



## KAMALA DAS AS A POETESS AND A SHORT STORY WRITER: A BRIEF APPRAISAL

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### **An Abstract**

*Kamala Das, a prominent Indian short story writer who looms over a poetic horizon of modern India focus on lives of woman subordinated in the patriarchal society and her prime concern is human relationship particularly the man – woman relationship. This paper explores inner landscape of women, their actions thoughts, feeling and also the various manifestations of human nature, marital sufferings, moreover she concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male – dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. This article echoes the voice of Kamala Das who want a new social order centered on woman values.*

Kamala Das's immense popularity as a poetess has puzzled a good number of critics and reviewers who generally consider her poetry as the be-all and end –all of her artistic being. Prof. K.R. Siinivasa Iyengar rightly holds:

“There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry – a far cry indeed from Tom Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu” (P 680)

Kamala Das, who looms large over the poetic horizon of today's India, hails from the south, precisely from the southern Malabar in Kerala. Born on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1934 at Nalapat House, Punnayurkulam, Thrissur as the daughter of V.M. Nair and Kamala Das whose maiden name was Madhavikutty first attended a European school in Calcutta, then the Elementary school at Punnayurkulam and then a boarding school run by the Roman Catholic nuns but in each of them, she is said to have stayed for a short while. At the Catholic Boarding school, she got ill and was removed to Calcutta where she was taught fine arts by private tutors. At the age of 15, she got married to Mr. Das, an official in the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay, where her life became miserable in the company of her nonchalant, lustful husband who had no soothing words for her, no time to spare for her and was ever busy sorting out his files and affixing his signature on them. As a traditional wife, she had to discharged her domestic duties well and look after the needs and comforts of her husband and her children. When she talks of love outside marriage, she does not really advocate for infidelity and adultery, but merely searches for a kind of man-woman relationship which should guarantee both love and security to a woman.

Having lived in such metropolitan cities as Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi, she is settled in Trivandrum, Kerala. She has written in both Malayalam and English and has to her credit publication of such poetical collections in English as 1. Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967) and The old playhouse and other poems (1973) and a novel in English namely Alphabet of Lust (1976) and also Padmavati The Harlot and other stories. Her prose writing remains a virgin area to be explored and assessed fresh for most of her prose works, like her verses, give the impression of having been written in great haste with the same urgency and the same feminine sensibility as projected in her verses. Her words, phrases and expressions gush forth like a jet of water from a sprightly fountain, and in the rush of emotions and thoughts she sometimes loses track of syntax or proper sentence- structure but her sincerity to 'the self' is never shakable and her mastery of phrase and rhythm in her prose writings is simply superb and enviable. No doubt, Kamala Das is unquestionably wedded to art and literature. Being firmly rooted in the Indian soil, in a sense Mrs.Das has felt the pulse of the whole of India. Commenting on her and her works, K.R.S Iyengar has said: “ --- Indian in thought and feeling, emotion and experiences ---“ (P50). When there was no recognition for her works, she wept and said:

“I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple who may have been proud of my works” (My Story 8)



Her love for English made her assert that she was “Half-English, half –Indian” (P 709). Though Kamala Das is a poet, her attempts on fictional and prose writings are in no way inferior to her poems. Her short stories are proof of her poetic-self. Besides the nineteen stories in the slender volume *Padmavati the Harlot* “A Doll for the child Prostitute” is a long story running to 35 pages and shortest story “That woman running to 33 printed lines. In the blurb of *Padmavati the Harlot*” these are the stories of a rare and adult feminism, capable of seeing man as son, lover and God, it is a disposition associated with the majestic woman of the epics.”

Kamala Das is of the view that harmony in human relationship is the most important thing and loves all types of human characters without any prejudice. Commenting on the intimacy she builds up with her readers a noted writer has stated as:

“Kamala Das treats her readers as her most intimate friends in whom she can confide all her secrets, to whom she can unburden all her sufferings” (*Kerala Writers in English* 40)

A short story is representative of a writer’s own observation and response to a stimulus. Kamala Das, whose experiences are varied, brings forth a wide range of themes and ideas in her stories which are as artistic as her poems. Being a short-story writer of great literary merits, Kamala Das has contributed significantly to this genre and by her new outlook; she has amusingly shocked the Indian reading public. The writer is keen on focusing on the changes that come about in the attitudes of man and woman who have hailed from south India, especially from Kerala and living in big cities. City life affects man and woman at various levels and the degree of its impact can be easily observed in many of her short stories. In one of her short stories “*Sanatan Choudhuri’s wife*”, she depicts the shocked surprise of a husband who encounters the infidelity of his wife:

