



## KAMALA DAS: AN EPITOME OF GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMAN EMPOWERMENT

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### ABSTRACT



Kamala Das is one of the foremost Indian English woman poets. Like a great number of progressive individuals from different walks of life who have contributed for the gender equality and woman empowerment in India, Kamala Das occupies a unique position among the Indian women poets who championed for the cause of women and their status in the society. Being a member of the traditional Indian patriarchal society, she not only experiences but also becomes a subject of humiliation and suppression inflicted by the practitioners of social dogmatism. She refuses to submit herself to such traditional beliefs. In contrast, she exhibits courage and an indomitable spirit through her inherent creative ability to fight against the illogical traditional norms that are designed to dominate women. Her bold and fearless exhibition of self is incomparable and therefore an inspiration for every Indian woman in their fight for empowerment, self-identity, self-dignity and equality of status. This paper tries to analyse the poetic works of Kamala Das in the light of gender equality and woman empowerment. It is assumed that the study would throw light on literature as a tool for social rectification.

**Keywords:** *Indian English, Woman Poets, Kamala Das, Literature and Gender Equality, Literature and Woman Empowerment*

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## INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das is a well-known Indian English woman poet. She is from Punnayurkulam in Southern Malabar, Kerala. She was educated mainly at home. She was a bilingual writer and wrote prose and poetry both in English and Malayalam. But she is more known as an important Indian English poet. Her well-known poetry collections are *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Collected Poems* (1985). The autobiography *My Story* has been translated into fourteen world languages. She won Asian P.E.N. Poetry Prize, 1964 for her poem *The Sirens*. She won *Kerala Sahitya Academy Award* for fiction in 1969, *The Chimanlal Award* for fearless journalism (1971) and *The World Prize for Literature* (1984). In 1985 she was awarded the *Shitya Akademy Award for Collected Poems*.

Kamala Das is the foremost poet of Indian English. The tone of her poetry is distinctively feminine. Her themes are basically love, sex and lust, pain nervousness, hurts and humiliations etc. She is to a large extent confessional and autobiographical poet. This paper tries to consider Kamala Das as an epitome of gender equality and women empowerment in India.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate if Kamala Das displays any tendency for gender equality and women empowerment the researcher tries to analyse the poems written by the poet. In addition to that the poets' interviews and other related literatures have also been considered as secondary resource for investigation.

## ANALYSIS

The place of Kamala Das in Indian English Poetry is no doubt superior in comparison to other woman poets. She is one of the few women writers in English who write from the strong feminine perspective. It is noteworthy that woman movement in India was in a very rudimentary stage when Kamala wrote her poems. Her first collection of poems *The Summer in Calcutta* was published in 1965. For a present day reader the poems of Kamala may not seem to be so much of importance because such vain of writing in India is now in abundance. But the poems gather significance once we think about the Indian society almost fifty years ago. We cannot help admitting the extraordinary courage of the poet. It was a society where women were regarded not more than silences. In such a social background the decision of writing poetry by a woman itself was a matter of courage. She not only took up pen in her hand but also decided to write for the women cause. It is for that woman she wrote who has been for ages subjugated and suppressed by the male dominated society. This is the woman who has never been allowed to open her mouth. This woman has been continuously subject of male dominance knowingly or unknowingly. The women for whom Kamala wrote never thought of uttering a single word against their conventional suppression. These are the women who never knew that they had the power to revolt and reject. They have been traditionally trained to bear all sufferings silently. But Kamala wrote for these women. She drew attention of the world towards the pathetic condition of these women. She became one of these women. She felt their suffering and not only felt but exposed it to the world. It will be a mistake to



think that everything Kamala wrote was about her personal life. But it is through her that Kamala wants the world to see the miserable life of the women of her society.

In such a social set up Kamala decides to write. She revolts vehemently against the age-old traditional concept of womanhood. It may be noted that just by expressing her thoughts, Kamala Das attacks the male chauvinism. She indulges in an act that her community frowns upon. And when she speaks about sex and sexual experience, and especially when she recounts her personal sexual experiences, she is deliberately inviting the wrath of a shocked community. But she does it deliberately because she thinks:

I needed to disturb society out of its complacency. I found the complacency a very ugly state. I wanted to make women of my generation feel that if man could do something wrong, they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realize that they were equal. I wanted to remove gender difference. I wanted to see that something happened to society, which had strong inhibitions and which only told lies in the public. (Kaur, 2005:167)

Therefore what she narrates and cries is not only her own story or cry but also that of any ordinary Indian woman. She has a universal appeal. She revolts against the idea of captivating a woman

inside the four walls of a house like bird in a cage. With the help of the image of a swallow the poet wants to delineate the condition of a woman. Flying is an inherent quality of a bird. It is her birthright. But by captivating her inside a cage and making her unable to fly we deprive a bird from her birthright. Accordingly her husband has deprived her from her freedom by captivating her. According to her by making her captive the husband has violated the basic rule of the world, which tells that every mankind is born free:

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 home left behind but

Also her nature, the urge to fly and the endless

Pathways of the sky.

