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## **Empowering Women: A Feminist Reading of Kamala Das' Works**

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### **Abstract:**

Kamala Das is regarded as one of the best known contemporary Indian writers writing in English. Kamala Das being the voice of a modern liberated woman holds a very high position among Indo-Anglican writers. Many a times, Kamala Das has written that she is not associated with any school of feminism, but her overwhelming sense to liberate herself and defy all social norms oppressing women makes her a pioneer among feminist writers in India.

**Keywords: feminism, emancipation, patriarchal society, feminine self.**

### **Introduction**

Feminism has been a noticeable influence in the writings of Kamala Das which is hard to miss the eyes of a regular reader. This influence becomes all the more pronounced when the writer delineates her male female characters and the relationship between them. Before we embark upon the task of evaluating the strains of feminism in the writings of Kamala Das, we need to understand what feminism is and how it originated. Attempt has also been made to analyze the trends of feminism in Kerala and how they helped Kamala Das in forming an image about man-woman relationship during her young and impressionable age. This imprint which stirred her sensitive and receptive mind during her childhood got recurrently reflected in portrayal of her characters in her works.

The word feminism has aroused great interest in the various spheres of the world. People have interpreted this term with different annotations and connotations in their own way.

In political world, feminism implies the political movement of the women across various countries to secure equal political and voting rights which have considerable historical significance. In literary circles, the term denotes the consistent and continuous evolution of literature from the ideas of male chauvinism towards the equitable share of women and women centric literature. It is considered as a response from the women against various form of injustice meted out to them in general.

In the mid nineteenth century, the term feminism was used to refer to the 'qualities of women'. It was only after the International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892, the word following French word 'Feministe', came into vogue into English to mean the belief which advocated strongly for the women empowerment and protested against the bias and exploitation of women by the male dominated society.

It was the French playwright Alexander Dumas, the younger who used the term 'feminism' first time in a pamphlet entitled "L' Homme-femme" to refer to the then

emerging movement for women's rights. It gradually developed into a worldwide movement demanding equal moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal and economic rights.

Feminism as it is understood in the West is quite different from the feminism as it is preached and practiced in India. In West, the women attempt to shatter all manmade restrictions imposed upon them. They wish to stand on the equal platform with the men and even in certain areas want to surpass them. They yearn to liberate themselves completely and stand against the patriarchal society which dictates terms to them. In India, what the feminists want is only some space and a respectable position in the society. They do not want to grab the scepter of power from the men and wield the authority. This tendency is very much evident in the writings of Kamala Das. She does not stand against the patriarchal society or anything associated with it. She rather enjoys being in the company of men. What she wants is only the right of women to express them freely. She also talks about the emancipation of women but her sense of emancipation is quite different from the usually perceived meaning of the word. She writes in her essay "My Instincts, My Guru":

I don't want to be "emancipated" because I have seen so many of them (Women) "totally emancipated". They irritate their husbands. I hear complaints from men, their wives have become "so emancipated" that they dictate and they frighten them, all the men turn into mice. I don't think there is much difference between a man and a woman. (160)

Though Kamala Das is treated as one of the most powerful women voice in the present time, she never claimed herself to be a feminist. But when one reads her works, he can very easily notice the indelible stamp of feminism in her writings.

Kamala Das through her works, advocates for the equal rights and liberty for women. She through her characters in her autobiography as well as other works invokes the image of a woman who despite suffering all oddities in the hands of men does not part with her feminine self. Her liberated spirit finds herself suffocated and cries out in anguish. Her feet feel fettered with the restrictions imposed upon her by her husband as well as the society. She revolts against the social norms which deny her the right to be herself. She despises the society which expects her to take up different roles without any complaint. She is aghast at the way she is expected to behave like a doll and please her master. Kamala Das exposes her inner pain in "Collected Poems":

I was sent away, to protect a family's  
Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some  
Abstractions, sent to another city to be  
A relative's wife, a hausfrau from his home, and  
A mother for his sons, yet another nodding  
Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to  
Warm his bed at night. (59)

Discussing about the subordinate position of women, Simone de Beauvoir writes in "The Second Sex":

The term masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of the two electric poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting

critic without reciprocity.... A man is in the right in being a man, it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. (15)

She also openly protests against the male domination in a man-woman relationship. She feels that in an interaction with a woman, what a man cares about the most is his ego. He does not leave enough room for a woman to express her inner feelings and emotions. She challenges this male domination in “The Old Play House and Other Poems”:

Your room is  
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always  
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little  
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. (1)

Kamala Das, through her writings, attempts to break this age old tradition of silent sufferings. The female characters delineated by her in her works are strong and courageous and they boldly take up cudgels against the male superiority and his falsely inflated ego and refuse to bow down to the system. She also draws our attention to those outworn ideas and social norms which hinder our emotional and intellectual growth. They also act as great obstacles in the cordial and equitable man–woman relationship.

