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## Diverse Shades of a Woman in the Life & Works of Kamala Das

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### Abstract:

A woman covers a bundle of emotions & relationships that are sometimes with reason or without reason. Kamala Das, a renowned feminist writer is a master artist in the portrayal of such human relationships especially in context of a woman in different shades. Her life & works is the collective repository of a woman's experience. Kamala Das has exposed the diverse colors in a woman's life by subverting patriarchal stereotypes on one hand and depiction of rejuvenating role of a woman on other hand that always helped her to wipe away unlimited tears and restored in her unbeatable strength to face her miserable life. However, Das emerged to be an unconventional and unorthodox figure in the society but at the same time she never forgot her moral & traditional values. Thus in spite of her daring nature, she came out as a responsible woman, a dutiful wife, a concerned daughter, an emotional grand daughter and a caring mother. The present paper depicts as how she gave preference to establish an identity equal to that of man without compromising her femininity as a daughter, granddaughter, wife, and worshipper and as a devoted mother.

**Keywords:** Repository, Patriarchal, Stereotypes, Rejuvenating, Unconventional, Unorthodox.

### Introduction

Kamala Das is undoubtedly the greatest woman poet in the contemporary Indo-Anglian Literature who has displayed diverse shades of femininity in her works. Kamala Das was born on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1934 at Punayarkulam in the coastal region of Malabar in the state of Kerala. She was a bilingual writer. Ever since the publication of the first volume of her poems "Summer in Calcutta" (1965) she has been known for her bold and undaunted honest expression of various stages of her womanhood and role of woman in traditional Indian context. Das's power lies in the naturalness with which she records and reveals her most intimate experiences which are very much uncommon in the Indian Society. Her volumes of poem such as "Summer in Calcutta" (1965), "The Descendents" (1967), "The Old Playhouse" (1973), "The Annamalai Poems" (1988)

, “*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*”(1996) and her Last collection “*Ya Allah*”(2001) , all more or less deal with her journey of womanliness. The present paper describes her voyage of femininity at different junctures of her life but with indianess and traditional touch in her attitude. The present paper shows that though she revolted against the society but she never dishonored the human values and tried her level best to give it expression. In fact in her poems she talked about the feelings and experience of the woman in general.

### As a Daughter

Kamala Das was the daughter of V.M.Nair, a former managing Editor of the widely circulated Malayam daily ‘Matrubhumi’ and Nalapat Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poetess. As tender kids Kamala and her younger brother always bore the burden of swarthy skin and ordinary features. She narrates that her parents never told them that they were disappointed by the color of their skin but it was evident from their every gesture. She remembers how her father used to repeatedly shout at them to drink the purgative and told her grandma to apply turmeric and oil on Kamala’s skin. She wanted her father’s love and affection but she did not get it the way she wanted it. She writes in her poem “*Next to Indira Gandhi*”:

“Father, I asked you now without fear  
Did you want me?  
Did you ever want a daughter  
Did I disappoint you much  
With my skin as much as yours.” (118)

Child’s psychology is much influenced by the parental behavior and bondage with their kids. It seems that Das’s parents did not encourage her poetic sensibilities. She remarkably asserts in her autobiography *My Story* “I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses.....” (9) Kamala Das notes that her parents were least concerned with what she felt yet she was much influenced by her mother’s poetic passion and sacred writings. That’s why she started writing poems at the age of six and each of her poems on her dolls made her sad.

Even then when her mother grew old she developed an intense attachment to her as evident in her poem “*My Mother Sixty Six*” This poem was published in 1999. This poem is the representation of the melancholic feeling of the poet about her mother old age and approaching death. In this poem she recounts her feeling towards her mother when she was driving away from her parent’s home to Cochin. She notices her mother sitting beside her. She minutely observes her face weak like a dead body. This reminds her agonizingly and painfully that her mother has grown old and could die one day leaving her alone:

“Driving from my parent’s  
Home to Cochin last Friday  
Morning, I saw my mother. (Line 1-3)

The stances “Driving away from my parent’s home/Last Friday,/Morning” suggest that the poetess is leaving her home to Cochin. She left her parent’s house by Friday morning. The word “Friday” might indicate “later part of the week or life” and “Morning” might refer to “new dreams and new aspirations”. The speaker perception of her mother would entirely be a fulfilling experience:

“.....I saw my mother,  
Beside me,  
Doze, open mouthed, her face  
Ashen like that  
Of a corpse and realized with  
Pain  
That she thought away, and  
Looked.....”. (Line 3-10)

