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Weaving the Fabric of Indian Society through Kamala Das's Works

Dilraj Kaur

Master of Arts (English),
Amity School of Languages,
Amity University Uttar Pradesh Lucknow Campus.
&

Prof (Dr) Kum Kum Ray

Director Amity School of Languages,
Amity University Uttar Pradesh Lucknow Campus.

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Abstract:

“I don’t know politics, but I know the names” quotes the most rebellious author who doesn’t care about politics, frankly talks about gender and women’s sexuality, and writes fiercely while debunking the Indian society -Kamala Das, an Indo-Anglican author. In an Indian society where the agency and mobility of a woman are constrained and judged constantly and her autonomy is just a mirage, a feminist born in a Malayali family later married to a Bengali at a very early age Kamala Das outspokenly wrote about her transition of womanhood, through the lens of das poetry, ‘An Introduction’, she even shows her dissatisfaction and frustration in love and marriage in her work named “The old playhouse”. There are other poetry and short poems that she wrote about an idealized childhood and a lane of nostalgia that goes through her grandmother’s nalapat at the house, symbolizing independence, affection and security. Her works advocate for free choices and equal rights. She, through her literature and work weaves the fabric of Indian society

Keywords: women's autonomy, literature, societal stigma, culture and social influence, sexuality, marriage, feminism, Indian society.

Introduction

Indian society is seen and considered as a patriarchal society where man takes all the control over women, patriarchy rests on defined notions of masculine and feminine is held in place by sexual and property arrangements that privilege men's choices, desires, and interests over and above those of the women in their lives and is sustained by social relationships and cultural practices which celebrate hetero-sexuality, female fertility, and the motherhood on the one hand and valorise female subordination to masculine authority and virility on the other. The institution of the Indian society, such as marriage, family, and kinship, one- or other-way subordinate women to live, behave, and act in a way that favours the patriarchal society regardless of a woman's choice.

Marriage is an essential institution of the society that binds two people together legally and culturally, but most of the time, the marriage setting works against a woman's autonomy and freedom. Her mobility gets more limited than before. A female identity in an Indian household is just as garden or oceans, having unexplored territory and depth that society tries to suppress and keeps in its caterpillar form.

Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Surrayya, is one of those writers who is frequently linked to confessional poetry. Das's poetry is marked by a fierce critique of patriarchal norms and the restrictive roles assigned to women. Her poems and short poems challenge conventional gender roles and advocate for a more inclusive and accepting society. Women are often excluded and discriminated against in society. Their home is not considered remarkable, they lack access to basic medical and educational resources. Kamala Das writes in a way that provides readers a very intimate and reflective journey by acting as a canvas for her deepest desires, thoughts, and

struggles. No matter what she wrote, Das always aimed to depict some of the most contentious aspects of Indian culture. She breaks the social and cultural stigma attached to women, talking openly and deeply about women. She's not like those writers who write on topics like colonial India but Das talks about her introspection of life, her birth in a Malayali family, writing in Malayali while identifying herself as Madhavi Kutty, and facing people's distress when she writes in English, and her major transitional period; her early-age marriage that turns out to be a disaster. The most outstanding and striking concerns of Kamala Das as a poet are sexual frustration and the failure of marriage as a means of happiness in the life of a woman. She opposes the inferiority of a woman, her desire stems from the anger and pain that being a woman has caused her throughout her life.

Different work of Kamala Das

Kamala Das's jotting interlaces the complications of Indian society, specifically the lives of women in it. Her poetry and short stories shatter the silence on issues of womanish identity, love, marriage, fornication, and societal restrictions. In her confessional poetry, she unapologetically explores the emotional and physical confines of womanises, constantly cankering strict patriarchal morals. Her lyric *An preface* speaks to her battle with identity, language, and gender places, as she claims her right to write and speak in English in malignancy of disapprobation by society "I'm Indian, veritably brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in/ Two, dream in one"(Das 26). In the same tone, *The Old Playhouse* condemns the stifling aspect of conventional marriage, depicting a woman confined to domesticity: "You called me woman / I was tutored to break soupy into your tea"(Das 5). Outside poetry, her short stories offer a gritty, unornamented account of social conditions. *A Doll for the Child courtesan* reveals the atrocities of child exploitation, lacing the chastity of