Kamala Das is always aware about her female identity and whether it is dealing with men in her life or shaking up the society out of its slumber and hypocrisy, Kamala Das is vocal about her need and rights. In an interview given to Iqbal Kaur, Kamala Das talks about the purpose of her autobiography “My Story”:

I needed to disturb society out of its complacency. I found the complacency a very ugly state. I wanted to make women of my generation feel that if men could do something wrong, they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realise that they were equal. I wanted to remove gender difference. I wanted to see that something happened to society, which had strong inhibitions and which only told lies in the public. (Kaur 5)

Kamala Das feels as if after her marriage, she has turned into a non-entity. Her husband boasts of his manly power by apprising her of his adventures with his maidservants. He is indifferent about Kamala Das’s emotions and feelings and comes back to her again and again for fulfillment of his carnal desire. Kamala Das feels herself devoid of any identity. She writes in “The Old Play House and Other Poems”:

You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite  
Dove, you build around me a shabby drawing room  
And stroke my pitted face absent mindedly while  
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep  
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. (51)

Similarly, John Stuart Mill’s sympathetic attitude towards feminism was one aspect of his belief that the freedom of each and every individual is absolutely necessary for the overall development of the society. In his famous work “The Subjection of Women”, he says:

This dependence, as it exists at present, is not an original institution, taking a fresh start from considerations of justice and social expediency –it is the primitive state of slavery lasting on... It has not lost the taint of its brutal

original. No presumption in its favour, therefore, can be drawn from the fact of its existence. (8)

In order to secure equal political rights, economic rights and educational opportunities for women throughout the world, the United Nations Commission on the status of women was established in 1946. .

As Kamala Das spent many years of her childhood in Kerala, the social conditions of Kerala had a lasting effect on her in forming the impression about the status of women in the society. Despite having a high literacy rate and a sex ratio in favour of women, the women in Kerala have witnessed a lot of discrimination and bias. Though it is believed that the engagement of women in financial activities facilitate them to acquire equal rights and freedom. But in traditional Malayali society, this trend has been sadly non-existent. Kerala produces highest number of women medical professionals in India and they work in different parts of India as well as of the world. Participation of Malayali women in education, management, engineering and other fields has presented very impressive statistical figures. Notwithstanding these facts, the women in Kerala are compelled to live as second class citizens and are subordinated and subjugated by their male counterparts. This injustice and unfair treatment has stirred the imagination of many female writers who have openly challenged against this discrimination and called for the liberty and equality for women. Among all the feminist writer of Kerala, Kamala Das holds a special place as she pioneered the cause of women and inspired other female writers to voice their concerns openly. Other female writers in Kerala who expressed their feminist views are Rajalakshmi (1930-65), Lalithambika Atherjanam (1909-87), K. Saraswati Amma (1919-75), etc. Apart from these writers, the other writers who deserve mention are Annie Thayyil, Mary John Thottam, Mary John Koothattukulam and Muthukulam Parvathi Amma etc.

In the traditional Kerala families, sex was still a taboo among women. They could not discuss it among themselves. The Nair community, the community to which Kamala Das belonged, basically had matrilineal social structure. But despite this fact the women were quite prudish and the men held a dominant position with regard to the sexual relationship. She writes in her autobiography:

No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed. They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi's legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her. (23)

In her household too, Kamala Das observes that the women are not assigned their due place. She talks about the relationship between her grand-uncle and grand-aunt in her autobiography 'My Story'. She describes that there was no emotional bonding between them. The relationship between them existed only on the physical level or as Kamala Das put it 'radically sex based'. Here the writer gives ample indication about the position of woman in Indian society. Her grand-aunt is viewed as a sexual object, a thing fit for consumption by her grand-uncle. Her grand-uncle often makes fun of her by referring as 'empty headed'. Kamala Das writes:

