

Kamala Das—A Biographical Note

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Her Orthodox Upbringing and Her Unorthodox Poetry

The first point to be noted by the reader of Kamala Das's poetry is that Kamala Das is her *non de plume* or pseudonym, and that her real name is Madhavi Kutty. She was born on the 31st March, 1934 at Punnayarkulam in the coastal region of Malabar in the State of Kerala. She received her education largely at home; and it is again a point to be noted that she comes of a very orthodox and conservative family. This point is important because her poetry is most unorthodox and almost revolutionary as compared to the environment and atmosphere in which she grew up.

Married at an Early Age; the Failure of Her Marriage

Yet another noteworthy point about her is that she was married at the early age of fifteen, and that her marriage proved an absolute failure. It was the failure of her marriage that compelled her to enter into extra-marital sexual relationships in search of the kind of love which her husband had failed to give her. Her husband was a believer in sex as a matter of routine; and his wife was therefore by no means starved of the pleasure of sex. She, on the contrary, believed in marriage as an emotional and spiritual bond and her husband's coldness in this respect led her to feel acutely dissatisfied and discontented in life and, not finding real love even in her extra-marital affairs, she slid into a life of sexual anarchy, with one lover following another, and with her discontent becoming deeper and deeper till it assumed the form of utter despair. Her poetry is generally called confessional poetry because it is a record of her personal experiences, chiefly in the sphere of marriage and sex, though it certainly has a wider range and includes a few other aspects of her life too.

Her Successive Volumes of Poetry

Kamala Das's poetic output is contained in four volumes of poems which include "Summer in Calcutta" (published in 1965), "The Descendants" (published in 1967), "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems" (published in 1973), and "Stranger Time" (published in 1973). She has written her autobiography (of course in prose) to which she gave the title "My Story" (published in 1975). Although she has distinguished herself as an Indo-Anglian poet, showing an extraordinary command over the English language, she has also achieved eminence as a writer of short stories in her mother tongue (namely Malayalam) for which the Kerala Sahitya Akademi honoured her with an award in 1969.

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Her Essays

Kamala Das has written a number of miscellaneous essays which, like her poems, have made her a controversial figure because of the views which she has expressed in them. Some of these essays bear the following titles: "I Studied All Men"; "What Women Expect out of Marriage and What They Get"; "Why Not More than One Husband" ? and "I Have Lived Beautifully".

Comfortably Settled in Bombay

Kamala Das has long been settled in the city of Bombay. Now at the age of sixty-three, she lives there comfortably. She has three grown-up children.

The Poetical Works of Kamala Das

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Kamala Das is the author of the following volumes of poetry:

- (1) "Summer in Calcutta" (published in 1965)
- (2) "The Descendants" (published in 1967)
- (3) "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems" (published in 1973)
- (4) "Stranger Time" (published in 1977)

(1) "SUMMER IN CALCUTTA"

The Dance of the Eunuchs and The Freaks

The first poem in this volume bears the title *The Dance of the Eunuchs*. It is a bold poem written against the background of the poetess's sudden contact with a man who, in her own words, had hurt her when she was just fourteen or fifteen years old. By virtue of the ironical tone of this poem, it sets the tone and temper of the entire volume which is entitled "Summer in Calcutta". The poem, which follows, has the title *The Freaks* which expresses the intensity of a woman's yearning for sexual gratification while the man lying beside in her bed is passive. The persona in the poem is certainly Kamala Das herself, complaining about the passivity of her husband who treats sex as something mechanical. The last line of this poem contains a phrase which has become famous and which is frequently quoted by critics. The phrase is "a grand, flamboyant lust."

Spoiling the Name

This, again, is a poem which illustrates Kamala Das's own passionate desire not merely for sexual pleasure but for the fulfilment of her love. In this poem Kamala Das asks herself whether she can give the name of love to her sexual experience. The poem entitled *Spoiling the Name* contains the following significant lines:

Why should this name, so
Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room-
Where I go to meet a man
Who gives me nothing but himself, who
Calls me in his private hours
By no name.....