In the above Para the poetess is having a very close glance at her mother with a possessive and concerned outlook. She is able to view a very sad state of ageing and the gloom of death that is quite visible on the mother’s face. Ageing is a natural phenomenon and face reflects it. Similarly Kamala Das’s mother’s face is reflective of the natural process of ageing. The poetess in a fast running life pauses for a moment to think intensely about her mother. She is very close to her mother and the thought of growing old kindles fear in poet’s heart:

“.....but after the airport’s  
Security check, standing a few yards  
Away, I looked again at her, wan  
Pale as a late winter’s moon and felt that  
Old familiar ache, my childhood’s fear....” (Line 15-19)

Any child feels insecure and becomes vulnerable whenever the child feels or finds itself separated from the mother. Similarly in this poem the apprehension of the poetess about her separation from her mother and moving towards the final & eternal truth worries her as her “old familiar ache”. After the airport check, the poetess again turns her gaze towards her pallid mother. It seems as if she is seeing her off to the Death. And then she tells her mother positively “see you soon” because she wants to see her mother again in pleasant phase either on earth or in heaven.

### **As a grand daughter**

Kamala Das was being loved and cared by her grandmother in her childhood. In the poem “*The Grand Mother House*” we witness the beautiful memories of her childhood where she

misses her grandmother. At the same time she feels proud of her grandmother and the love she received from her. She feels so bigheaded while talking about her grandmother and her house as she spent some of the happiest days of her life. Das recalls her ancestral home and her dead grandmother in the poem “*My Grandmother’s House*” published in 1965 in her poetic collection *Summer in Calcutta*. The poem is a reminiscence of the poet’s grandmother and their ancestral house in Punnayurkulam in Kerala. Her deepest remembrance of love she received from her grandmother is associated with the image of ancestral home:

“There is a house now far away  
I received love.....” (32)

The poem starts with a story introducing a house which was visited long back and it’s too far from the place where the poetess lived. Das expresses very clearly about the unconditional love which she received from her grandmother and she is carving for such love which is lost. The poet now lives at another place but the remembrance of her grandmother’s ancestral house makes her gloomy and sad. She is almost heartbroken because with the death of her grandmother the house has become deserted. The poetess affirms that due to the demise of her grandmother, the silence began to sink in her grandmother house:

“.....That woman died,  
The house withdrew into silence.....,” (32)

She realizes that she cannot go back to the past but she wants to go back to the ancestral house which has become desolate where the snakes crawled among the books. The poetess wants to look through its windows and catch a handful of darkness to keep as a reminder of her lost happiness. The poetess is now covered with the intense grief .She hankers for love like a beggar going from one door to another asking for love at least in small quantity but her love hunger remains unsatisfied, and there is a big void which she longs to fill up with love :

“.....snakes moved  
Among books, I was then too young  
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon  
How often I think of going  
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or  
Just listen to the frozen air,  
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of  
Darkness to bring it here to lie  
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding dog....” (32)

The image of the window indicates the link between the past and the present. It highlights the desire of the poetess for the melancholy mood and her attempt to revive her dreams and desires.

The poetess also implies that the house is like a desert with snakes and other reptiles crawling over. The air is frozen now, as contrasted to when the grandmother was alive – the atmosphere was filled with compassion and love. In the sad mood, she also long to bring in an “armful of darkness”. This armful of darkness shows her nostalgic state of mind:

“.....you cannot believe, darling,  
Can you, that I lived in such a house and  
Was proud, and loved.....” (32)

Das is very proud of the unconditional love she received from her grandmother. The poem shows how much she grieves at the loss of the person who gave her warmth of empathy and satisfied her to the core. She feels proud of her grandmother and her house and wants all the others know how pleasing and satisfying was the atmosphere at the grandmother’s house. Das is at her best in portraying the picture of her grandmother. In her *My Story* she gives a feministic outlook of her grandmother. Kamala Das opined that she was the great grandmother of the women’s lib who advocated the rights of women whenever a controversy cropped up and a female oppressed.

### As a wife

According to Kamala Das, a woman as a wife is an abode of sensual pleasure for men and they employ all their mannish authority to dominate her. Married to a man of her father’s age, at the age of 15, Das suffered a tremendous mental pressure to overcome the constant disrespect because of her husband’s physical desires. Das as a confessional poet has candidly described how dissatisfied she was due to the harsh treatment of her husband as he always considered her a plaything and physical relationship between them had just become a skin communicated thing. She considered herself a helpless victim of a young man’s carnal hunger. Her husband successfully used her body and making his bodily juices mingle with hers. In the following lines Das presents the candid details of the essence of the womanhood to fulfill the physical and sexual needs of the man and accept their self-centeredness and domination in her poem “*The Looking Glass*” from her poetic collection “*The Descendents*”:

Gift him all,  
Give 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.....” (25)

