

## Kamala Das's Poetry: A Feminist Perspective

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Kamala Das 1934-2009

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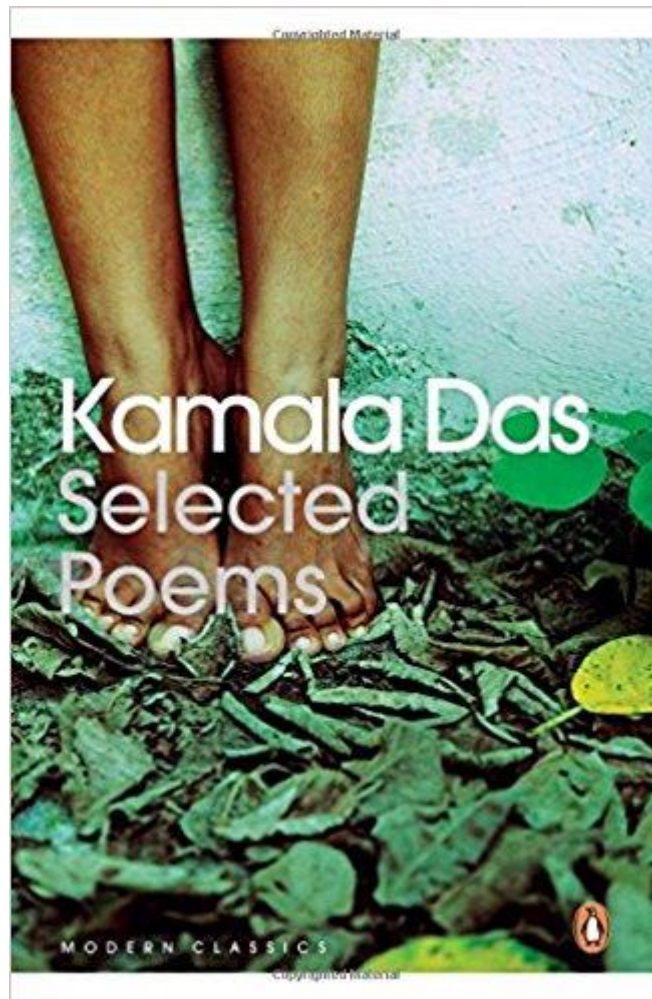
### Abstract

“I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femininity. And I want to be respected in all my femaleness.” (Adichie, 15)

Kamala Surayya (1934-2009), popularly known as Madhavikutty and Kamala Das, is beyond doubt the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. Her poetic collection includes: *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse And Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *Only Soul Knows How To Sing* (1996). Kamala Das's poetry is replete with feministic ethos.

She repudiated the archaic and somewhat sterile aestheticism for an independence of mind and body. Her poetry conveys her aversion to male domination and to the artificialities of modern life in which she feels suffocated. Her poetry is remarkably realistic and feministic. The paper aims at a feminist reading of Kamala Das's poetry whereby she effectively subverts the ingrained elements of patriarchy, privileging female will, choice and strength.

**Keywords: patriarchy, feminine, misery, revolt, freedom.**



### **Feminism**

“There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.  
(Woolf, 76)

Feminism is a movement which tries to define and establish social, legal and cultural freedom and equality of women. Gender equality is at the core of feminist movement: it advocates women's rights on the ground of equality of sexes in all spheres of life. Feminism, as a literary movement, aims to revolt against the patriarchal society which associates masculine with superiority, strength, action, self-assertion and domination; and feminine with inferiority, weakness, passivity, obedience and self-negation. Feminism aims to emancipate women from the chains of subjugation and domesticity. By depicting domestic violence, sexual harassment, male ego, etc., in their works the Feminist writers highlight and condemn the plight of women in the patriarchal society and thereby try to inculcate a sense of rebellion and self-identity in them.