(The Old Playhouse)

But she secretly meditates to break all the shackles. The bird in her wants to fly away ignoring all the traditional barriers. This is the earnest desire of a soul that accepts no domination. It symbolises the zest of an indomitable spirit. A spirit that knows no bound. It thrives for freedom and is certain to achieve it someday. It is the primitive human spirit that no force in this world could dominate:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon

You built around me with morning tea,

Love-words flung from doorways and of

course



Your tired lust. I shall some day take

Wings, fly around, as often petals,

Do when free in air.

(I Shall Some Day)

For Kamala, her marriage was nothing but a rediscovery of her own self. Through her marriage she wanted to learn the lessons of life and thereby to grow as a complete woman. It was not to gather knowledge of a yet another man that she got married. But unfortunately her objectives were not fulfilled. She is dissatisfied with the fact that her husband turns out to be any other ordinary man who wants to dominate his wife with the power of his male ego. The tragedy is that the husband turns out to be a traditional man who wants to make his wife a traditional woman:

It was not to gather knowledge

Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn

What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every

Lesson you gave was about yourself.

(The Old Playhouse)

The tragedy of her life, therefore the tragedy of every woman, is that she cannot show her dissatisfaction to the society. In most of the time a woman in Kamala's society has to 'pretend' like a happy woman. A woman is not expected to speak out her dissatisfaction publicly. On the other hand, a man can easily show his dissatisfaction to the society. He can shout, he can beat his wife, and can humiliate his wife publicly if he is not satisfied with her. The society does not discard such a man for his ill

treatment. But sometimes it appreciates such an action and even encourages him. But the same rule is not applicable with the wife. She cannot utter any word of dissatisfaction publicly. If she does so the society will look down upon her as immoral woman. The husband can beat her wife publicly but a wife cannot. Kamala dislikes this double standard of the society. While the husband has been traditionally taught to dominate the wife, the wife has been traditionally taught to accept all domination silently for the sustenance of family bond. If the wife becomes rebellious the family will be at stake. As if the responsibility to take care of the family bond is vested on the wife only.

The outcome of frustration and humiliation in love and affection is nothing but rebellion and rejection of the traditional concept of womanhood as conceived by the orthodox society. Kamala rebels and the evidence of her rebellious mind gets reflected in her external outfit such as her dress, hairstyle etc.:

Then..... I wore a shirt and my

Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

My womanliness.

(An Introduction)

The traditional orthodox society does not approve Kamala's new outlook. It always tries to impose its orthodox, stereotype concept of womanhood on her. It never allows any woman trying to come out of its dogmatic condition. The society is dumb to hear the agony of a suffering woman. It has no scope for her to get rid of her agonizing condition. And unfortunately when a



woman tries to come out of the condition on her own, it tries to check her. It neither helps her nor does it support her personal effort:

Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,

Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,

Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit

On walls or peep in through our laced draped windows.

(An Introduction)

The traditional society has set roles for women to play. It has predetermined what role a woman would play:

Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better

Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to

Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.

(An Introduction)

Therefore in another poem Kamala rejects the name and identity inherited by her. Kamala wants an identity of her own created by her own self. She wants the world to know her by that identity. She wants to live a life with dignity:

I have a name, had it for thirty

Years, chosen by someone else

For convenience....

.....

Why? Why should I remember or bear

That sweet-sounding names, pinned to

Me, a medal undeservingly

(Spoiling the Name)

The feminine sensibility of Kamala Das is reflected in her rejection of the traditional man-woman relationship. Kamala Das not only rejected the age-old concept of man-woman relationship but also tried to redefine it to suit the changing social condition.

In an interview she remarks:

*"He (Kamala's father) had warned me that if I did not do well in Maths. he would marry me off. Unfortunately, I could never do well in Maths. and hence I was married off as a punishment."*(Kaur, 2005:161)

Regarding her marriage Bruce King observes:

*Marriage, thus, came to Das as a punishment for not coming up to the male intellectual standards. Therefore suddenly at a young age she was married to a cousin for whom she apparently had little affection, while he was too preoccupied with his career to expect more from his young wife than a cook and sexual partner. Left by herself as she and her husband moved home in accordance with his job, rebellious, angry and confused, Das turned to others for affection. Her husband's willingness to let her have her*



*sexual experiences was a further  
blow to her ego. What he saw as  
freedom for a writer she saw as  
a lack of caring. (King, 1987:148)*

The institution of marriage is responsible for the conventional type of man-woman relationship that the society perceives. However the institution of marriage is criticized by Kamala. In a marriage a man-woman relationship is created and the two members of the relationship are asked to maintain it. It never tries to understand the likes and dislikes of the woman whereas it certainly takes into consideration the wishes of the male member of the relationship and tries to fulfill it.