Her husband did not realize that her physical wishes have fully been fulfilled but she remained emotionally incomplete and hungry. As through most of her poems we can understand that her only desire is to get love from her beloved but instead of love in every man she gets lust as explained in her poem “*The Freaks*” from “*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*”:

“Who can help us who have lived so long?  
And have failed in love? The heart  
An empty cistern, waiting  
Through long hours, fills itself  
With coiling snakes of silence.” (59)

Instead of waiting for love for long time her heart remains an empty cistern which is filled with coiling snakes of silence. Women are just treated as an inanimate object and suffer the loss of freedom especially after their marriage. As mentioned in the poem “*The Stone Age*” from her poetic collection “*The Old Playhouse & other poems*”:

“You turn me into a bird of stone, granite  
Dove, you build round me a shabby room  
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while  
You read.....” (51)

Here the bird, the symbol of freedom is ironically converted into a lifeless showpiece which is kept in the room to showcase, which is very common in Indian society as in case of women who are kept in home as a showpiece and are denied any type of freedom. She cannot fulfill her desires & wishes because of her marriage. The same feeling we can find in the following lines of her poem “*The Old Playhouse*” from her poetic volume “*The Old Playhouse & the other Poems*”:

“You called me wife  
I was thought to break saccharine into your  
Tea and to offer at the right moment vitamins,  
Cowering beneath your monstrous ego. I ate  
The magic loaf and became a dwarf.....” (01)

Kamala Ds firmly believed that love is the essence of life for a woman. She longed to receive and to give love. Her dreams about the marriage, love and home were unfortunately shattered by an insensitive husband and he made her fall down to earthly realities from her dreamy world. Her husband always hurt her and evoked a sense of disappointment in her.

### **As a Worshipper**

When she was craving for love, she decided to seek it out of her legal orbit. She made up her mind to move toward another alternative. As she was a bit of conservative and God-fearing so she tried to brought in the spiritual aspect in her life and in her poems such as “*Radha*”, “*Ghanshyam*”, “*Vrindavan*” and later on her poetic collection “*Ya- Allah*”.



In the essentially tragic drama of selfhood that Das's poetic pilgrimage represents, the poet's union with Krishna is delineated in her poetry as well as in her autobiography, as a redeeming finale. Depressed and disgusted by the lustful and self-interested human bondage, the poet finds herself in a mystical communion with Krishna. For Kamala Das love as skin communicated thing, seems to be no love at all and only an emotional fascination in love can do justice. Love has become the pervasive theme in Das's poetry and it is through love that she endeavors to discover her identity and soul. And then later on she drifts towards spirituality in quest of her ideal love as explained in her autobiography "*My Story*"

"Free from that last of human bondage I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show has ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet." (195)

It is an imaginary and theatrical monologue between the speaker's soul and the Almighty. In fact, it is an account of the union of the limited to the unlimited. Similar kind of contrast between the shadow and real can be found in Das's poem "*A Man is Season*" from her book "*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*". It shows a fine relationship between the evanescent human lover and the eternal lover.

A man is season,  
You are the eternity,  
To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins  
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,  
You let me sing in empty shrines....." (81)

Krishna is the real lover and human lover is the shadow. Mr. A.N.Diwedi in his book explains that Das sometimes gives a mythical structure to her quest for true and ideal love, and identifies it with the Radha-Krishna myth or with Mira Bai's abandoning the ties of marriage as she expresses in her poem "*Vrindavan*":

"Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind,  
And the flute, luring her  
From home and her husband." (116)

In another poem entitled "*Radha*" from her poetic collection "*The Descendents*" she tries to feel some mystical experiences of Lord Krishna, her divine lover. She writes of herself that the long waiting had made their bond so pure. She further explains in her poem that she has engulfed herself with Lord Krishna when she says "Everything in me/ is melting, even the hardness at the



core/Krishna; I am melting, melting, melting/Nothing remains but you ....”(15).In the passion of her relationship with Lord Krishna, the poet as a literary incarnation of Radha finds herself melted in the body of her lord. Lord Krishna appears to her in myriad shapes and stays in her consciousness. She realizes that the relationship with men is temporary but our eternal relationship is with Almighty God. God can be our divine lover. Kamala Das realizes that all her worldly lovers are the reflection of her eternal lover and that is God.

In another poem called “*Ghanshyam*” , she asserts that Ghanshyam ( another name of Lord Krishna) is her ideal lover who occupies her heart. All her lovers are the shadows of her real lover which is God. She is also in intense love with Nature which is another name of Lord Krishna.