These lines evidently show that there is no real love in the persona's sexual relationship with the man. The tone of this poem is, again, one of disappointment verging on despair.

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1. "AN INTRODUCTION"

A Confessional Poem, Showing Kamala Das as a Feminist

This poem first appeared in Kamala Das's very first volume of poems which was entitled "Summer in Calcutta" and which was published in 1965. This poem is wholly autobiographical and may also be labelled as a confessional poem. It is confessional in the sense that Kamala Das here takes the reader into her confidence with regard to matters which are strictly personal and private. Like all her other confessional poems, this one shows Kamala Das's candour in dealing with sex, with bodily functions, and the like. At the same time it shows Kamala Das's capacity for self-assertion. Furthermore, we have here a poem of revolt against conventionalism and against the restraints which society has been imposing upon women. Kamala Das's feminism or her advocacy (in an indirect manner) of the rights of women clearly appears here. Thus this poem reveals to us several aspects of Kamala Das as a poet.

Kamala Das's Description of Herself

Kamala Das begins this poem by telling us, that although she does not know much about politics, she knows the names of those persons, beginning with Nehru, who have wielded political power in this country. She then describes herself as an Indian, of a very brown complexion, born in Malabar, having the ability to speak three languages, writing actually in two languages, and dreaming in the third. Next, she speaks sarcastically about the many relatives and friends who used to advise her not to write in English because English was not her mother tongue. In fact, she takes such advisers to task for having given her this advice because she claims the right to speak and write in any language she likes.

Her Growth from Childhood to Adulthood

Kamala Das goes on to tell us that, as she grew up from a child to an adult, her limbs swelled, and hair sprouted in one or two parts of her body. Then she asked for love, and what she got was a husband who performed the sexual act with her in the crudest possible manner. The husband's way of performing this act made her feel miserable.

The Advice She Received from People

Everybody wanted to give some or the other advice to her. Her advisers urged her to do some embroidery or cooking and also to keep quarrelling

with the servants. They told her to call herself Amy or Kamala or better still Mahdavikutty. They urged her not to pretend to be a split personality suffering from a psychological disorder, and not to become a nymphomaniac (or a sex-crazy woman).

Her Resemblance with Other Persons

Finally Kamala Das describes herself in the following words:

I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

What she here means to say is that she is no different from other human beings, that like every other human being she is sometimes sinful and sometimes pious, that she is sometimes loved and sometimes betrayed in love, that she has the same joys in life which others have, and that she suffers the same disappointments which others suffer.

A Self-Portrait in a Condensed Style and in Well-Chosen Words

In this short poem, then, Kamala Das has given us a self-portrait and the anatomy of her mind, recounting the major incidents of her life and the experiences which had affected her most till the time of her writing this poem. The poem is remarkable for its compression and for the compactness of its structure even though it contains a diversity of facts and circumstances. The rules of punctuation have here been fully observed; all the lines are almost of the same length. The words used and the phraseology show Kamala Das's talent for choosing the right words and putting them in highly satisfactory combinations. Indeed, the poem contains many felicities of word and phrase. Her brief picture of her husband's rough treatment of her is an outstanding example:

He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. Then.....

These lines also show Kamala Das's uninhibited manner of speaking about sex and about her physical organs.

The poem is written in *vers libre* or free verse (which is devoid of both metre and rhyme)

2. "GLASS"

A Confessional Poem, Describing Kamala Das's Experience of the Sexual Act

This poem was published in 1973 in Kamala Das's third volume of poems which was entitled "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems". The word

"glass" has here been used as a metaphor for a woman who is easily shattered and is, therefore, fragile. (Glass is fragile and is easily shattered). Kamala Das here describes her frustration, verging on despair, because of her disappointing experience of sex and the sexual act. It is yet another confessional poem because Kamala Das here gives expression to feelings which most women in similar circumstances or in a similar predicament would keep strictly to themselves. She speaks of a man who, wanting to perform the sexual act with her, had drawn her towards himself rudely and hastily, treating her as "an armful of splinters". His behaviour, she says, had hurt her and caused her much pain. She felt like broken glass. Subsequently too she received the same kind of treatment from her other lovers, with the result that she developed a dislike for all of them. She then sought only sexual gratification from men with whom she performed the sexual act, and she did not expect, or offer, any real love in the process. However, she really missed the love which she had originally aimed at in performing the sexual act, beginning with her husband. It seemed to her that only her father had given her the love for which she had always hungered.