nonage with the atrocity of societal oppression. In *The Sandal Trees*, she delves into the close bond of two women, subtly fighting the standard hypotheticals about women's connections. In her tale *Padmavati the Harlot*, she shows an independent and bold woman who isn't accepting of markers by society, buttressing Das's ongoing motif of women's defiance. Through her tales, Das shows women not as unresisting subjects but as individuals, granting them a voice against domination. The jottings of Kamala Das continue to be essential to reconsidering the story of Indian womanises. By working in particular and social themes together, she defies the complacency of morals, producing erudite material that encourages feminist jotting within Indian literature.

Her famous poems that portrays her inner angst with the society that suppresses her choices, agency and joy of simply being herself

Das Kamala. *An Introduction*. 1962. "I am the flesh, the body /You've denied, the woman /You have scorned."

In the poem "An Introduction" it acts as both a personal manifesto and a commentary on the broader societal structures in India. Kamala Das uses her life and experiences as a lens to examine the rigid frameworks of tradition, identity, and language, questioning and resisting them with eloquence and bravery. Her poem is a testament to the evolving cultural fabric of India a blend of deep-rooted traditions and the unstoppable quest for individuality and change.

"A woman who loves being a woman, embraces her womanhood, but refuses to be mistreated like the same, aspires to be treated as a human and a human only, breaking all the barriers of language, gender and not to be gatekept by the society. Who loves her freedom, which she absolutely deserves, and the agency that liberates her to be the rainbow of being a woman. Her voice in a patriarchal society is just like driving a bus in a heavily foggy weather to reach the destination.

In her poem “Summer in Calcutta,” Kamala Das presents a sophisticated analysis of Indian society through vivid images and self-reflective narrative. A Calcutta summer is explosive and intense, which stands as a reflection of the metaphoric Indian culture and its complexities. Her description of the city’s heat and torpor embodies the suffocating social standards and norms attributed to womanhood in Indian society. One can almost physically feel the desire for freedom and self-expression in the lines, “I am a freak. It’s only / To save my face, I flaunt, at / Times, a grand, flamboyant lust” (Das 5-7). These lines dismember societal norms and expectations and are in sync with Das’s work, embodying how women in India face multifaceted struggles. The sensual imagery in the poem interspersed with “My worshiping fingers” (Das 11) challenges traditional concepts of femininity, sexuality, and Indian society. The indulgence and boldness that Das displays while painting female identity and desire in a conservative culture emerge as powerful tools in criticizing the social order of India in “Summer in Calcutta.”

Das’s unique lens weaves together individual battles, giving insight into more profound universal themes and issues through the depiction of her own personal encounters.

Das, Kamala. “The Old Playhouse” is a very strong criticism of the patriarchal system.

As kamala das is known as one of the most outspoken feminist who sings her female desires and identity without any hesitation and societal fear ,she tries to deliver boxes of her inner feelings capturing the complicated high powers of marriage and the systemic loss of agency experienced by women. It’s highly criticised because of its oppression and patriarchal system where the wife’s individuality is embraced under the expectations of her husband.

Das uses striking metaphors and vivid imagery to emphasize the alienation of the woman within the marital space. For instance, the lines, “It was not to gather knowledge of yet another man / that I came to you but to learn what I was and by learning, to learn to grow,” focus

attention on her yearning for self-discovery, a journey stifled by the institution of marriage. She asserts her voice, defying the confinements of traditional gender roles and revealing the transformative impact of such relationships on the female psyche.

In "The Old Playhouse," Das moves beyond a mere feminist perspective to delve into universal questions of identity, freedom, and self-realization. It accords the constraints of domesticity, where roles are rehearsed and repeated to the point of monotony. The imagery of the "closed windows" and the "heart... an empty cistern" powerfully evokes the themes of emotional deprivation and spiritual desolation. Through this, Das does not just present a feminist critique but also a deeper exploration of human autonomy, how her other poems suggest the same – the quest for individuality and self-identity.

