

FATHOMLESS OCEAN

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
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(AUTONOMOUS)
PERIYAKULAM, TAMILNADU, INDIA

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KAMALA DAS'S UNIQUENESS IN WRITING

Dr. J. PREETHI

Kamala Das was born on 31st March 1934 at Punnayurkulam, a village in South Malabar, Kerala. Her father V.M.Nair was employed in an automobile firm in Calcutta and so Kamala began her early education in Calcutta. She started writing poems at the age of six. At the age of 15, she got married to a bank officer Madhava Das, who encouraged her writing interests, and she started writing and publishing both in English and in Malayalam. Calcutta in the 1960s was a tumultuous time for arts and Kamala Das was one of the many voices that came up and started appearing in cult anthologies along with a generation of Indian English poets. In *My Story* she has written the experiences of her childhood days at the Convent. She won the PEN's Asian Poetry Prize in 1963 which made her popular as an Indian poet in English. She has written a collection of poems *Summer in Calcutta, The Old Play House and Other Poems, The Descendants*. She has viewed the society in various perspectives. Some of her poems reveal her childhood days, the feminine identity and psychological traumas.

This paper deals with Kamala Das's collection of poems from *Summer in Calcutta*, consisting of 50 poems which was published in 1965. In this collection, the poems suggest the poet's conscientious involvement in the panorama of life around her. In *The Descendants* which has twenty three poems, the themes of love, lust and disillusionment are dealt with. She expresses her experiences and passions with an openness which is unusual in the Indian context. She is compared to modern confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Her poems express her failure in love and her longings for love. Her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt, infused her writing with power, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation. On 31 May 2009, she died at the age of 75 in a hospital at Pune, but has earned considerable respect in recent years.

In the title poem *Summer in Calcutta*, the poet reveals the intense summer heat of experiences. It derives its poetic and aesthetic meaning from the poet's intimacy with the torture of Indian summer. The April sun brings a sense of sensuous repletion and warm intoxication. The poet expresses in a beautiful way

"What is this drink but

The April sun, squeezed

Like an orange in

My glass?"

The April sun becomes the 'noble venom' that flows through the poet's veins providing a temporary triumph over life's despair. Just as the sun is transformed into a juice, heat is transformed into laughter, despair is transformed into hopeful desire.

In the poem *An Introduction* Kamala Das gives an introduction and description of a woman in the patriarchal society. She has tried to tell about her interest and about her in a detailed manner.

"I am Indian, very brown, born in

Malabar

I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one" – An Introduction

She wonders why the society discourages her to write in English. She feels irritated why they impose rules on her and refuse her to use any language she wishes to write. She could voice her joys, longings and hopes in English. It comes to her 'as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions'. She wants to express with full honesty and sincerity, to her own feelings and emotions which is the fundamental quality to poetry. In I.A.Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) suggests that there are several kinds of meanings and the total meaning of a word depends upon four factors – Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intention, where sense refers to what

is said, or the 'items' referred to by a writer; feeling refers to the emotion, attitude, interest, will, desire etc towards what is being said; tone is the attitude towards the audience/ reader; and intention is the writer's conscious or unconscious aim or the effect that she/he is trying to produce. In Kamala Das's poetry, the reader can find all these together to comprehend the effect of a poem.

"Don't Write in English, they said English is

Not your mother-tongue...

....

It is human as I am human, don't

You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my

Hopes..... the speech of the mind that is.."

— An Introduction

T.S.Eliot observes, "The notion of appreciation of form without content of a poem, we fail to appreciate the form and content ignoring form, is an illusion; if we ignore the content the content of a poem, we fail to appreciate the form; if we ignore the content of a poem, we fail to appreciate the form, if we ignore the form, we have not grasped the content – for the meaning of a poem exists in the words of the poem and in those words only". There is a fusion of thought, expression, rhythm and meaning in her verses and the words create a symbiosis of several sensations, visual, auditory and emotive.