True Love Only from Her Father and Her Grandmother

In this connection we might mention that in a couple of other poems Kamala Das recalls the love which her grandmother had given her. This means that only her father and her grandmother had given her the love which she failed to receive from anybody else in the whole of her life. All her sexual relationships with men proved disastrous failures because she received no real love or true affection from any one of them.

An Irregular Poem Containing Appropriate Mataphors

This poem is an irregular composition, with most lines of moderate length but some consisting of only one word or two words. The poem is written in free verse like most of Kamala Das's other poems. However, there are a couple of very appropriate metaphors in the poem. Her calling herself "fragile glass" is one such metaphor; her referring to herself as "an armful of splinters" is another good metaphor; and her regarding herself as a musical instrument on which her lovers could play the tunes which pleased them most is yet another good metaphor.

3. "THE DANCE OF THE EUNUCHS"

Kamala Das's Sense of the Futility of Her Sexual Experiences

This poem was published in 1965 in Kamala Das's very first volume of poems which appeared under the heading "Summer in Calcutta". In fact, that volume of poems opened with this poem. In other words, this was the first poem in that volume; and it may also be pointed out that this poem set the tone and the temper of all the poems which followed it in that volume. The tone of this poem is one of frustration and the temper is a feeling of the

futility of love. The eunuch, as we know, is incapable of performing the sexual act and, therefore, of producing a child. In this poem, the eunuch has been regarded as a symbol of unproductiveness. The eunuch is here thus a metaphor for barrenness and, therefore, for the futility of love. Consequently this poem is an expression, in symbolic terms, of Kamala Das's feeling of frustration in love. She seems here to be giving an outlet to her feeling of the futility of all her sexual experiences because all those experiences had failed to satisfy her emotional demands though they did satisfy, and in full measure, her sexual demands.

An Abundance of Imagery in the Poem

There is an abundance of imagery in this poem even though it is a short poem, like most of her other poems. It was very hot before the eunuchs came to dance, wearing wide skirts and anklets, and carrying cymbals. When the eunuchs were dancing, their skirts went round and round, their cymbals produced rich clashing sounds, and their anklets jingled, jingled, jingled. The eunuchs danced, their dark eyes flashing; "they danced and oh, they danced till they bled". They had green-coloured tattoos on their cheeks, and jasmines in their hair. Their faces were harsh, and their songs melancholy. Some beat their drums, and others beat their "sorry breasts"; and they "writhed in vacant ecstasy". The phrase "writhed in vacant ecstasy" is very significant as a devastating image of the barrenness of Kamala Das's own life. The poem ends also with some imagery which conveys the poetess's sense of the futility of her sexual experiences:

The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice.

A Powerful Poem, Effectively Expressing Kamala Das's State of Mind

The Dance of the Eunuchs is a powerful poem, and it effectively expresses Kamala Das's state of mind in well-chosen words. The repetition of certain words in some of the lines reinforces the intended meaning. The whole poem is enveloped in gloom and despondency.

4. "IN LOVE"

The Poetess's Dilemma with Regard to a Sexual Experience

This poem was published in 1965 in Kamala Das's very first volume of poems which was entitled "Summer in Calcutta". Kamala Das here gives us a brief account of a sexual experience which created a kind of dilemma for her. Her lover made love to her with much fervour and much passion; but till the end she could not decide whether it was sheer lust which motivated his action or there was any feeling of love also in his heart. She then had the feeling that the chances of there being any love in that man's heart were rather thin.