My grand uncle liked to see women glamorized with jewels and flowers. His second wife, my favorite aunt, was never seen even at night without her heavy jewellery, all gem encrusted and radiant ... Each night she came to our house accompanied by her maids and a lantern, looking like a bride. And she walked

up the steep staircase of the gate house to meet her famous husband in their lush bedroom, kept fragrant with incense and jasmine garlands. (20-21)

When Kamala Das sees around her at Kerala households during her childhood days at Nalapat house, she gets the impression that there is no love or harmony between the married couple. Women get married at quite an early age just after attaining puberty to the much older boys. The girls undergo brutality in the hand of their much experienced husbands right on the very first night of their marriage. She mentions in her autobiography, "It was customary for a Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also customary for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night".(23-24)

She observes that only dissatisfaction and unhappiness exist in a licit relationship between a man and woman. She sees many women in her society who were not happy with their husbands and looking for the happiness outside the ambit of marriage. She expresses it candidly in her autobiography, "The only heroine whose sex life seemed comparatively untumultuous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jamuna for her blue-skinned lover. But she was another's wife and so an adulteress. In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence". (24)

Kamala Das poetry is replete with imagery especially related to the human body which the writer uses quite convincingly. It seems that while showing love towards the male counterpart, her mind is fully conscious of her feminine psyche. Perhaps these expressions and articulation of her feelings are related to her sense of liberty which she wants to attain time and again. In her poem "The Looking Glass" she writes:

Stand nude before the glass with him  
So that he sees himself the stronger one  
And believes it so, and you so much more  
Softer, younger, lovelier...Admit your  
Admiration. Notice the perfection  
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under  
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor. (25)

Kamala Das resents when she is asked to behave like a woman. She wants to attain liberty and refuses to act like a clown. In "The Descendants", she writes ironically:

It will be alright when I learn  
To paint my mouth like a clown's  
It will be alright if I put up my hair  
Stand near my husband to make a proud pair. (6)

In traditional Kerala society, it was a norm to marry off a girl at quite an early age to a much older husband notwithstanding that the girl is not physically or mentally matured to enter into a man-woman relationship. Kamala Das herself bore the brunt of this evil social practice when she was married at an early age of 15 years. She mentions in her autobiography 'My Story' that at the time of marriage she was not physically and mentally ready for the marriage. Since it was customary, an early marriage was imposed upon a sensitive and young girl. Neither Kamala nor her parents or grandparents had the courage to stand against this evil social practice. Kamala Das writes:

That very night my grandmother came to my room and told me that I ought to marry him. 'Das is a very good man and entirely without vices. Your parents and his mother feel that you two should get married soon. 'What is the hurry?' I asked her, knowing well that neither she nor anybody else of older generation would ever speak the truth to a fifteen year old child. (77)

In a patriarchal society, besides serving men and doing other odd household chores, women are entrusted with the task of looking after and raising the children. Men try to get away from this children raising duty and consider it only women's liability. In "My Story" Kamala Das tells the readers how her husband behaved when she gave birth to a child:

Having him at my side during the night reminded me of my husband and I wrote asking him to come home on leave. When he arrived, he grew disgusted with the child who woke up several times during the night to take his feed. Take him away to your grandmother's room, he cried angrily. I can not sleep with all this noise and fussing. The baby clung to me and I sensed that he too felt the humiliation our position. (89)

Usually in these societies, the women are also denied right to express them freely. In a man-woman relationship, nobody pays any heed to what women want. Women are treated merely as a sexual object, a thing fit for consumption. The males feel that they can have their affairs with any number of women but do not tolerate any digression of women in any way. They boast of their manliness by citing their sexual encounters to their female partner as their biggest achievement. Kamala Das writes about it in her autobiography:

We were left alone and probably my father thought I would enjoy being alone with the young man. Wherever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin. He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar. (79-80)

The women in India remain dependent throughout their life on their father, husbands and sons. After their marriage they are mistreated by their husbands who consider them no more than a sexual object only fit to gratify their sexual urge. Women in this position feel suffocated and deprived of their rights. Kamala Das in her poem "The Sunshine Cat" talks about the stereotypical attitude of Indian husbands towards their wives. She writes about the misery of a wife:

Her husband shut her  
In, every morning: locked her in a room of books  
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door, like  
A yellow cat, to keep her company but soon,  
Winter came and one day while locking her in, he  
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a  
Lone, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when  
He returned to take her out, she was cold and  
Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to me. (51)