“This girl born and brought up in a Kerala village? How could she enter another man’s house, eat a western-style breakfast with him and allow him to fondle her? Oh, God, let this be nothing but a nightmare, prayed menon” (*Padmavati* 50)

Menon could not tolerate his wife’s embracement of western culture. To the writer, western culture is like Ravana she wants to embrace Sita, a symbol of Dravidian Culture. Native life has been spoilt by these cultural adulterations for which big cities offer a comfortable ground. The comforts of city life attract man as well as woman. The boy-friend of Minnie denigrates the attitude of a city girl:

“Perhaps you are just another rich girl a spoilt city girl who would fall in love only with a rich man somebody who owns a house, a car and a video recorder, some ugly old man with venereal diseases”(Panorama 215)

A woman loses her love-relationship when she turns ultra-modern. A young lady in “*The sea Lounge*” is fond of making herself conspicuous by wearing quaint clothes:

“She had worn a red scarf tied round her throat and had a pair of jeans with four ridiculous patches stitches on” (*Padmavati* 19)

Her lover does not like it. He rejects her love as “she was not his kind of woman” (P 20). He expects his life – partner not to wear ultra – modern dress. Though Kamala Das hates such kind of woman she does not fail to recognize the woman characters who survive in the love-torn world with courage and determination. The woman, a house-wife in “*A little Kitten*”, has indulged in extra-marital love as she feels bored in the house during day-tiem. She is not prepared to react to the situation by facing the problems squarely. Hence, she faces only clouds, some



smoke” in her life (Padmavati 40). The impact of city life creates identity crisis in man. He has lost his “self” in the crowded places:

“A family he (Narayan) had shaped to suit his taste. He has asked for sophistication and he had got it. And yet the pride had faded with the years” (Padmavati 103)

He loses his spirit of life when he grows up. He is surprised that his wife could accommodate herself to the new situation:

Perhaps there was no pride left. But after all each of them belonged to him. The middle – aged woman sporting pastel silks and diamond jewellery was his wife, this city – slick woman who spoke in several languages, conversing with her own grandchildren. Had she not changed within as she had changed in her appearance over the years? Was she the Madhavi he had carried away from her village – home, her shyness as glittering as her wedding silks? (Padmavati 103)

The woman fits well in the city life. But Narayan feels himself a fish out of water. He draws his happiness from past memories. He prepares a balance sheet of his spent years. He speaks philosophically:

“Man stands alone and rotates alone on his own axis.  
Loneliness is an appendage man cannot get rid of” (P 106)

So he decides to resign the job and settle in his village home where he can feel peace of mind. City life provides Madhavi a life of comfort, Narayanan a life of loneliness. Thus, Kamala Das creates a juxtaposition of these two characters to illustrate that woman take to city life more easily than man. Kamala’s themes are largely concerned with the difficulty of being a woman in a society. Her stories plead with woman to detach themselves from cultural conventions. She presents a modern woman’s urge to escape from the bondage and her music of freedom is melancholic. Her unfulfilled desires and ambitions lead her to inexorable sufferings and destitution. Kamala Das’s short story “Running away from Home” is the best illustration to portray Prema Nandakumar’s opinion of a contemporary woman who has an unquenchable thirst to escape not into Keatsian “Magic seas and fairy lands” but into the realms of her own inner self”. To Minnie, in “Running away from Home”,

“--- the subject of sex had not interested her why she had been Ignorant of it till the wedding night when the thin Bridegroom overpowered her stabbing her vitals incessantly, Mercilessly, so mercilessly that she begun to sob---“ (Panorama 214).