The Theme of the Poem and the Imagery Used in it

A critic* has given us quite a helpful analysis of this poem. The poem, he says, opens with an expansive image of the burning sun in the sky, symptomatic of the spiritual and physical symbiosis**. This master image, in turn, evokes a series of other remarkable images. The lover, whose mouth is like "the burning mouth of sun" spreads his limbs like "carnivorous plants reaching out" for the poetess and draws her up in his embraces which are like "a finished jigsaw." However, irrespective of the ecstasy of love, Kamala Das's "moody mind" hears the sobs of anguish lurking behind the "gaiety trumpets". When the lust has been quenched, the undercurrent comes to the surface, and she distinctly hears the words "Bol/Hari Bol" from the men carrying a dead body to the cremation ground. A million questions then arise in her mind as she sits in the silent room. The answer to these questions is that real love is quite elusive and therefore hard to find anywhere. What she had felt in the course of the sexual act with that lover was only "a skin-communicated thing" or purely a physical desire; it was the sublimation of "my unending lust" into eternal fulfilment through physical annihilation. According to this critic's interpretation, Kamala Das here does not suspect only her lover of wanting merely to satisfy his lust without feeling any love for her; she suspects herself also of being lustful at the time and having no love in her heart for that man.

The Stylistic Aspect of the Poem

This poem too, like most others by Kamala Das, is written in free verse and reads like prose. The poem is entirely devoid of any musical or melodic effects. However, the words have been well chosen and been arranged in excellent combinations. Kamala Das shows also a talent for using very appropriate, and even felicitous, metaphors and similes. The lover's limbs, for instance, have been compared to carnivorous plants (meaning plants which stretch their stalks and twigs towards a human being in order to draw him towards themselves in order to suck their blood). The man's embrace, which is a complete thing in itself, is described metaphorically as a "finished jigsaw". Then the crows flying in the sky are compared to "poison on wings". Lust is aptly described as "this skin-communicated thing." On the whole, we have here quite an interesting poem; and the chief interest of it lies in Kamala Das's analysis of the anatomy of lust and love. In poem after poem, Kamala Das has given an outlet to her feeling of disappointment on not receiving any love from her sexual partners, or given an outlet to her feeling of uncertainty in this respect. We must appreciate the frankness and the candour with which she writes about such matters in her confessional poems.

* Shyam Asnani in a book on Kamala Das's poetry, edited by Iqbal Kaur.

** Symbiosis—conjunction; interlinking; interconnection.

Radha had fallen deeply in love. In these poems Kamala Das has tried to transform her lust into love and to exalt and glorify that love by dedicating herself to Ghanashyam or Lord Krishna. In other words, Kamala Das has outgrown her lust and has risen above the demands of her body, thus imparting a spiritual quality to her love. We may regard these poems as representing her spiritual evolution, and as expressing her devotion to Lord Krishna.

Q. 2. Write a critical note on Kamala Das as a confessional poet.

Or

What does Kamala Das have to confess in her poetry, and in what manner does she perform this self-imposed task ?

Or

Examine some of Kamala Das's confessional poems to illustrate their subject-matter and her treatment of it.

Or

Write an essay on the confessional quality of Kamala Das's poetry.

Writing Candidly and Without Inhibitions About Her Personal Life

Kamala Das is pre-eminently a confessional poet and, in this respect, she may be regarded as an outstanding Indo-Anglian poet comparable to the American Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. A confessional poet is one who takes the reader into confidence about his or her personal and private life, and reveals those facts of her life which an ordinary person, even if that person be a poet, would keep strictly to himself or herself because of the delicate nature of those facts. A confessional poet has to shed all of his or her inhibitions and to write frankly, candidly, and in an outspoken manner, thus defying the restrictions and restraints which the social code and the conventions of society impose upon him or her.