The poet also rejects lust in one of her poems called “*The Prisoner*”. She tells that deceitful lust is mortal and is of no significance. A fine comparison has been done between prisoner and the woman involved in the sexual act. The prisoner is trapped in the jail and the woman is locked with her lover’s body and wants get away from it. It means woman in this poem finds herself caught in the prison of desire and sexual hunger and wants to get out from this trap.The poem also has spiritual meaning that soul is trapped in the physical boundaries. After sometime, the soul longs to leave the physical boundary and become free. Kamala Das realizes the difference between perishable and the imperishable. She says that Krishna is the ultimate reality and the human lover is just an illusion.

Irshad Gulam Ahmed writes “In Das human ties are seen as being accidental and confined only to this perishable body and hence inconsequential. The soul’s union with God is the only kind of bond that is permanent.” (97). Kamala Das writes of the pains and sufferings, of disappointment and of fulfillment as well as acknowledging the Almighty God as her real & ideal lover. Pier Paolo Piciucco in his book opines that trapped in the bitter relationship with an insensitive male, the poet escapes from the material world to divinely spiritual world and finds the ultimate solace as explained in the poem “Request”:

“When I die,  
Do not throw  
The meat and bones away  
But pile them up,  
And let them tell  
By their smell  
What life was worth on this earth?  
What love was worth in the end ?”(155)

This poem shows the sense of disgust of the bodily union. This poem is also related to alienation and search of love which is incomplete, endless and eternal. Contrary to her passion with physicality, she affirms the need to look beyond the human skin, transcend flesh and hence achieve complete union with the God.

## As a mother

After the birth of her first son Das's life took a new turn. Her complete world seemed to be revolving around her child. She found a toy to play with. Das herself explained the experience of child bearing in her autobiography and her poems in a very candid manner. She called it as one of the major milestones of her life. In her autobiography she has given a vivid account of her three deliveries in most effective terms. During her pregnancy her creativity reached at the peak and she used to sit throughout the night writing poetry. Even post- delivery, the motherhood brought a great change in Das's approach towards life. In fact she shed all the carnal desires and became more inclined towards her kids and religion. "*Jaisurya*" is one of the famous poems of Kamala Das on motherhood which was published in 1967 under the heading of "*Only the Soul; Knows How to Sing*". The theme of this poem is child birth and poet recalls her experience of giving birth to her first child "Jaisurya". Here Kamala Das speaks of her groaning due to the labour pains. It was the time of rain and every "weeping tree the lush moss spread like eczema", and from the beneath the muddy earth, the fat worms emerged. It is noteworthy that imagery used here, is sad and depressing. It was a "slanting rain" which had begun to fall at the very time of the first labour pain experienced by Kamala Das to keep company with her. At that time she neither felt the desire to be loved by her husband and nor the feeling of lust but what mattered to her most was the child whom she was going to give birth. When the child emerged from her womb, she felt proud of her son who has been separated from the darkness:

"Separated from the darkness that was mine,  
And in me....." (71)

Kamala Das felt so happy when she became mother and gave birth to her first son who had now entered the world of sunshine and brightness:

"Out of the mire of a moonless night was  
He born, Jaisurya, my son....."(71)

Here Kamala Das gives a fine comparison. The son was born in the same way as explained below:

"Out of the  
The wrong is born the right and out of the right  
The sun-drenched golden day....." (71)

Similarly in the poem "*The White Flowers*" the newly born child is set against the background of 'war', 'bloodshed and despair'. In the view of Mr. A.N.Diwedi, this poem is a sort of prayer wishing her son a long life in the face of violence in the outer world. The contrast has been

shown between the White Flowers (symbol of peace) and red of the cherry wine (blood, & mortality). He writes that there are solitary gestures of heroism in the poem:

“Today some of us will rise and sing for love  
In voices never as sweet before.....” (13)

But the glasses are cold like a dead man’s palm and horrible sobbing tend to suppress the poet’s prayer for the preservation for the child. Kamala Das in her personal life had three sons - M D Nalapat, Chinnen Das and Jayasurya Das. Madhav Das Nalapat whom she was so much attached.

## CONCLUSION

Kamala Das ,in her various literary works, has candidly enumerated the expectations of society from a woman. Kamala Das was one of the very few Indian English writers who revolted against the pre established norms of the feminism and female identity. In most of the works of Kamala Das, woman is the main character and that too in different shades such as a daughter, granddaughter, wife, and mother but primarily as the woman who seeks unconditional love and respect in the society and family. For Kamala Das besides being wrapped in all different roles during her life it is more important to be a woman and a lover with a body and soul without disgracing and dishonoring the human values but externalizing the natural and inner human feelings. Kamala Das strongly feels that woman always carries the positivity of being a faithful daughter & wife and a loving mother and she should be gifted with her individual identity and be accepted as a normal human being.

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