



## Kamala Das: Life and Works

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**Abstract:** Kamala Das (Kamala Suraiyya) also written under the pseudonyms Madhavikutty and Kamala Suraiyya was one of the best known contemporary Indian women writers. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam, Das has authored many autobiographical works and novels, several well-received collections of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories, and essays on a broad spectrum of subjects. Since the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), Das has been considered an important voice of her generation, exemplified by a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists. Das's provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, women's roles in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalised people. Das's work in English has been widely anthologized in India, Australia, and the West, and she has received many awards and honours, including the P.E.N. Philippines Asian Poetry Prize (1963), Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for her writing in Malayalam (1969), Chiman Lal Award for fearless journalism (1971), the ASAN World Prize (1985), and the Sahitya Akademi Award for her poetry in English (1985). In 1984, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

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**Introduction:** Kamala Das (Kamala Suraiyya) was born into an aristocratic Nair Hindu family in Malabar (no Kerala), India, March 31, 1934. Her maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were Rajas, a caste of Hindu nobility, and her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her maternal great-uncle, Narayan Menon, a prominent writer, and her mother, Balamani Amma, a well-known Malayali poet. Kamala Das was also deeply affected by the poetry of the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nairs. Das's father, a successful managing director for a British automobile firm, was descended from peasant stock and favoured Gandhian principles of austerity. The combination of "royal" and "peasant" identities, along with the atmosphere of colonialism and its pervasive racism, produced feelings of inadequacy and alienation in Das.

Educated in Calcutta and Malabar, Das began writing at age six (her poems were "about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for ever") and had her first poem published by P.E.N. India at age fourteen. She did not receive a university education. She was married in 1949 to Madhava Das, an employee of the Reserve Bank of India who later worked for the United Nations. She was just sixteen years old when the first of her three sons was born; at

eighteen, she was "a mother and a disgruntled wife" who began to write obsessively. Although Das and Madhava were romantically incompatible (Das's 1976 autobiography *My Story*, describes his homosexual liaisons and her extramarital affairs), Madhava supported her writing. His career took them to Calcutta, New Delhi, and Bombay, and Das's poetry is influenced by metropolitan life as well as by her emotional experience. In addition to writing poetry, fiction, and autobiography, Das served as editor of the poetry section of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* from 1971-1972 and 1978-1979. In 1981 Das and her husband retired to Kerala. Das ran as an Independent for the Indian Parliament in 1984. After her husband died, Das converted to Islam and changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya. She currently lives in Kerala, where she writes a syndicated column on culture and politics.

### Major Works

Kamala Das published six volumes of poetry between 1965 and 1985. Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, Das tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage, and her life in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. Since the publication of *Summer in Calcutta*, Das has

been a controversial figure, known for her unusual imagery and candour. In poems such as "The Dance of the Eunuchs" and "The Freaks," she draws upon the exotic to discuss her sexuality and her quest for fulfilment. In "An Introduction," Das universalises and makes public traditionally private experiences, suggesting that women's personal feelings of longing and loss are part of the collective experience of womanhood. In the collection *The Descendants* (1967), the poem "The Maggots" frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths, while the poem "The Looking-Glass" suggests that women are the Untouchables of love, in that the very things society labels dirty are the things the women are supposed to give. The poem implies that a restrained love seems to be no love at all only a total immersion in love can do justice to this experience.

In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1975), poems such as "Substitute," "Gino," and "The Suicide" examine the failure of physical love to provide fulfilment, to allow or escape from the self, or to exorcise the past, whereas poems such as "The Inheritance" address the integrity of the artistic self in the face of religious fanaticism. In *Tonight, This Savage Rite: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy* (1979), Das invokes Krishna in her exploration of the tensions between physical love and spiritual transcendence. *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), a series of short poems written after Das was defeated in the 1984 parliamentary elections, rework the classical Tamil *akam* ("interior") poems that contrast the grandeur and permanence of nature with the transience of human history. Poems such as "Delhi 1984" and *Smoke in Colombo* evoke the massacre of the Sikhs and the civil war in Sri Lanka. Das is also the author of an autobiography, *My Story* a novel, *The Alphabet of Lust* (1977), and several volumes of short stories in English. Under the name *Madhavikutty*, Das has published many books in the Malayalam language.

### Critical Reception

Critical response to Kamala Das's poetry has been intimately connected to critical perception of her personality and politics; her provocative poetry has seldom produced lukewarm reactions. While reviewers of Das's early poetry praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Scholars such as Devinder Kohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar find powerful feminist imagery in Das's poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship to their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are offered in traditional Indian society.

Much criticism analyses Kamala Das as a "confessional" poet, writing in the tradition to Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov. Some scholars, such as Vimala Rao, Iqbar Kaur, and Vrinda Naur, find Das's poetry, autobiography and essays frustratingly inconsistent, self-indulgent, and equivocal, although they, too, praise her compelling images and original voice. They suggest that Kamala Das is both overexposed and overrated. Other scholars, such as P. P. Raveendran, connect the emphasis on the self in Das's work to larger historical and cultural contexts and complicated, shifting post-colonial identities. Indian critics disagree about the significance of Das's choice to write of her experiences as an Indian woman in English, with some scholars suggesting that, in her shunning of traditional aesthetic form, she has created a new language for the expression of colonial contradictions. Despite disagreement over the aesthetic qualities and consistency of Das's body of poetry, scholars agree that Das is an important figure whose bold and honest voice has re-energised Indian writing in English and provided a model for other Indian women writers.