Stripteasing Her Mind, and Exuding Autobiography

Kamala Das has a lot to confess in her poetry, and she does so in the most candid manner conceivable. Indeed, her poetry has no precedent so far as her frankness and candour in revealing herself to the readers are concerned. She has expressed her intense desire to confess in a very graphic manner by saying that she must "striptease" her mind and that she must exude autobiography. Her confessions pertain to her role as a wife, as a mistress to many men, and as a mother. The bulk of her poetry is a confession of her relationship with her husband, and of her extra-marital sexual relationships. The themes of most of her poems are love or lust, and marriage. In dealing with these themes, she hides nothing, and in dealing with this subject-matter, she makes use of language freely, without any scruples, and even unabashedly. The orthodox reader would even accuse her of being immodest, shameless, or brazen in her use of the language through which she lays bare the secrets of her private life. Her poetry is the poetry of introspection, of self-analysis, of self-explanation, and of self-revelation.

Kamala Das describes a sexual experience which she accompanied it. Her feelings, as she lay in bed with him, she did experience the gratification of her body and in his heart. She felt disappointed by the lack of any love or affection in his heart. She felt his fingers moving upon her body and she was not with the kind of urgency and passion which would arouse in her yearning for an emotional union with him in addition to the gratification of her lust. This poem clearly shows her frankness in confessing that, in order to save her face, she flouts, at times, a flamboyant lust.

The Confession in the Poem Entitled *The Sunshine Cat*

Then there is a poem entitled *The Sunshine Cat* in which she talks about the pain and the suffering which, first her husband, and then the other men with whom she had had a sexual experience, caused to her. She accuses her husband of having been a selfish and cowardly man who never loved her nor used her properly but who was a ruthless watcher of her act with other men. She had tried her utmost to please her sexual partner by clinging to their hairy chests, but they all told her that they could only satisfy her sexual desire but could not love her. The consequence was that she lay in bed weeping, trying to build walls with tears. As for her husband, he locked her in a room every morning which he locked and which he opened when he returned from his work in the evenings. The streak of sunshine which fell at the doorstep looked like a yellow cat, keeping her company all day. But, when winter came, the streak of sunshine was reduced to a hair-thin line, and, one evening when her husband returned from his work, he found her half-dead, with the result that she had now become entirely unattractive to men from the sexual point of view. What Kamala Das here means is that the hearts of all these lovers of hers had been absolutely empty of any sentiment of love or affection for her, and that she had therefore had to look for any further love-making. This poem obviously contains a confession which an ordinary woman in a similar predicament would never reveal to any body.

The Poem Entitled *The Invitation*

In the poem entitled *The Invitation*, Kamala Das recalls that her husband, presumably her husband, used to perform the sexual act with her in a manner, coming to her in the intervals of his office-work, and then going away. She did feel a certain pleasure during her sexual act with her husband, but she did not feel a certain pleasure during her sexual act with other men. She felt like committing suicide by jumping into the sea, but she did not do so because she felt like committing suicide by jumping into the sea which seemed to be inviting her to enter its waters and perish.

Her Observations in *The Looking-Glass*, Also Based on Her Personal Experiences

The poem called *The Looking-Glass* is even more candid in its use of the language to describe a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. Here Kamala Das urges women not to feel shy or timid when they are about to perform the sexual act with their lovers. She urges women to stand nude by the side of their lovers' nude and muscular bodies, before a mirror, and look at their reflections. She urges them to let their lovers know what they (the women) expect from them (their lovers) when they lie in bed together. She also urges women to give to men all that makes them women: to let them smell their long hair, to smell the musk of sweat between their breasts, to let them experience the warm shock of their menstrual blood, and to let them know their endless female hungers. If a woman does all these things, she would have no difficulty in winning her lover though, when the lover is gone and has no intention to come back, the woman would feel desolate and find it impossible to get a substitute to give her the same pleasure during the sexual act which that man had provided. Kamala Das's treatment of the subject of sex is, indeed, astonishing and her observations in this respect are undoubtedly based upon her own sexual experiences with men.

