

## Cosmopolitanism In The Poetry Of Kamala Das

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**Abstract:** In conjunction with these aspects, it is imperative to call into context the opening quote. The lines highlight certain important aspects that demand attention while studying a vibrant area like Indian Literatures in English, particularly poetry. The main points of contention are the multiple ways of engagement with language and the need to examine how Indian poets have deftly manoeuvred it, which becomes the focus of this research on Kamala Das. In short, cosmopolitanism refers to the opinions and behaviors emerging from the theory that cultural and artistic activities should have neither national nor parochial boundaries even when defined by them. In other words, it emphasizes a dialogue among differences, thereby validating itself as a tool in analyzing the gamut of Indian Literatures in English, particularly poetry. Now, therefore, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In whom you are also being built together for a habitation of God in the spirit.

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### Introduction:

The insinuations inherent in the evocation of the metaphor of palimpsest also take into account, on one hand, the dialectical relationship between text and reader and on another, creators' engagement with words or images that go on to create the patterns on the surface. The proclivities attached to this metaphor is foregrounded when approaching any text that transcends the idea of being sacrosanct and reliable, hinting at the central premises common to poststructuralism and postcolonialism -- the deferment of meaning and the act of signification as an endless process of becoming resulting from differences, exhumed by factors such as "the dislocation of subjectivity, otherness and desire." In conjunction with these aspects, it is imperative to call into context the opening quote. The lines highlight certain important aspects that demand attention while studying a vibrant area like Indian Literatures in English, particularly poetry. The main points of contention are the multiple ways of engagement with language and the need to examine how Indian poets have deftly manoeuvred it, which becomes the focus of this research on Kamala Das. While examining the poetry of Kamala Das, the aspects that gain prominence are also remarkably similar- how words and/or languages are manipulated to aid in comprehending the many apprehensions arising out of lived experiences; methods of narration that are relied on to achieve this and the consequent creation of an

exclusive niche. However, this research undertakes the task of reflecting on the ways in which Das, by focusing on the same concerns, moves beyond them. Moreover, the evocation of the metaphor of palimpsest and its ramifications too are pertinent here. It becomes one of the ways to approach the paradox and multifariousness that characterises her, and their consequent immanence onto the ambivalence in her verse, which, ironically, is projected in her works as a means to transcend the self.

But, while engaging with a text which is, in essence, of an unreliable nature, it is necessary to acknowledge here, the contribution of the discourses of post structuralism to the understanding of the term trace, particularly, the contribution of Jacques Derrida. Since this research focuses on Kamala Das' engagement with language and the ambivalence in her verse, the act of tracing that is undertaken imbibes, to a great extent, the dialectics of presence and absence as contrived by the Derridean trace, which "... has come to be represented in the form of a word that exists on the page but is cancelled through by a mark: the word is present in front of us, but it is also erased; its significance hence lies in its simultaneous existence and erasure. When he uses the term trace, open-endedness and arbitrariness of words are highlighted, as according to him every sign/ word contains trace of other signs/ words which differ from each other in essence. Thus, Derridean trace is a paradox which implies the possibility of a presence

only in an absence, thereby, calling into context the metaphor of palimpsest, the poetry of Kamala Das, and the fact that nuances of this concept evolving from writing as difference<sup>vii</sup>, gains a warranted relevance in postcolonial theoretical discourses too.

### **The Inheritance”: A Disinherited Self**

Cosmopolitanism as a concept and theoretical tool hold within it many nuanced discourses, as Kwame Anthony Appiah says in his essay “Education for Global Citizenship”<sup>v</sup>: “It is an ideal that’s particularly useful when we are faced with the sorts of conflicts, grounded in religious, ethnic, racial, and national identities, which pervade our world.” In short, cosmopolitanism refers to the opinions and behaviors emerging from the theory that cultural and artistic activities should have neither national nor parochial boundaries even when defined by them. In other words, it emphasizes a dialogue among differences, thereby validating itself as a tool in analyzing the gamut of Indian Literatures in English, particularly poetry.

### **Inroads into cosmopolitanism**

At the outset, the word cosmopolitan when used in the context of this research has both literary and metaphorical implications. More importantly, it has to be understood in conjunction with and in opposition to concepts such as national, global and universal. Entries for each of them in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> edition are as follows: Universal: (adj.) 1 done by or involving all the people in the world or in a particular group. 2. true or right at all times and in all places. Global: 1. covering or affecting the whole world 2. considering or including all parts of something. National: 1. connected with a particular nation, shared by a whole nation. 2. Owned, controlled or paid for by the government After an initial engagement with these different notions, which though seem to be alluding to the same entity, subtly stands out as different entities. Interestingly, it is reckoned here that it is only cosmopolitan that accommodates difference or an experiential element arising from an understanding of difference. This is precisely why this term is being inducted to analyse such a variegated area as Indian Literatures in English.