### EMERGENCE AS A GREAT INDIAN POET

Among the Indian writers of English, there are not many to whom English is as natural a medium of expression in both prose and poetry as it is to Kamala Das. The sixties of the twentieth century saw a poet writing in English from India and in Indian English and writing as a woman on the themes and issues that directly related to women. Bold, free, frank and unconventional in expression and resentment and protest about how the male-world has abused the female body and restricted its freedom of the soul, she made poetry the very instrument with which much could be achieved. Poetry to her was a tool to work towards freedom. Not immediately, adequately, sympathetically evaluated and appreciated, this poet being a woman herself made it her mission to expose the hypocrisy of the husband-wife relationship in the Hindu society almost a manipulative and coercive practice to keep Woman subjugated in all matters including the area of sex life. There is in her poetry an awareness of human rights and her judicious views about how the world could be properly reset, readjusted and reformed. She wrote for women's cause in most clear-cut language appearing to most to be quarrelling while writing.

In her autobiography *My Story*, Kamala Das has maintained that poets "cannot close their shops like shop-men and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is his/her personality".

Kamala Das first published poems in PEN since 1948. Thereafter her iconoclastic poems got noticeably represented in the anthologies, magazines and journals such as The Illustrated weekly, Thought, Quest, etc. With P. Lal, A.K. Meherotra, Ezekiel and Jayant Mahapatra providing a lead in the field of poetry writing in English, there appeared special efforts by women poets to emerge as a separate entity, and not just as a reflection of the mainstream poetry of the male poets. Bruce King makes the right assessment of the situation:

Rather than finding salvation in art, Kamala Das's poetry spoke of fantasies, many lovers and the counting disappointments of love. More important than its theme was the use of an Indian English without the concern for correctness and precision which characterized most earlier modern verse. Instead it appeared unpremeditated, a direct expression of feelings as it shifted erratically through unpredictable emotions creating its form through its cadences and repetition of phrases, symbols and refrains.

Poetry of Kamala Das is Indian in sensibility and content. It deals with the Indian environment and reflects its mores often ironically. "The total freedom that language could offer was her search and she used language to express herself fully in all her paradoxical and complex situations. Her revolt as a woman against the traditional concept of womanhood matched with her revolt as a poet against the conventional medium of mother tongue for poetry.

Srinivasa Iyengar believed that the women poets of India who wrote in English were poets first and only women by birth. Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Mamata Kalia, Anna Sujatha Modayil, Sunita Jain, Rina Sudhi, Gauri Pant, Meena Alexander, Lalitha Venkateswaran are some of the names he mentions in his volume Indian Writing in English.

In Kamala Das the poetry was confessional in character and referred back to the late 1950s in its Americanised mode feminist like Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell being the models. She had a tendency that shows "depression, self-consciousness and flamboyance as despair alternated with self-assertion". Nissim Ezekiel comes close to Kamala Das when he writes without inhibition on sex.

Kamala Das in her quest for freedom and identity in her poetry "reflects the artistic identity. It reflects the artistic movement between utopia and authenticity". In her the "feminine aesthetics" finds an expression in the compelling need "to break through the conventional barriers to establish a new tradition".

Criticism in the late seventies has quite timely taken note of the emergence of the new women's writing though the changes were observed by only a few critics. Women critics like Meena Shirdwarker and Shashi Tharoor have argued rather convincingly for the case of a feminised tradition. They recognized and defined that this "new feminine tradition" is ingrained in its departure" from existing norm with regard to "Choice of themes" and projection of the "female figure". More recent works have referred to Conflict" as inherent in "female struggle" whereas Raji Narasimhan proposed a sort of "utopian solution" for man to become "forever free". We may benefit if the status and role of women in India is explained to serve for a centric In her poetry Kamala Das challenged the phallogocentric foundation for the latter developments to come. Gender distinctions were not taken into account in ancient India as far back as the Vedic Age.

In her poetry Kamala Das challenged the phallogocentric idea of society. At a deeper level her poetry seeks to declare through her writings that for a woman writing what she had written was not something totally unexpected. Her writing as necessitates a feminist reading. Her ability to depict, not as a male but as a female, the situations, characters and dilemmas straight out of every day dogmatic life, particularly her own needs to be recognized. At the age of 15 she got married to Mr. Das who was an officer in the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay. Dwivedi records that her life became miserable in the company of her nonchalant, lustful husband whose sexual escapades with maidservants made "his contact with his wife usually cruel and brutal." This made Kamala Das to initiate herself into "a hectic love life with small capital and just a pair of beautiful breasts and a faint muskrat smell in her perspiration." The extract from her autobiography My Story is quite vivid and clear in this regard:

She grew revengeful towards him, and reacted in a non-traditional fashion in lovemaking, offering herself to any handsome and resourceful man who came across her, and forgiving even her rapists. Her husband had no soothing words for her, no time to spare for her and was even busy sorting out his files and affecting signature on them. And as a traditional wife, she was expected to discharge her domestic duties well and look to the needs and comforts of her husband. This eroded her own distinct personality and dwarfed her forever.

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