The Miserable Conjugal Life, Described in Most Explicit Terms

The poem entitled *The Old Playhouse* is most remarkable so far as its confessional quality is concerned. Here Kamala Das describes, in unusually frank terms, the kind of life which she had been leading with her husband. This poem describes, metaphorically, Kamala Das's feeling of suffocation in her husband's home as a consequence of her husband's selfishness, self-centredness, egoism, and exaggerated sense of his own importance. Kamala Das's narrow life of domesticity with her husband, and her husband's unemotional manner of performing the sexual act with her, had driven her to desperation and had made her feel that her mind was like an old theatre-hall which was no longer in use and all the lights of which had been put out. Then she expresses her resolve to liberate herself from this kind of slavery to her husband. No ordinary woman would describe her unhappy conjugal life in such explicit terms as Kamala Das has done in this poem.

Her Candour in the Poems *Composition* and *Substitute*

In one of her poems, namely, *Composition*, Kamala Das goes to the extent of using the words pubis and pubic hair; and, in another poem, namely *Substitute*, she has described her anarchic sexual life in the following memorable manner:

After that love became a swivel-door.
When one went out, another came in.

Here is a confession without any reservations and without any hesitation either.

A Feminist in Her Confessional Poems

Kamala Das as a confessional poet has rendered some valuable service to the female sex by making them conscious of their dormant sexual desires and their suppressed discontent with their husbands from the sexual point of view. She has thus given a sort of incentive to women to assert themselves or at least not to suppress themselves. In these confessional poems Kamala Das appears as a feminist, indirectly advocating the liberation of women from the conventional social restraints and taboos.

Two Confessional Poems Expressing Her Feelings as a Mother

Two of Kamala Das's poems contain her feelings as a mother. The poem entitled *Jaisurya* expresses her feeling of exultation when she is going to give birth to a child and her feeling of pride when the child comes out of the darkness of her womb into this bright world lit by sunlight. During the child-birth, Kamala Das felt that to her at that time neither love was important nor lust, and that the man or men, who had been betraying her by gratifying their lust and then forsaking her, did not matter to her at all. She found child-birth to be a glorious phenomenon. The other poem about her motherhood has the title of *The White Flowers*.

The Therapeutic and Cathartic Effect of Her Confessional Poetry

Kamala Das's confessional poetry, like most confessional poetry written by Nissim Ezekiel, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, has a therapeutic and cathartic effect on the readers as well as on the writer herself. Confessional poetry is written by a poet under an internal pressure in order to give vent to his or her grievances or feelings of resentment or a sense of the injustice experienced by him or her. By confessing what a poet has undergone, he or she is able to obtain some relief; and such poetry naturally brings some relief to the reader as well by making him feel that his own sense of injustice should count for nothing when compared to the more acute and more painful sense of injustice of persons much more important and much more talented than he. After all, catharsis only means the feeling of relief which a person experiences after witnessing the spectacle of others suffering from the effects of the stress of circumstances or of misfortunes or from a sense of guilt. All confessional art, says a critic* is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed. And the poetry of Kamala Das certainly tends to kill such beasts in herself and, incidentally, similar beasts in us. According to another critic**, Kamala Das's poetry is replete with a powerful force of catharsis and protest. This is so, says this critic, because of Kamala Das's intensely confessional quality and her ultra-

* Robert Philips

** Iqbal Kaur

subjective treatment. Kamala Das raises her confessional traits to the level of a specific universal appeal. The struggle of her self ultimately becomes the struggle of all mankind, and herein lies her *forte* (or her special power), because the best confessional poetry is that which rises above the subject-matter to achieve some sort of victory over pain and defeat. Poems of this kind are glosses on the triumph of life. Because of the absolute confessions made by a group of poets in their poetry, particularly in America (such poets as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman) they have raised themselves to a level known as confessional poets, and Kamala Das's place is certainly secure in the ranks of these poets. Even suicide is a subject they are ready to confess. In one of his poems, John Berryman appears to ponder over, and mastermind, his suicide: "It all centred in the end on the suicide/In which I am an expert, deep and wide." In the same vein, Sylvia Plath writes in a famous poem: "Dying/Is an art, like everything else/I do it exceptionally well." And Kamala Das, in her poem *The Invitation*, is clearly contemplating suicide as a means of escape from the frustrations of life. Kamala Das's poetry has a cathartic effect because, the more poignant her confessional tone is, in poems like *The Sunshine Cat* and *My Grandmother's House*, the greater is the cathartic effect.

