Kamala Das’s place among Indian poets writing in English is reasonably secure even if her poetry remains controversial. Reactions to her work, including comments on her frankness, her need to dominate and her ‘freedom to decompose’ indicate a growing tendency to take her work seriously. It has been generally recognised that her poetry, its bias towards ‘self-indulgence notwithstanding, is driven, occasionally to give vent to a powerful rage. The speaker ‘I’ in her poems always gravitates between two worlds: a paradisaical past and a wretched alienated present. Escaping from the baseless present now she takes rest, in her’ familial, personal history and the mythical past of India as a whole.

Kamala Das, born at Punnayukutu in South Malahar in 1934, is the daughter of V. M. Nair and Balamani Amma, the Malayalam poetess. She was educated at the Convent School, Calcutta, but could not receive higher education because of her marriage at the age of 15.
She has published four volumes of poetry in English: *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants* and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, and *Only the Soul Know How to Singh* while Pritish Nandy’s anthology of *Indian Poetry in English* 1947-1972 contains 18 of her uncollected poems and Gouri Deshpande’s *An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry* has seven of them. *Her Collected Poems-I* was published very recently. Apart from her writings in English, her autobiography in Malayalam has been published in English as *My Story*. Her works in Malayalam include more than 14 books, a majority of them being collections of short stories. She won the Poetry Award of the Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for her collection of short stories in Malayalam, *Thanuppu*. Besides books in poetry and prose, Kamala Das has written for various magazines like *Opinion, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Poetry: East and West, Debonair, Eve’s Weekly, Femina, Imprint, Weekly Round Table*, and *Love and Friendship*, and a novel, ‘*The Alphabet of Lust*.

Being a bilingual writer, she wrote under the pseudonym Madhavikutty, the feminine version of the name of her husband. Most of her short stories were published in the celebrated Malayalam weekly *Matrubhumi*. Though she had begun writing verse even while
at school, her significant contributions began to appear only in the
1950s when Indian poetry in English was emerging with a new vigour
and fervour distinct from the romantic croonings of the nineteenth
century poets and their successors. She is a natural poet with a
great capacity to transcend the worn-out platitudes about romantic love, her
themes go beyond the traditionally accepted thought and embrace vast
hidden areas of experience. Her poetry is not merely Indian like that
of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, but a passionate expression of the
universal experience of love, despair, anguish and failure
apprehended through a feminine Indian sensibility. She has never
striven to be merely Indian in her poetry. Her concern has been the
existential anguish of humanity as revealed through woman’s
relationship with man in the male-dominated society.

Margaret Atwood, Judith Wright and Kamala Das are amongst the
few women poets who enjoy immense popularity and eminence in the
Commonwealth world. They have contributed significantly and are
recognised, both at home and abroad, as the poets of great
accomplishments. They are among the selected few women of letters
who have at the same time been poets, critics, nature lovers,
fictionists, autobiographers, and true women. Having bagged several
literary awards, and written on a variety of themes, they seem to be
excelling one another as poets of love. What is overpowering about their poems is their sense of urgency. At the same time, they impress by being very much themselves in their poems. Their tone, throughout, is feminine. Matured and experienced poets, they have made pronouncements on life, love, and literature.

Kamala Das rapidly rose to fame in the mid-1960s, even receiving notice by ‘Time’ magazine, as all Indian woman who dared to write openly about her love life beyond her marriage. Das is an interesting writer for her themes and social significance. She is perhaps the first Indian poet to write naturally in Indian English and express herself fully without worrying about British English and what a poet is supposed to say. Her poems are questions rather than answers. Irony and understatements intensify her questions, about life, love, and expectations from life.

The energetic and ranging verse of Kamala Das moves through many worlds. First and foremost, it charts the world as seen from a woman’s eyes, as wife, lover, mother- and grand-daughter, each role constituting different demands and a different perspective on the people around her. At odds or in harmony with them, she channels experience and through imagination defines the emotions, relationships, hopes and despair. Many women, perhaps, especially so
in India, have characteristically seen themselves thus defined, as it is often unfortunately their lot to be managing domestic affairs and being responsible for a family, rather than holding a career in their own world. Das had the best of both worlds and is able to express the intimate knowledge she has of people and of herself against a panoramic view of new and old India. Her poetry is derived from the tactile world of sense experience and is committed to the language of the common woman.