The Reflection of Social Issues in Her Writing-

The rebellious Author Kamala Das, in her writing, openly discusses important social issues, especially those related to gender, identity, and societal rules. Her poetry and stories criticize the male-dominated systems that affect women's lives in India, showing the cultural and social problems they face. Through her personal stories and poems, Das shares the struggles of women in a society that often ignores their voices and experiences.

A major issue in Das's work is female identity and the search for self. In a society that often sees women only as wives and mothers, Das's writing challenges these ideas by stressing the importance of individual identity. In her book "My Story," she shares her own experiences of love, betrayal, and the quest for freedom. This story highlights the limits placed on women and stresses the need for women to assert themselves. Das's exploration of her identity reflects the broader challenges faced by women in a male-dominated society, making her work relatable to many readers.

Additionally, Das's poetry looks at the complexities of love and desire, showing the conflict between what society expects and what people want. In her poem "An Introduction," she boldly challenges the rules that restrict women, claiming her right to express her feelings. This resistance to traditional expectations is a common theme in her work, as she balances society's approval with personal happiness. By sharing her true feelings, Das not only questions the norms but also encourages other women to speak up about their own experiences. The poem delves into the gendered expectations placed upon women in Indian society. Das critiques the patriarchal norms that dictate how women should behave, speak, and even live their lives. Her rebellion against these norms, expressed through her refusal to conform to prescribed roles, resonates with the struggles of countless women navigating their identities in a traditional yet evolving society.

Another important issue Das discusses is gender and sexuality. She openly talks about female sexuality, which is often a taboo topic in India, helping to break the stigma around women's desires. In poems like "The Looking Glass," Das explores the complexities of sexual relationships and the emotional impact of societal repression. By discussing her own sexual experiences, she challenges a society that often silences women while objectifying them. Her courage in addressing sexuality not only questions societal norms but also builds a sense of unity among women who feel similarly restricted.

Moreover, Das's work reflects the wider social and political issues in India, especially the struggles of marginalized groups. By addressing issues like caste, class, and community conflict, she highlights the different social injustices that affect women. Her stories call for a better understanding of women's experiences, recognizing the various factors that shape their lives.

Overall, Das's work provides deep insight into the social issues affecting women in India. By exploring themes of identity, sexuality, and societal constraints, she critiques the systems that limit women's freedom and advocates for a better understanding of their experiences. Her contributions continue to inspire and resonate, making her an important voice in discussions about gender and social justice in modern literature.

Exploring Literary techniques in her work

Confessional poetry

Kamala Das's confessional style is a hallmark of her literary identity, placing her among the pioneers of modern Indian poetry. Her works are deeply personal, often blurring the lines between the poet and the persona, as she delves into themes of love, longing, betrayal, and identity. Drawing inspiration from confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Das fearlessly exposes her vulnerabilities, making her poetry raw and relatable.

Her autobiographical approach is evident in works like 'My Story' and poems such as "An Introduction," where she candidly explores her struggles with societal expectations, gender roles, and her quest for selfhood. She uses free verse to mirror the fluidity of her emotions, while her vivid imagery and symbolism—like the recurring motifs of confinement and freedom—add depth to her confessions.

Das's writing challenges patriarchal norms, giving voice to female desires and frustrations in a way that was revolutionary for her time. Her use of colloquial language and conversational tone makes her work accessible yet profoundly impactful. Through her confessional style, Kamala Das not only bares her soul but also creates a mirror for readers to reflect on their own lives, making her work timeless and universal.

As Das explores themes of love, longing, betrayal, and identity, her confessional approach is a trademark of her literary identity—often blurring the lines between the poet and the persona.

Symbolism and metaphor

She used symbolism and metaphors to express themes of love, identity, femininity, and societal constraints. Her works, often autobiographical, delve into the deeply personal, offering readers a window into her emotional landscapes and the broader human experience.