Robert Webb defines feminism in the following terms: "Feminism isn't about hating men. It's about challenging the absurd gender distinctions that boys and girls learn from childhood and carry into their adult lives."<sup>1</sup>

### **Kamala Das – A Feminist Poet**

Kamala Das is a representative feminist poet. The themes prevalent in most of her poems make her poems highly absorbing, confessional and feminist. "Many scholars find powerful feminist imagery in Das's poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship with their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are offered in traditional Indian patriarchal society."<sup>2</sup> Kamala Das's poetry artistically portrays her unhappy, dissatisfied life. Her poetry is a critique of patriarchal prejudices and discriminations. Even as a child, Kamala Das experienced the bitterness of sexism: Her parents considered her a burden and compelled her to become a premature wife and mother. She was married to a relative when she was only a school girl. She complains about it in her poem *Of Calcutta*:

"I was sent away, to protect a family's  
Honor, to save a few cowards, to defend  
Some

Abstractions, sent to another city to be  
A relative's wife."

(*Collected Poems I*, 56-60)

Moreover, the transformation of a wife into the contemptible canine status of a house wife has artistically been portrayed in this poem:

"Here in my husband's house, I am a trained circus dog  
Jumping my routine hoops each day."

(*Collected Poems I*, 56-60)

### **Against Self-Assumed Superiority of the Patriarchal Society**

Kamala Das exposes the supposed and self-assumed superiority of the patriarchal society in her poems. Sexual exploitation, betrayal, and the lack of love in man-woman relationship are the major themes in her poetry. She portrays a loveless relationship as unbearable and as a means of oppression. In the words of Prasantha Kumar:

"Kamala Das conceives of the male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the woman loses her identity. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry...Several poems of Das convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage...Their love is disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. The life of Das's persona may be considered a tale of her experiments with love and repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love."

(Kumar 34-35)

### **Indifference of Man to Woman's Miseries**

Kamala Das exposes the patriarchal prejudice of the male-dominated society by portraying the indifference of man to woman's miseries in her poem *The Stone Age*:

“You turn me into a bird of stone,  
A granite dove,  
You build round me a shabby drawing room  
And strike my face absentmindedly while you  
Read. (The Best of Kamala Das, 97-98)

Kamala Das expresses her frustration caused by her disillusionment with real love in a male-dominated society in her poem *The Freaks*:

“...Can this man with  
Nimble finger-tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin’s lazy hungers?”

(Only The Soul Knows How to Sing, 59)

### **Feminism - A Form of Revolt Against Patriarchal Prejudices and Bias**

Feminist literature highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women- the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender.” (Kumar, 9). Feminism, as a form of revolt against patriarchal prejudices and bias, can be found in most of her poems. Her poem *The Old Playhouse* is seminal for the discussion of feminist strain in her poetry. It is a representative feminist poem composed by Kamala Das. In *The Old Playhouse*, Kamala Das not only depicts the plight and sufferings of a married woman chained to her husband’s house but also revolts against the male domination. The poem symbolizes a protest of all womanhood against the male ego:

“You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her  
In the long summer of your love so that she  
Would forget  
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left  
Behind, but  
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless

Pathways of the sky...”

(*The Old Playhouse*, 1)

The poem highlights and condemns the miseries of a woman, a wife, who is expected to play certain conventional roles, and her wishes and aspirations are not taken into account. Kamala Das exposes the callousness and the hollowness of patriarchal society in this poem. The miserable condition of a woman in a patriarchal society has elegantly been portrayed in the following lines of the poem:

“You called me wife,  
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right movement the vitamins, cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic  
Loaf and  
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to  
All your  
Questions I mumbled in coherent replies...”

(*The Old Playhouse*, 1)

### **Kamala Das – Aloof from the Ordinary Concerns of a Woman**

Feminist strain in the poetry of Kamala Das is manifested in her highly individualistic sensibility and her aloofness from the ordinary concerns of a woman. Her hatred and repugnance that she feels for traditional roles assigned to women gets an artistic expression in her poem *An Introduction*:

“Then... I wore a shirt and my  
Brother’s trousers, I cut my hair short and ignored  
My womanliness.”