She portrays the expectations of the society from a woman which makes her sad. Through her words, she makes us to think of the pitiable condition of a woman in the society.

"Dress in sarees, be girl

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

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,

Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit

on walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows." – An Introduction

Though she possesses all the qualities and abilities that is superior to men, she is not able to get the status that she expects. After a woman grew up, she is forced to marry a young man without consulting her.

"When I asked for love, not knowing

What else to ask

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into

The Bedroom and closed the door"

Kamala Das' language is simple, colloquial and is moulded by a confessional urgency. Even though it is not highly philosophical, it remains in the mind of the readers. It gives a visual image while reading her poem. She does not want to keep anything secret. She openly talks and describes even her house and the condition.

In the poem, *Blood*, she takes the reader to her house by her visual image used it. There is poetry and simplicity in lines such as

"When we were children

My brother and I

And Always playing on the sands

Drawing birds and animals"

I know the rats are running now" – *Blood*

Kamala Das has written on various themes. She admits that there is 'lot of love' in her poems. She upholds the sanctity of domestic love and marital relationship. But she is disheartened when marital love degenerates into lust, when marital relationship turns into one of domination by the male over the female. Her poems are the expression of

emotionalism caused by frustration when love turns into its opposite solely because of male insensitivity and self-centredness. In the poem *The Sea Shore*, the poet has given vent to the mood of loneliness and despair when her husband is occupied with several preoccupations. In *My Grand Mother's House*, she expresses her happy childhood days with her grandmother who showered her with love and affection without expecting in return. She feels that that love has no end and keeps unchanging. She expects the same love from her husband and when it is not given, she feels that her husband's love as lust.

"Behind my bed room door like a brooding
Dog...you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?" (11 to 16)

The title piece *The Descendants* begins in sinning and ends in the impossibility of redemption. The lovers' indulgence in insubstantial love is sin because there is no authenticity of emotions. In the poem *Love* she expresses her longing for a different love. When her man kisses her in a rough manner she hates it and she uses the term 'burning mouth'.

"Mouth, and....his limbs like pale
And Carnivorous plants reaching out for me,
And the sad lie of my unending lust.
Where is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each Embrace
A complete thing a finished Jigsaw,
When mouth on mouth, I lie,

Ignoring my poor moody mind While pleasure,
With deliberate gaiety"

She expresses her happiness and contentment and gives a brief account of sexual experience which created a kind of dilemma. She portrays that in his relationship with her, there had been no room, no excuse and no need for love and that every embrace between them had been like a finished jigjaw which is obscured.

In the poem *The Old Playhouse* she describes the way how a woman is expected to do all the works to her husband and even though she has done her duties as a wife throughout the day she is not given respect. Thus she feels unhappy in the house which is lit by artificial lights and windows always shut. It shows her mismatched marital relationship. The word 'sparrow' stands for the poetess who is captured by her cruel and heartless captor who denies to show her identity. The poet's mind is compared to the old play house with lights put off.

"You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her

.....

Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless

Pathways of the sky.....

You were pleased with my body's response,

.....

My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,"

- The Old Playhouse

As a woman writer, she is very bold to write everything what is in her mind without minding the society. She has written in diversified themes. The poems begin from her kindergarten's teacher's hurt and experience to death. She narrates her childhood days how she played in her grandmother's house with her brother. She never hides even her

married life and her nostalgic experience to live in Calcutta. Her mental instability is seen in her poems such as *Suicide* and *Death*. She is frank enough to reveal her lover's abnormal sexual tendencies and her remarriage. Though some might label Das as "a feminist" for her candour in dealing with women's needs and desires. It is said that Kamala Das has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism. Kamala Das' views can be characterized as "a gut response," a reaction that, like her poetry, is unfettered by other's notions of right and wrong. Nonetheless, poet Eunice de Souza claims that Das has "mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms".

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<https://www.poemhunter.com/> dt. 01.02.2019