In her poetry, symbols like the “sun,” “tree,” and “sea” frequently represent vitality, growth, and the unending quest for freedom. Her evocative use of metaphors often contrasts the societal expectations of women with the inner turmoil of individuality and desire. For instance, in her iconic poem “An Introduction,” she uses the metaphor of language and voice to challenge patriarchal norms, asserting her identity as a woman and a poet in a male-dominated world.

Her prose, particularly in ‘My Story’ is rich with metaphorical explorations of love and betrayal, juxtaposing the physical and emotional dimensions of human relationships. The body becomes a recurring symbol, representing both entrapment and liberation, reflecting the struggles of womanhood in a conservative society.

Through her daring and poignant use of symbolism and metaphors, Kamala Das broke traditional literary boundaries, giving voice to the silence and redefining the scope of Indian literature. Her works remain a testament to her courage and creativity.

Free verse and conversational tone

Das’s trailblazing use of free verse allows her to express raw emotions and personal experiences without the constraints of traditional poetic forms. Her free verse style is characterized by its conversational tone, emotional intensity, and vivid imagery. This approach enables her to delve deeply into themes of identity, love, sexuality, and societal norms.

One of the key techniques in her free verse poetry is the use of autobiographical elements, where she draws from her own life to explore universal truths. For instance, in her poem "An Introduction" she candidly discusses her struggles with identity and societal expectations. Her use of enjambment, where sentences flow beyond the end of a line, creates a natural rhythm that mirrors the spontaneity of thought and emotion.

Das also employs symbolism and metaphors to convey complex ideas. In "The Old Playhouse", she uses the metaphor of a caged bird to depict the constraints of marriage. Her direct and unflinching language challenges patriarchal norms and gives voice to the experiences of women.

Through free verse, Kamala Das breaks away from traditional structures, crafting a unique poetic voice that resonates with authenticity and emotional depth.

Unpacking core Themes in her works

An outstanding and distinguished personality of her time, Kamala Das is the most important figure in contemporary Indian English literature. She is a woman printmaker who has no fear or reservations, and therefore, it is with great joy that she enters into the concept of a free personal exploration of womanliness, identity, love, desire, and the limits of society. Das investigates the inner life of a woman who reacts and often contradicts the social standards of womanly living. Thus, she writes historical insights into women but does so with universal themes that are human real character studies, mostly the female aspect.

Female Sexuality and Desire –

Perhaps nowhere in the work of Kamala Das is her exploration of female sexuality and desire more important than in acknowledging female sexuality. At a moment when Indian literature

was drastically conservative through an exploration of female desire, Kamala Das challenged the boundaries of Indian literature in her openness to female desire in prose and poetry. To Kamala Das, there is no shame for women in desiring their own formulations of sexual experience. Kamala Das uses poetry to demonstrate a woman's right to desire. Das Kamala. An Introduction. 1962. a poem written for children, she writes:-

“I am sinner, I am saint.- I am the beloved and the betrayed.”

These lines explain, in part, why her work laid the foundation for the exploration of female sexual desire in women. If we look at other poems, we see her illusion to the signal of sexual desire often for or in the realm of “belovedness,” while also recognizing a relational reality, that complex relationships of duality are present in sexuality. While desire is unemotional, there are no tensions between the emotional and the physical; the emphasis on the body is blatant. In many of her poems, the totality of the body is a site of longing, emotion, desire, frustration, passion, or some mix thereof. Women personify longing for love not only romantically but also sexually, and in the poem “The Looking Glass” as well as “The Dance of the Eunuchs.” Her frank and unpersuasive discussion of female sexuality subverts the cultural performances that have limited female expressions of physical desire.