(*The Best of Kamala Das*, 12)

Kamala Das goes on to portray how traditional sex roles assigned to women are, in a way, forced upon them by the dominant male members of their families:

“Dress in sarees, be girl,  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh!  
Belong, cried the Categorizer. Don’t sit  
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped  
Windows.  
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better  
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to  
Choose a name, a role.”

(*The Best of Kamala Das*, 13)

K. Satchindanandan says in this context:

“The woman cannot change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men. But the voices of the tradition would force her back into sarees, the saree becoming here a sign of convention. She is pushed back into her excepted gender roles: wife, cook, embroiderer, quarreller with servants.”  
(Satchindanandan, 13)

In the poem *An Introduction* Kamala Das struggles against ‘the categorizers’ who ask her to ‘fit in’. Having revolted against them she defines her identity:

“I am saint. I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I”

(Kamala Das Poems, 9)

## Main Motto

The main motto of a feminist is to challenge the traditional framework that presents a woman as weak, submissive, passive, acquiescent, timid and emotional. E. V. Ramakrishnan rightly stresses that in her poetry Kamala Das “has always dealt with private humiliations and sufferings...Indian critics have found in her poems the voice of the new liberated Indian women...” (Tilak, 112).

The cumulative burden of domesticity, dull routine is realistically and artistically portrayed in the poem *The Blood*:

“I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long queue  
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must  
Roll across the road...”

In her poem, *The Sunshine Cat*, Kamala Das presents her humiliations and sufferings. She portrays her callous husband as “selfish” and “coward”. She calls him a ‘ruthless watcher’ who keeps watch on her and thus curtails her freedom of movement:

“...Her husband shut  
Her  
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books.”

The poem throws a significant light on the brutalities of the patriarchal society where nobody cares for women. In this poem, Kamala Das portrays male ego, selfishness and lust.

## *The Looking Glass*

*The Looking Glass* is another poem in which Kamala Das underlines patriarchal prejudices. The poem exposes the hypocrisy and the hollowness of the male dominated society which associates inferiority, submissiveness with the ‘feminine’ and in contrast strength, power and assertiveness with the ‘masculine’:

‘...Stand nude before the glass with him



So that he sees himself the stronger one  
And believes it so, and you so much more  
Softer, younger, lovelier.”

### **Social Rebel**

“I am no bird; and no net snares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.” (Bronte, 280)

Kamala Das’s aim as a poet, thus, is to highlight and condemn the plight of women in a society governed by men. Her poems are a remarkable manifestation of her longing for domestic security and for independence. She revolts against the callousness of patriarchy by trying to assert, conquer and dominate. She tries to uplift the position of women and thus resist the dominance of men. In her poetry, Feminism gets manifested through the themes she presents- death, victimization, revolt against patriarchy, man-woman relationship.

Her personal frustrations and sense of loneliness impart to her poems a rare intensity and immediacy of appeal. Kamala Das was unconventional in life, and she is equally unconventional in poetry. She refuses to conform to the traditional roles which a woman and a wife is expected to play. As a social rebel, her poems portray a desire for breaking away from the dull routine of domesticity. She, as a feminist, revolts against the patriarchal society, “where male ego takes the decision and women have to keep silence ignoring their own power and capacity.”<sup>3</sup> She dares to challenge the tradition that silences the feminine in women, for which women regard themselves as inferior, passive and the ‘Other’. She is a rebel against the restraints of man-made world. She violates the systematic, traditional norms and values in order to secure an unconventional position of women in society, where she will be given significance and respect. She exposes the sterility of patriarchal society where woman is denied genuine love and spiritual gratification. As a feminist, she challenges the absurd gender distinctions prevalent in the society. It would not be wrong to conclude the paper with a quotation from Srinivasa Iyengar (Iyengar ,680):

“Kamala Das’s is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive, largely man-made world...But one hopes- and her exceptional talent offers the ground for such hopes- she will outgrow this obsession in due course and find her way to...a world other than the ‘unreal’ city of dreadful ghosts.”

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3. <https://sites.google.com/site/journalpierian/home/articles---vol-oo2/an-analysis-of-the-poems-of-kamala-das-from-feminine-perspective>
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