After the publication of *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965, she was immediately and widely noticed and soon recognised as a poet of promise, for her poems were characterised by a striking vitality of metaphor and an originality of voice which cannot be missed. She proved that one could write well without parading Eliot and Auden in one’s pocket, and that one could be a distinctly Indian poet without striving to be one and without leaning on the crutch of transcendental philosophy. The first volume of her *Collected Poems*, which has the usual mix of good, bad and indifferent works, suggests a totality, a kind of sustained lifelong effort, a drive to explore obsessions and not merely to project them. If one compares this with the somewhat desultory air of the poetry produced by other Indian women poets, Kamala Das scores heavily over them. They seem to turn to poetry
occasionally for ‘self-expression’. Kamala Das is faithful to a poetic
drive which produces poem after poem clearly in her voice, from the
same troubled source: life. Poetry is there in her veins.

The flight from the external world to a personal world and from
the private elements of human experience back to larger historical
realities was the painful journey that Kamala Das undertook.

And the difficulty of this journey is due to an identity crisis. Her
identity as an Indian, as a woman, as a wife, as a poet everything
comes under attack, she recognised the gravity of this identity crisis
very early in her career:

... I wore a shirt
and a black sarong, cut my hair short
and ignored all of this
Womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl, or be wife,
they cried. Be embroiderer, cool;, or a quarreler
with servants. Fit in, belong, said the categorises.

Be Amy or be Kamala. Or, better still, be just 1

In order to have a close understanding of this emotional crisis in
the poetess a study of her life through her autobiography is necessary.,
Her poetry and prose are subjective, based on personal experiences,
memory, recollection. In her *My Story* she frequently mentions the incompatibility of her parents as marriage partners. Her mother belonged to the Nalapat family which boasted of its royal lineage. Her maternal grandfather and great grandfather were Rajas. Her father, on the other hand, was a Nayar, descended from peasant stock. Over the years he rose to become the Managing Director of Walfords, a British automobile concern. Das describes her mother as having been indifferent to the mundance tasks of housekeeping. Her father was wholly engrossed in selling his automobiles. Neither parent seems to have cared particularly for her or her elder brother.

Kamala grew up at a time when British rule in India was in its last stage. This was also a period when the social barriers between the rulers and the ruled were showing signs of breaking down, though there was still a degree of unease in social relationships. The father’s job naturally brought them into contact with his British superiors.

From Das’s own account of her early years, she appears to have been lonely. She and her brother were left pretty much to themselves. Newspaper propaganda also made them idealise Hitler and Mussolini, surprisingly described by her as “undoubtedly the greatest heroes in our eyes at that time.” As their interest widened they began to bring out a sentimental little manuscript magazine. When the Second World
War seemed to go on for ever the children were sent to their ancestral home, Nalapat House, in Malabar. Kamala’ Das remembers the years spent there as the happiest of her childhood. The uncle of her mother, Narayan Menon wrote poetry and philosophy. He often had writers and critics visiting him, some of whom stayed as guest over fairly long periods. It is perhaps the memory of these gatherings which made Kamala encourage younger writers and critics gather at her house, many years later. It is evident that her great grand-uncle, with his dignified, almost regal bearing, was someone she admired greatly.

The Nalapat house was variously peopled, and something- always seemed to be happening. Kamala’s great grandmother’s sister had been a poet till she was struck down with paralysis. Kamala was repeatedly drawn to the room in which she lay.

It was in Calcutta, that she first saw eunuchs dance. The colour, music and pathos of that scene is described in her poem ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’. In Calcutta, she saw a prostitute for the first time ‘gaudily painted like a cheap bazar toy’. When Kamala’s husband was deputed for three years to the Planning Commission to New Delhi, she was hopeful of a change. But Delhi proved uneventful. While in Delhi, she became pregnant again, and went to Calcutta where her parents now lived. Then her husband was again transferred to
Bombay, and now that they badly needed money, she seriously took to writing. In the “bastard culture” of Bombay, she felt herself a misfit, “a branded outcaste” in drawing room gatherings. She withdrew into herself, avoiding formal parties, and that withdrawing into herself had its advantages. She was now entering middle age. It seemed to her that her body was gradually declining into ‘grossness’. Her last lover was a politician, a libertine who enslaved her completely. The affair, when it ended, appears to have purged her of all physical desire. She says that she now transferred her devotion to Krishna, and towards religion in the form of worshipping Him. She now shed carnal desire as a snake might shed its skin. Then she fell ill again, with myocarditis. Then Bangladesh war made her aware of how deeply she loved Bombay. Writing of this she goes on to deliver a little homily about charity towards beggars, and proposes a series of schemes to cope poverty.

