crisp lines indicate a solemnity of tone and a gravity of mood. Even where Kamala Das speaks of defeat and emptiness and the inevitable darkness which is imminent the absurd clarity of outline, the serious contral of nerve, and the poise of movement of personal reminiscne. There is a pervasive sense of death and decay in the following lines:

"I know the rate are running now

Across the darkened halls  
They do not fear the dead.”  
Here memory is mixed with sadness.

The poem ‘Nani’ is a peculiar blend of irreverence and gravity. The pregnant maid, “the dark plump one, who bathed me near the well”, and who hanged herself in the privy. Times moves on and the incident, but not by the poet. The poem ends abruptly with the poet admiring the ‘clotted peace’ of the dead. Perhaps the poet identifies her self with the dead but paradoxically the dead belongs not to the world of the dead but to that of the living world.

“Gino” starts on a note of warning and fear, comparing the kiss of a lover to the bite of a Krait who “fills the bloodstream with its accursed essence”. This makes her think of the sense of life. There is a conflict between the desire to experience this poisonous love, possibly love outside marriage, and the defficiency to ‘dislodge the inherited memory of a touch. But if this difficulty is anyhow overcomethoughts of the triumphant love haunt the poet and she dreams of obscure hands of ‘wardboys’ and in a sudden transition of thought, she realizes that her dreams are body growing uncomedy and gross is more real. The poem “Glass” focuses the attention on the fragility of love- experience and also of the body. The poet says with a sense of pathos.

“ I went to him for half an hour  
As pure women, pure misery  
Fragile glass, breaking  
Crumbling.....”

In this poem, the restlessness of the poet is voiced through a Freudian - search for the misplaced father- figure. She moves from man to man in search of her true home, but there is a sense of wasted effort, in the prolonged search. And what in poems such as “ Vrindavan”, “Radha – Krishna”, and “Lines Addressed to a Devadase” is mythologized as the woman’s search for Krishna, the eternal lover, is given in glass a clinical version as an attempt ‘ to look for him the’ “misplaced” father now everywhere’. ‘ The Stone Age’, like ‘The old playhouse’ deals with the poetess by another man rather than by her husband. This poem portrays the husband of the woman personal as ‘ old fat spider’ who weaves ‘webs of bewilderment’, around her and creeps the dead, dull stong wall of domesticity, comfort, lassitude and thus turning her into ‘a bird of stone’, a granite love’. The husband is the perpetual irritant, unwelcome intruder into the privacy of the wife’s mind , which is haunted by other man. There was infact, never any mental contact between herself and her husband. What she wanted was a lovable identity with him, but her circumstances brought her only the pain of growing old with a freedom I never once had asked for. This poem makes a shift in Kamala Das’s approach to love theme and from the glorification of general dissatisfaction with the male character which tries to dwarf the woman in her.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

To conclude, Kamala Das is a typical Confession poet who pours her heart into her poetry which is largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her that a reliable poetic voice has been heard in contemporary Indo- English verse at long last. Dwivedi remarks “there is a strong autobiographical touch in it, which makes Mrs. Das a confessional poet of the first order”.

#### AWARDS:

- Nominated and shortlisted for Nobel Prize for literature in 1984.
- Award of Asian PEN anthology – 1964
- Kerala Sahitya Academy Award – 1969
- Sahitya Academy Award – 1985
- Asian Poetry Prize –1998
- Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries – 1999
- Vayalar Award – 2001
- Honorary D. Litt by University of Calicut – 2006
- Muttathu Varkey Award – 2006
- Exhuthachan Puraskaram – 2009

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