I was sent away, to protect a family's  
Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend  
some  
Abstractions, sent to another city to be  
A relative's wife, a hausfrau from his home,  
and  
A mother for his sons, yet another nodding  
Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to  
Warm his bed at night.

(Collected Poems 59)

The frustration, disappointment and negligence in the married life lead to strong resentment for the institution of marriage. She advocates for redefinition of the man-woman relationship. Out of despair and disappointment in the traditionally imposed man-woman relationship, Kamala looks for other types of relationship according to her choice. She finds one:

.....I met a man, loved him. Call  
Him not by any name, he is every man  
Who wants a woman, just as I am every  
Woman who seeks love.

(An Introduction)

This is a relationship, which is not an imposition and hence has no obligation. It does not matter for her whether the traditional society approves of this new type of relationship or not. Such relationship needs not to be sticky. One can change one's partner according to one's wish. There is no regret, there is no obligation but there is only satisfaction! One is not bound by such relations. You can abandon such relationship as soon as you find it difficult to continue with. It is another question whether Kamala gets what she wanted to get from such relationship or not:

After that love became a swivel-door  
When one went out, another came in  
Then I lost count, for always in my arms  
Was a substitute for a substitute.

(Substitute)

So, with a feminine sensibility in her mind, Kamala Das rejects the socially imposed man-woman relationship and reconstructs a relationship that her heart approves Kamala Das is a critic of social custom and tradition. She rejects all those customs and traditions that are unfavorable to the position of a woman in a society. Through her writings she wants to expose the follies of society by making them bare and naked before the eyes of people. Being a woman



writer her emphasis is mostly on the vices related to the condition of women in the traditional Indian society.

She appeals all women to join hands in this fight. She makes them aware of their rights and possibilities:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried

Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive

The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame.

(The Conflagration)

Writing for her became the best way of attacking the hypocritical society. She remarks, "All the pain unexpressed and the sad tales left untold, made me write recklessly and in protest.....I took up writing hoping that it would help the volcano within to explode in a slow orderly way." (Kaur, 2005:165) In fact, the choice of writing itself was an act of defiance because writing was considered to be primarily an activity meant for male members of the society and a woman, as has already been mentioned, would do well as "a cook", "an embroiderer", "a quarreler" with servants, a producer or nurturer of a babies. It was a society, which insisted on establishing the significance difference between the lives possible to men and to women on the violence necessary to men to maintain their position of authority. But Kamala Das rejected out rightly this kind of gender-discrimination. She wanted liberation from the stifling social reality, which doomed the women to immanence-liberation from the past, i.e., liberation from the age-old tradition of silence on women's part. She

tells:

I am a million million people

Talking all at once, with voices

Raised in clamour like maids

At village-wells.

(Someone Else's Song)

*Kamala Das openly revolts against the traditionally accepted, strange, queer, womanhood concepts in Indian society, which is so awkwardly full of abominable shams and cants. Rigid trammels of tyranny, she does not like at all. In a bitter piercing, cathartic tone, Kamala Das ridicules traditional imposters, show of masculine strength and also man's lust.* (Kaur, 2005:165)

As a poet with strong feminine sensibility her primary motive has always been to raise the position of women in the society and give them an identity of their own rejecting the one previously defined by the male dominated society.

She also declares that her story represents the story of millions of such deprived, subjugated, frustrated, humiliated women in a male dominated society. Therefore the aim behind her writing is not only to let her readers know about her own problems but also to let the world know the condition of all those ordinary women who are constantly subjected to male domination and



social suffering knowingly or even sometimes unknowingly. These women about whom Kamala says may have never thought that the world would ever know of their sufferings or they might have accepted all their sufferings silently because they have traditionally been trained to accept all sufferings and subjugations silently. These women have never thought of rejecting or revolting against all these. They are not so brave to stand against the socially determined and accepted norm. Therefore Kamala thought it her duty to let the world know the condition of the women of her society. So she says:

I am a million million people

Talking all at once, with voices

Raised in clamour like maids

At village-wells.

(Someone Else's Song)

## CONCLUSION

It has been observed that Kamala Das openly revolts against the traditionally accepted, strange, queer, womanhood concepts in Indian society. Through her poetry she tries to assert for gender equality and woman empowerment.

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