We see a reconceptualization of desire. She does not show the woman as someone who is passive or secondary to the desire of the male. She illustrates the woman as a subject who feels desire and experiences pleasure and pain. Kamala Das writes from a position of not just vulnerability but also defiance—her writing argues for the importance of a woman's right to desire and be desired on her own terms. Kamala Das's work is much more than an articulation of a woman's difficulties with her marriage. It is also largely about women's struggles to assert themselves in the face of denial. In India, the traditional patriarchal structure forces women to become only wives and mothers. These roles are inhibiting and Kamala Das criticizes them

through her writing. In her autobiography *My Story* and *The Old Playhouse*, she describes in detail her emotional alienation and discontent in marriage. She is often shown as someone who is unable to live out her desires due to the restrictions of society on her. Many of her poems have the conflict between being a wife and the quest for self at the centre. Kamala Das shows how women in marriage are expected to give up their self for the family and the society and they feel alienated and emotionally starved because of this. Das "The Old Playhouse," she describes a relationship in which the woman is suffocated by her husband's control and neglect:-

Das kamala (*The Old Playhouse*)

"You have loved me in your own way- And I have loved you too.- But now, I am suffocated."

Such relationships depict the suffering of women. Kamala Das does acknowledge the dual and painful complications of relationships between men and women. She does not idealize or romanticize love; instead, she shows it as a space where women often find themselves lost, alienated, and dissatisfied.

Identity and Self-Discovery

The identity of an individual, nonetheless of Das herself, is another central concern in her work. Much of her writings deal with the question of self-discovery and the struggle to find a sense of individuality in a world that imposes roles and definitions upon women. Throughout her life, she questioned the expectations placed on her as a woman, wife, and mother, and her works expressed how she felt between these external compulsions and her internal sense of self.

In poems like "An Introduction," Kamala Das challenges the idea of the woman as a passive object defined by her relationship to others; her husband, her family, and society. Instead, she asserts her right to define herself on her own terms. She writes:

Das, K. (1976). (An Introduction)

- "I am every woman who ever loved,

I am every woman who ever feared."

Here, she represents herself as a universal figure, emphasizing the importance of recognizing women's experiences as central to understanding human identity. Das's work reflects a journey towards self-assertion, where she seeks to reclaim her own identity from the limitations imposed by cultural and social norms.

Das's works often explore the conflict between traditional and modern identities. As a woman in post-colonial India, she was caught between the conservative cultural expectations of her native land and the liberal ideas of the West. Her writing, therefore, becomes an act of resistance against a society that demands conformity. She refuses to be defined solely by her role as a wife or mother and instead advocates for the freedom to embrace all facets of her being.

Loneliness and Alienation

Das's poems show the deep sense of loneliness and alienation that the female gender undergoes with men are recurrent topics in Das's works, no matter if they are existing within the bounds of marriage or in the context of relationships at the workplace and with family and friends. Even when one is physically close to others, one may not be emotionally close to them and thus one may feel deep inside that one is not in a real relationship and these facts are sharply evidenced in her art.

It is in poetic lines such as "The Looking Glass" and "The Invitation" that Kamala Das describes the sad emotional emptiness of many women, though they may be surrounded by others. A woman also usually the persona in her poetry, is portrayed as a person in search of

transcending the external and the physical and delving into the depths of human understanding. Nevertheless, these relationships all too often are not fulfilling or satisfying.

The alienation that Kamala Das draws with lead is both on an emotional and intellectual level. One of the best pieces of her creativity is "The Dance of the Eunuchs" which carries an aura of dissociation as the narrator has a feeling of alienation from her body not being in accord with what her heart and her mind think. The fact that Das moves beyond the individual experience of loneliness is a case in point for her writings. She posits a situation in which women from varying backgrounds and lifestyles find themselves in an effort to know and be known as persons in a world that often marginalizes them.

Love and Betrayal

Love, with all its complexities, is another central theme in Kamala Das's works. However, she does not depict love as a purely romantic or idealized concept. Instead, love in her poetry is often bittersweet and fraught with pain, betrayal, and disappointment. Kamala Das explores how love can simultaneously be a source of joy and heartache. Das frequently explores the

The theme of love in her poetry is both emotional and physical. Her investigation of desire is characterized by candor and a rejection of social norms. "The Sunshine Cat" explores the complexities of intimate relationships, expressing the intensity of desire and the fleeting nature of love through metaphorical language.