The poet is fully aware that the women are treated as inferior to their male counterparts. The male partners being proud of their masculine power neglects the

emotional needs of their female partners. They also exhibit a feeling of indifference and do not show warmth and love which women expect from them. The poet understands well that it is the Indian social fabric which denies the women their due place in society. She writes in her poem “The Sunshine Cat”:

They did this to her, the man who knew her, the man  
She loved who loved her not enough, being selfish  
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor  
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher and the band  
Of cynics she turned to ... (51)

In her collection of short stories “A Doll for the child Prostitute”, Kamala Das delineates her female characters as strong and forceful who take up cudgels against the age old traditions and refuse to bow down before the male dominated society. Some of the stories of this collection were published earlier in well-known magazines and periodicals as *Opinion*, *Quest*, *Debonair* and *Beautiful*.

This captivating and beautiful collection of short stories starts with the title story “A Doll for the Child Prostitute” which tells the emotional and pitiable story of Rukmani, a minor girl of thirteen years who faces the scourge of society when she is raped by her father and subsequently sold to Ayee for prostitution. Here Rukmani comes across a morally corrupt Inspector a representative of every man who considers woman a thing of consumption and fails to see her in the form of a mother, daughter or a sister. Right at the very young age of thirteen, Rukmani realizes that the world is full of immorality and hypocrisy. In this touching story, the author very appropriately portrays how an innocent and helpless woman who does not know anything about the filth of the society is forced into prostitution and is made to swallow down the reality that the man-woman relationship which a girl idealises in her dreams has no place in the real world. In the story, Kamala Das very adroitly brings out the emotions and leave the readers almost in tears when Rukmani runs towards Inspector Saheb calling him ‘Papa, Papa’ and the Inspector has a change of heart and thereafter starts treating her as his granddaughter.

Kamala Das through another character in the story conveys the message to her readers that males are fit to be made love to but never to be trusted as they are ignorant and insensible of the emotional needs of a woman. In the story, Mirathai, a beautiful prostitute known as Mira meets a college boy and falls into love with him. The boy manages to elope away with Mira. They are found and arrested by the Inspector Saheb. Though the boy is freed by the Inspector on insistence of Ayee, he does not have the courage to come forward and fight for his love. Mira retorts furiously, ‘The ungrateful swine. He told me that he was twenty-four and that he had found a job at a mill. A liar. A stinking liar’. (55)

In her story “The Young Man with a Pitted Face”, which is very different in its treatment of human relationship, the author delves deep into the psyche of its characters and gives the readers an opportunity to think deep about man-woman relationship. In this story, Das depicts the relationship between a dying woman and a healthy young man very beautifully. The man visits an emaciated and blue woman who is bed ridden and about to die, just out of sympathy for that woman. But as the woman comes out of her illness, the woman deserts her as he was not ready to get into a serious love affair with the woman.

Sometimes, we find an urgent need in Kamala Das to address the hollowness and futility of female life- the trials and tribulations, the vicissitudes which a woman has to suffer in a male dominated world.



The treatment of the women in the society also depends upon the time and place in which the writer lives. In the so called 'modern' and rich Indian society, women enjoy a different status as regards their social life and interaction with men as compared to the women in poor society. In her poem "The Flag" she writes:

The  
Rich men dance with one another's wives and  
Eke out a shabby  
Secret ecstasy, and poor old men lie  
On wet pavements and  
Cough, cough their lungs out. (20-21)

Though at the very outset, it may seem that a lot has been achieved by this movement in India but when one sees closely and carefully, the differences between man and woman become quite conspicuous. Whenever women have attempted to step out of their stereotypical role of looking after household chores and venture into the political and public spheres, they have often been ridiculed. Nevertheless, the women have constantly endeavored to assert their identity and challenged the age old system of male hegemony.

### Conclusion

Thus in the light of above arguments, it can be seen that Kamala Das was very much influenced by the movement of feminism and it imbues her poetry, short stories and the other work with a unique quality of its own. Despite Kamala Das's refusal from associating herself with any particular school of feminism, Kamala Das comes out as a true champion for the cause of women's freedom and equality. Notwithstanding the controversies surrounding her, she acts as a perpetual spring of inspiration for the other women writers and fills them with a sense of self confidence and self worth.

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