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## KAMALA DAS – THE MOTHER OF MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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Kamala Das (1934-2009) is also known as Kamala Surayya or Madhavikutty is amongst the most significant poets of modern Indian poetry in English. As a poet, she merits a place among the best women poets of 20<sup>th</sup> century. She took the literary world by storm in the mid-sixties. She has created a permanent place for her in contemporary Indo-English poetry. She has made enormous contribution to Indian English poetry by adding a feminist dimension to it. Perhaps deriving inspiration from her matrilineal background, she celebrates women's body and pleads for its integrity. She writes poetry as only as a woman and takes pride in the fact of being a woman and that is the starting point of all kinds of feminism.

The present research paper highlights various facets of her poetry and other writings from feminist perspective.

She is a brilliant bilingual writer, who has earned a respectable place in both English and Malayalam. Her well-known volumes of verse in English are 'Summer in Calcutta' (1965), 'The Descendants' (1967), and 'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' (1973). Her poetry is primarily autobiographical, and her theme is love. For her, love hardly ever goes beyond sex and lust which even reaches the point of nausea, and is born again and again with new vigor. About the subject matter of her poetry, she states, 'A Poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.'

She writes with the Indian tradition in her bones. She represents typical Indian middle class women. Her concept of love is 'a skin communicated thing'. Her poems focus on love treat with a broad view of life. Her themes go beyond stereotyped longings and complaints. Even her feeling of loneliness and disappointment are part of a larger-than-life

personality. She is a natural poet with an excellent feeling for sound, rhythm, phrasing, image, symbol, word play and drama. She had always aspired for the life of freedom.

Her poetry is characterized by a daring frankness, a total lack of inhibitions especially with reference to love and sex, this marked her as iconoclast. Her poems when focused upon love treats it within more panoramic ranges of themes, more realized settings and with soft feelings, bringing to it an intensity of emotion and speech. In her poems she expresses her inner pangs caused by marriage. She feels a sense of loss and suffocation for marriage commodities. Her approach is authentic, revolutionary, honest, frank, human, persuasive, and above all female.

As a poet of sharp feminine sensibility, she gives vent to the hopes, fears and desires of womankind. She has been the companion of woman's cause in all her writings. Her poems like 'Summer in Calcutta', 'Marine Drive', 'An Introduction', 'A Relationship', and several others show her boldness and freedom in speaking aloud the secret longings and aspirations of womankind.

In her first book of poetry, 'Summer In Calcutta', she wants to breathe in fresh air. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. She abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian poets were still governed by '19th-century diction, sentiment and romanticised love.'

Her second book of poetry, 'The Descendants' was even more explicit, urging women to: 'Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts, The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your Endless female hungers ...'- This directness of her voice led to comparisons with Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath.

Not only in her poetry, but also in her essays Kamala Das comes out as an unofficial spokesman of the woman's 'lib' movement. Her feminism can also be seen in the essays – 'Why Not More Than One Husband?', 'What Women Expect Out of Marriage', 'What They Get', and 'The She-Mouse Returns Home'.

At the age of 42, she published a daring autobiography, 'My Story' which was originally written in Malayalam and later she translated it into English. Afterwards, she admitted that much of the autobiography had fictional elements.

'My Story' is an autobiography originally published in Malayalam, titled 'Ente Katha'. The book evoked violent reactions of admiration and criticism among the readers and critics. It is the best-selling woman's autobiography in India to the date. 'My Story' is a chronologically ordered, linear narrative written in a realist style. It recounts the trials of her marriage and her painful self-awakening as a woman and writer. The entire book is written in the form of a novel.

The book, with 50 chapters, follows Aami's (Kamala) life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools in Calcutta where she had to face racist discrimination, through the brutal and indulgent relationship with her husband, through her sexual awakening, her literary career, extramarital affairs, the birth of her children and finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing, and sexuality.

'Ente Katha' was serialised in 1972 in the now defunct 'Malayalanadu' weekly, a literary magazine published by S. K. Nair. The novel not only created a literary sensation but even invited the wrath of Das' close relatives who wanted to stop its publication. V. B. C. Nair, the Editor of 'Malayalanadu' recalls, 'Despite pressure from her influential relatives to stop the publication of the work, Kamala remained bold and it proved a roaring hit boosting the circulation of the weekly by 50,000 copies within a fortnight.'

A Hindi translation titled 'Meri Kahaani' is being published by Hind Pocket Books which expresses her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt in her generation. She was noted for her many Malayalam short stories as well. She was a syndicated columnist also. She once claimed that 'poetry does not sell in this country', but her forthright columns, which sounded off on everything from women's issues and child care to politics, were popular. Overall, she wrote on a diverse range of topics, often disparate from the story of a poor old servant, about the sexual disposition of upper middle class women living near a metropolitan city. Some of her better-known stories include 'Pakshiyude Manam', 'Neypayasam', 'Thanuppu', and 'Chandana Marangal'.

She wrote few novels, out of which 'Neermathalam Pootha Kalam', is very popular.

She travelled extensively to read poetry to Germany's University of Duisburg-Essen, University of Bonn and University of Duisburg universities, Adelaide Writer's Festival, Frankfurt Book Fair, University

of Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore, and South Bank Festival (London), Concordia University (Montreal, Canada), etc. Her works are available in French, Spanish, Russian, German and Japanese.