Now she decided to leave Bombay and finally settle in Malabar. Her arrival in Malabar alone raised the eyebrows of relatives, friends who speculated on the possible collapse of her marriage. Yet she was happy to be back home and attempted to assimilate herself in the lifestyle of the village. She grew sentimental about Nalapat and regretted the years she had spent in the cities. Recollection of her
eventful life with its multicolour is the main asset of her creative writing. Her happiness, sorrow, guilt, love, hatred, her father, mother, granny, brother, lovers, above all, her eternal lover Krishna are the subjects of her poetry.

‘The Summer in Calcutta’ is the first published, anthology of Kamala Das’s poetry. It sets the tone for her entire poetic output. It contains only 50 poems, and with few exceptions the themes of all of them is love, or failure in love. The exceptions are ‘The Flag’, and ‘Sepia’. ‘The Flag’ is about the Indian poor, and ‘Sepia’ about the Indian rich. Both the lyrics show her social awareness. ‘To a Big Brother’ and ‘Punishment in Kindergarten’ are evocations of her own childhood. Kamala Das’s world, particularly in Summer in Calcutta is a harsh, sun-scorched tropical world, heavy with the smell of rotting garbage and death, where even the men have “limbs like carnivorous plants.” The lanes are “fevered”, the “trees” “dusty” and “leafless”, cheeks “sunstained”. Only the hardy marigolds and bourgainvilla survive, and courtesans with “tinsel and-jasmine in their hair”. The poet herself feels “a-hunger to take in with greed, like a forest fire that! consumes”\(^2\)

The poetry of Kamala Das is intensely personal and powerfully gynocentric and since she has written a great deal of inward-looking
or confessional poetry, the question of autobiography in her poetry frequently crops up. The poetry of Kamala Das is much more than occluded autobiography. A poet can be both an instrument and a subject of her poetry but a mere preponderance of the confessional mode or a deliberate shutting out of ideology or social criticism is not enough ground to term her poetry autobiographical. In fact, the question of autobiography in art cannot be settled with any measure of finality and to say that all poetry is autobiographical is to be as right (or, as wrong) as to say that no poetry is so. Similarly, it is not possible to force the poetry of Kamala Das into an ideological framework the way Devindra Kohli does in his book on her. In this context, the assessment of T.N. Dhar that her poetry is “reflections or dramatizations of varying moods” is more tenable. The point that needs to be made here is that the poetry of Kamala Das has a greater quantum of indeterminacy that will be expected in an ideologically-oriented poetry. In other words, she does not consciously set out to write poetry with a distinctively feminist standpoint; rather, the gynocentricism in her poetry is reflected in the way she handles and organizes experience to produce some of the most powerful poetry written in India by a woman.
Having said this, one must admit that the feminine self is at the sharply focused centre in the poetry of Kamala Das. In her poetry the emotional change is primarily attached to love. It has an extra, shifting dimension that will not allow it to be reduced to neat slices of meaning. It has a dominant mystical authority of its own.

The sea, often seen as a woman, is a prominent element in Kamala Das’ symbology. Her poem ‘The Suicide’, for instance, is a running monologue in which the sea is a silent dialogic presence. The context is suicide which implies an inexorable conflict between the body and the soul.

In the poetry of Kamala Das the idea of death is closely linked with the presence of a man—a dominant figure whose presence or absence is at the centre of the poet’s consciousness. K.N. Daruwalla dwells upon this fact,” Throughout she shows a longing for an emotionally stable life, a state which can be achieved through receiving love. When this is not forthcoming, which is most of the time If one were to believe her, she starts flailing against the male”. This male is ‘often referred to in the third person signifying both emotional and physical distance. To quote:

Yet, I was thinking, lying beside him
That I loved, and was much loved,

It is a physical thing, he said suddenly.

End it, I cried, end it and let us be free.4

Kamala Das is a strong poet and she will not be hurt by any amount of demystification. Her poems have a rich experiential texture. This is necessary for poetry to be artistically valid. Experience is merged into dream psychology and conscious image making in the poetry of Kamala Das. Hers is truly the poetry of a woman for whom the question of identity in a male dominated system is very real.

REFERENCES:


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