On another plane, an engagement with the concept of cosmopolitanism should be informed by the many threads that it imbibes within it. An understanding of the idea and its evolution and spread into postcolonial theoretical discourses have to be dealt with holistically and hence the many reverberations of the concept in politics, law, philosophy and critical theory are engaged with in detail in the following sections.

### **Political Cosmopolitanism: Greco – Roman Interventions**

For instance, in ancient Rome if anyone claimed to be a citizen of the world, the world could be Rome, as it was at the heights of its glory. But then, there were questions related to loyalty, and the state that one will be serving and the problems arose from there. By claiming citizenship of a cosmopolis, in effect, who is the citizen serving - world or his own polis or state? Isn’t it then a way of stating that by serving everyone he/ she is not serving anyone or in other words, such a claim would also entail in it idea that one is trying to pass by the responsibilities attached to being a responsible citizen of a state. Clearly then “it is often difficult to determine whether a particular cosmopolitanism is merely negative (rejecting local ties), merely positive (embracing fellow cosmopolites as well as, implicitly, local compatriots), or both (embracing fellow cosmopolites and rejecting local compatriots),”<sup>viii</sup> which is an aspect that gains relevance in its contemporary relevance too.

After this new branch - Stoic Cosmopolitanism, the idea came to be linked to more of a political engagement with the aim of building bonds outside the traditional community, which was taken forward by Epicureans and the founding Stoic, Zeno of Citium. But there were developments on that notion, in the lines of Rome as the ideal state to rule the world as is seen in the literature of the Golden age of Rome, particularly through Virgil’s *The Aeneid* which established itself as the national epic and played the role of propaganda in establishing the ideal roman citizen as the citizen of the world. Moreover, the expansion of Roman Empire, in a way, legitimized the use of the word Cosmopolitanism as, at its heights, Rome was, in effect, a cosmos. The idea of a world state also came into the picture with the likes of Alexander the Great and the possibilities of a nexus of cosmopolitanism and imperialism is evident in Roman Stoic texts, such as Cicero’s *On Duties* or Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*. Reverting here to the origins of the term cosmopolitanism as it comes into play in the many dialectics that define Indian writers, stoic cosmopolitanism and the Hierocles’ circle model of identity which it popularized becomes pertinent. This model states that a person should be regarded as existing in concentric circles, the first one around the self, next immediate family, then extended family, and gradually expanding to include local group, citizens, countrymen, humanity, making all human beings fellow city dwellers. This is an ideal way of marking the identity of an Indian citizen who is defined by many effective concentric circles such as region, religion, caste, customs, traditions and language. However, when it comes to literature, the ambivalence arising out of the engagement with the various circles

and its resultant representations gains significance, as was highlighted in the first chapter through Kamala Das' poem "An Introduction". It is possible to read the element of palimpsestousness into this circle model of identity.

### **Middle Ages and the shift in cosmopolitanism**

Now, therefore, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In whom you are also are being built together for a habitation of God in the spirit.

### **Enlightenment thought and the revival of cosmopolitanism**

This period even when situated in 18th is not tied down by proper time frame and reflected a sense of open-mindedness and impartiality. Hence, it was a fertile ground for an idea like cosmopolitanism to come up again. Prominent thinkers and philosophers of this period such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Joseph Addison, David Hume and Thomas Jefferson, among others, identified themselves as cosmopolitans. During this period, however, cosmopolitan was used to signify a man of no fixed abode, or a man who is nowhere a stranger. Incidentally, this was also the 18th period when the idea of cosmopolitanism expanded beyond the political nuances, to include moral, legal and economical cosmopolitanism. However, the spirit of the essential ideas imbibed by the concept of cosmopolitanism was accurately identified and propagated by Emmanuel Kant through his work *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795). It envisioned a cosmopolitan law and highlighted the need to respect human rights of the citizens as well as the foreigners, in a way reiterating the ancient stoic thought. However, this way of approaching humanity also came to be called moral cosmopolitanism as his views were firmly grounded in human reason and the idea of a moral community. This basic notion is reverberated in Jeremy Bentham's notion of utilitarian cosmopolitanism implying a common and equal utility of all nations and also in Adam Smith's idea of free market. In 19th century these notions are imbibed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (evident in *Communist Manifesto*) and is also evident in the formation of organizations such as League of Nations (Kant also talks about the creation of a league of states in his treatise)

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