In her several works, the love becomes a symbol of ephemerality and the one that lasts only for a short period. In the poem "The Invitation," the speaker longs for his/her love, but at the same time, there is the feeling that the love has its own fate and it will not last. Betrayal in its different forms is also a strong theme in Kamala Das's poetry. Her poems are usually showing the suffering because of the absence of reciprocated love, maybe because of the disillusionment in the relationships or the fact of the abandonment of the self for another cause. Also, these

poems express the deep emotional cost of love that, for many women, means to compromise, to sacrifice, and to have sufferings.

Nature and the Body

Moreover, nature in Kamala Das's poetry possesses a symbolic function, suggesting the speaker's emotional and psychological state. The natural world in many of the poems reflects the turbulence and longing of the speaker's inner life. Her body, too, is a symbol central in her work, but it's not the body as physical; it is the psychological and emotional body as well.

In poems like "The Looking Glass" he treats the body as a desired, but also betrayed and disillusioned site of desire. It's the land of love and pain, the emotional complexity of man. In her exploration of the body, Kamala Das believes that the deepest connection is between the body and the emotion, the physical experience and the emotional truth, where the body cannot be separated from the mind or the soul.

Kamala Das's works are a forceful and unapologetic expression of women's life experiences, particularly as it relates to their love, sexuality, marriage and societal roles. As a confessional poet and writer, she weaves a candid, often raw, story of the woman and her multifaceted life. Themes of desire, identity, loneliness, and betrayal are her themes that hit a chord with readers in any culture and, to date, keep sparking interest in discussing issues of gender, sexuality, and complexities of human relationships. The voice of Kamala Das continues to play a major role in literature not only for her depiction of women's experiences but also for her courageous approach of writing against and disapproving the social norms and expectations.

Her Writing Through the Lens of Social and Cultural Influences-

One of the most significant cultural influences in her work is her exploration of female identity and sexuality. Das challenges the conventional narratives of femininity by presenting the female body and voice as sites of resistance and empowerment. Her confessional style of

writing breaks taboos, addressing themes like love, desire, and betrayal with unflinching honesty. This approach not only highlights the repressive nature of societal norms but also opens a dialogue on the liberation and autonomy of women.

Socially, Das's work critiques the alienation and repression experienced by women within the domestic sphere. Her portrayal of female desire and selfhood confronts the restrictive narratives imposed by a patriarchal culture. By situating her work within the context of Indian societal norms, Das provides a powerful commentary on the intersection of personal identity and social constraints. Her writings serve as a voice for the marginalized, advocating for gender equality and challenging deeply entrenched patriarchal norms.

In essence, Kamala Das's literary contributions are a testament to her courage and vision. By intertwining her personal experiences with broader social and cultural critiques, she has redefined the landscape of Indian literature, making her an enduring figure in feminist discourse and literary criticism.

Conclusion:

The poetry works of Kamala Das are notable additions to breaking the Indian society stigma attached to women. It can be said that she was a true feminist who tried her level best through her literary artwork to empower women and influence them to speak up for themselves even when it comes to their sexuality and desires. In poems like "An Introduction: she brashly asserts her independence, rejecting social labels and fighting for women's freedom from oppressive conventions. My grandmother's house is a melancholic look at cultural identity that captures her spirit of ancestry while bemoaning the decline of conventional values." The Dance of the Eunuchs" is a powerful statement against patriarchal conventions, urging people to defy social norms. Last but not least, "Forest Fire" explores existential themes, reflecting on the transience of life and the certainty of change. The limitations of traditional poetry are challenged by her

unreserved and her honest approach to self expression, giving readers a profoundly intimate and reflective experience. Das has left an indelible mark on the literary landscape, particularly in the realm of Indian poetry. Her treatment of female sexuality in her writing was realistic, honest, and unimpeachable, making her the iconoclast of her time. Her critique of prevailing social structures turns her into a rebel, seeking independence and individuality. Her suffering femininity goes to emotional nerves. Kamala Das's works continue to resonate with readers, inspiring discussions on feminism, cultural identity, and the human condition.

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