She realizes that her life has been impaired by the arranged marriage. Her dream of life has turned into a nightmare in reality. Her two babies seem to be two miniature wrestlers. She dislikes her family and hates herself because

“Nature had already made her a child bearing machine and she Could not escape domestic drudgery either” (Feminist Trends 3)

Minnie wants only to separate from the family and not from the society. To her, though reality is harsh, family can afford her safety and security. Family is a prison but yet a woman cannot find a better place than it. A woman has aspirations to free herself from bondage but she has to sacrifice them for her family which is her permanent abode. Dorothy Jones explains this rather admirably:



“Das’s principal achievement has been to define and expose the Prison in which a woman finds herself trapped, rather than Proclaiming an escape route out of it, although she also records The urge to escape and desperate longing for freedom” (P 195)

Both Kamala Das and Anita Desai have similar opinions regarding unrewarding marital life and male chauvinism. Both have taken a giant wheel to kill a butterfly. They make a faint and feeble attempt to prove that their characters are successful after their fight with social taboos and customs which are detrimental to their freedom in a patriarchal system.

Kamala Das presents woman as more sentimental than man. In “December”, the young woman has given up her writing profession so as to gain the love of a man. Her foremost aim after her recovery from a long illness is “how to make love to this particular man” (P 37). She cries: “I am finished---“ (Padmavati 37).

Frustration and despair make her highly emotional. The writer very clearly shows that man are responsible for woman’s unhappiness. The man who once liked the quaint clothes worn by the woman rejects her love because now he prefers a stylish woman for love-making but for marriage, his choice would be different man’s failure to distinguish between carnal desire and love is the cause for separation. The love relationship is rejected and broken at last. The woman is the worst sufferer in all the short stories of Kamala Das. Our society does not recognize a woman who is not legally married to a man though she may love the man with her fullest heart and soul. The society treats such a woman with contempt. It wrongly concludes that she is after his wealth. When a man is allowed to live with a woman other than his legal wife, why is a woman forbidden the same option?. Kamala Das discussed this theme in “That woman” portraying woman character who loves a man for himself and not for his properties. True love between man and woman ends in tragedy.

Since the changing attitude of the individual is restricted by our society, many characters of Kamala Das fail to feel the warmth of life. Discords in married life, agonies of extramarital love, wretchedness of prostitutes, dissonance among parents and disharmony among lovers loom large in her fictional writings. They hear only the still sad music of humanity. However, Kamala Das draws a silver lining in the dark clouds. She hopes that woman’s ambitions and expectations will be understood by men in the near future. When a man destroys the life of a woman in “The sign of the Lion”, the woman hopes that she will be protected by the child in her womb:

I tell him of the child to come. He will be a little lion,  
I tell him A beautiful lion – cub” (Padmavati 48)

According to Kamala Das, when man are not an obstacle, a woman can advance herself in all possible ways. Men’s lack of sympathy for woman is well expressed in “A Little Kitten”. A prostitute lends her body to strangers who hate her and then hate themselves. The resurrection of woman is in the offing for which they are anxiously awaiting. The blurb of Padmavati, the Harlot insists on this:

“Kamala Das’s stories are reaffirmation of woman, woman  
Reclaimed of body and spirit. But it is woman, above all,  
Always on the side of life, never betraying it by  
antagonising man through mean acts of getting even or  
scoring points”

Kamala Das has been labelled as a female chauvinist because she presents her female characters as renovating the independence of mind and freedom of body or soul. She herself asserts this view to an interviewer:

“Through my works I tried to provide the boost that girl  
need to become free spirits, thinking souls” (Femina 27).



The woman characters are not silenced by Kamala Das. The action and decision of the woman characters are established well in her works. So she asserts:

“At first it was a literature of protest because women were not free to do what they wanted or take major decisions in life”  
(Femina 27).

Though her woman characters meet failures in life, they never seek suicide. In spite of being raped in the Sanctum Sanctorum Padmavati does not think of ending her life. Jasmit after the loss of her husband, rejuvenates her life with the old man. Kamala Das is well aware of the fact that ‘patriarchy’ is the primary cause for the oppression of woman. Within the family unit and in the society man have a good position. Women get little chance of possessing it. In many of her stories, women are eager to uproot patriarchy. As the Indian woman and her predicaments have been the subjects of Kamala Das’s deep concern, she has evaluated man and woman encounter in the present day society. Kamala Das complains that the present day young man who are aware of the aberrant behavior of their wives do not have the courage to deal with them strongly. The author strongly criticizes such weak-minded masculine gender.

To conclude, Kamala Das’s characters are not like Knnagi or Sita, the mythical characters who are the symbols of Indian women’s chastity and she echoes the voice of radical feminists who want a new social order centered on woman values.

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