She holds the UNESCO Peace Chair and Professor of geopolitics at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education. He was formerly a resident editor of the daily Times of India.

She has also held positions as Vice-chairperson in Kerala Sahitya Academy, Chairperson in Kerala Forestry Board, President of the Kerala Children's Film Society, editor of Poet Magazine and poetry editor of Illustrated Weekly of India.

In 2009, prestigious 'The Times' called her 'the mother of modern Indian English poetry'. Although occasionally seen as an attention-grabber in her early years, she was seen as one of the most formative influences on Indian English poetry.

Das' uncanny honesty extends to her exploration of womanhood and love. In her poem 'An Introduction' from 'Summer in Calcutta', she says, 'I am every/ Woman who seeks love'. Though critic Amar Dwivedi criticizes her for this 'self imposed and not natural' universality, this feeling of oneness permeates her poetry.

In her eyes, womanhood involves certain collective experiences. Indian women, however, do not discuss these experiences in deference to social mores. She consistently refuses to accept their silence. Feelings of longing and loss are not confined to a private misery. They are invited into the public sphere and acknowledged. She seems to insist that they are normal and have been felt by women across time. In 'The Maggots' from the collection, 'The Descendants', she corroborates just how old the sufferings of women are. She frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths like Krishna-Radha's love. She tries to give voice to Radha's salience.

Furthermore, by making a powerful goddess prey to such thoughts, it serves as a validation for ordinary women to have similar feelings. Coupled with her exploration of women's needs is an attention to eroticism. The longing to lose one's self in passionate love is discussed in 'The Looking Glass' from 'The Descendants'. The narrator of the poem urges women to give their man 'what makes you women'. The things which society suggests are dirty or taboo are the very things which the women are supposed to give. The 'musk of sweat between breasts/ The warm shock of menstrual blood' should not be hidden from one's beloved. In the

narrator's eyes, love should be defined by this type of unconditional honesty. A woman should 'Stand nude before the glass with him,' and allow her lover to see her exactly as she is. Likewise, the woman should appreciate even the 'fond details' of her lover, such as 'the jerky way he/ Urinates'. Even if the woman may have to live 'Without him' someday, the narrator does not seem to favor bridling one's passions to protect one's self. A restrained love seems to be no love at all; only a total immersion in love can do justice to this experience. Much like the creators of ancient Tantric art, Das makes no attempt to hide the sensuality of the human form; her work seems to celebrate its joyous potential while acknowledging its concurrent dangers.

Das once said, 'I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little' (Warrior interview). Though some might label Das as 'a feminist' for her candor in dealing with women's needs and desires, Das 'has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism'. 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'. Das has ventured into areas unclaimed by society and provided a point of reference for her colleagues. She has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very honest woman.

She has received many awards for her literary contribution, including 'Asian Poetry Prize 1998', 'Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries-1999', 'Asian World Prize-2000', 'Ezhuthachan Award-2009', 'Sahitya Academy Award-2003', 'Vayalar Award 2001' 'Kerala Sahitya Academy Award-2005', 'Muttathu Varkey Award' and so on. Her name was nominated and shortlisted for Nobel Prize in 1984. She was a longtime friend of Canadian writer Merrily Weisbord, who published a memoir of their friendship, 'The Love Queen of Malabar' in 2010.

R. Parthasarathy's 'Ten Twentieth-century Indian Poets' published the works of these 'academic' poets, among whom the most audacious - particularly in Kamala Das' protests against patriarchy and embracing of matrilineal culture with a romantic fervour, the exploration of female sexuality - and, in the words of great critic K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, 'Kamala Das is aggressively individualistic, the so-called icon of Indian feminism.'

What Das needs is 'critical scrutiny, not unalloyed praise' says Keki Daruwalla in his essay 'Not Equipoised Enough.' He finds her 'Sri Lankan' poems sentimental, sounding 'a bit like political soap opera.' Her 'mired metaphor and over cluttered image' display a woeful lack of discipline in her writing. Krishna Ryan's intentional defence of Das in his short piece 'Mixed Metaphors' does not meet Daruwalla's accusations fair and square. Thus, Das is an important figure whose bold and honest voice has re-energized Indian writing in English. She has attempted to touch and feel life in a meaningful way and there lies a dualism in her writing in English, in which soul is contrasted to body. Her poems are filled with yearning for death which symbolizes calmness in contrast to the conscious mind and the body of the anxious individual. Her realization of the supremacy of spirit over matter, soul over body, timeless over the temporal is suggestive of a maturity in her creative art. As an Indian writer and poet, Kamala Das champions the causes of superiority of spirit over matter, as in some poems like Radha Kishan and Vrindavan. She has attempted to find a mythic equivalent for her search for true love. Her offended feminine on emotional wanderings attempt to explore an identity and freedom. As a woman, she tries to see man-woman relationship in its purest and idealized form. So dualism results from the fall from childhood innocence into the adult realm of sexuality, marriage and life amongst strangers. Her sympathetic understanding explication and revelation of the problem of Indian woman in general, obviously make her feminist.

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