Q. 3. Write an essay on Kamala Das's concept of love as revealed in her poems.

Or

What opinion have you formed about Kamala Das's concept of love on the basis of the poems which you have read; and what is your reaction to that concept ?

The Sexual Relationship and Emotional Attachment

The word "love", as it is generally used in relation to cinema-films, and in relation to novels and short stories, means an emotional attachment between a man and a woman, the kind of attachment which makes a man and a woman feel that their separation from each other would be the greatest catastrophe or misfortune in their lives and would ruin their happiness in life for ever. And it is only by implication that the word "love" conveys also the desire for a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. The thought of a sexual relationship is certainly there in the minds of both the man and the woman; but it exists only at the back of their minds and not in the forefront of their thinking. The sexual relationship is undoubtedly an essential ingredient of love but both the man and the woman treat it as something secondary, at least in theory. Now, Kamala Das too regards love as an emotional attachment, and a deep one, between a man and a woman; and she too regards the sexual relationship between them as something essential but secondary. The difference between the general view of love and Kamala Das's view of it is that, while people in general do not speak openly and freely about the essentiality of the sexual relationship, Kamala Das not only speaks about it openly and freely in her poetry but puts a great deal of

emphasis on it. Kamala Das does not think it indecent or vulgar or indelicate or even undignified to speak about the need of the sexual relationship in explicit and specific terms. She even goes to the extent of using such words as "pubis", "pubic hair", "womb", and "menstrual blood" in this connection, and she does not shrink from suggesting to women how they should extract the maximum possible pleasure from the sexual act. Kamala Das confronts a woman's sexuality, treating it as a very important part of her physical and mental make-up.

Kamala Das's Sexual Fulfilment and Emotional Frustration

Kamala Das's poetry has rightly been described as confessional poetry because it reveals to us those facts and those experiences of hers which women ordinarily do not disclose to anyone and which they would shrink from confessing even to themselves. Kamala Das's sexual experiences with her husband and with many other men have most candidly been described in her poetry; and she has stated in specific terms her feeling of disappointment and frustration in all these experiences. Her frustration arose from the want of love (meaning the sentiment or the emotion of love as distinct from sexual gratification) in the hearts of the various men with whom she had had those sexual experiences. She has frankly admitted, in poem after poem, that the demands of her sexuality had fully been met both in the case of her sexual experiences with her husband and in the case of her extra-marital relationships. But at the core of her poetry is the disappointing, and depressing thought that she never received love in its proper sense from any of her sexual partners. At the core of her poetry is the painful, almost agonizing, thought that her love has remained unfulfilled; and it is this thought which has ruined all her happiness and rendered her poetry pessimistic.

Sexual Experience Without Love from a Sexual Partner, Not Welcome

In the poem entitled *The Freaks*, Kamala Das says that, although she and her husband had lived together for a very long time, they had failed in love, and that her heart had become an empty cistern. In the poem *My Grandmother's House*, she says that she received much love from her grandmother but that now she has lost her way and stands at strangers' doors "to beg for love, at least in small change". In *The Sunshine Cat*, she bluntly says that her husband, being a selfish and cowardly man, had neither loved her nor used her properly and that, in the long run, the streak of sunshine, which had looked like a yellow cat, was reduced to a hair-thin line and that she herself was reduced to "a half-dead woman", no longer of any use to any man wanting sexual pleasure. And in the same poem, she has also given expression to her disappointment with her other sexual partners who never offered her their love on the ground that they were incapable of loving her. As a consequence of her disappointment she used to lie in bed weeping and trying "to build walls with tears." In the poem entitled *The Invitation*, she

admits that she experienced perfect sexual pleasure in bed with a man who, however, gave her no real love and showed no real emotion in his relationship with her. The bed, in which she used to sleep with him, seemed to be a paradise to her if judged only by the extent of her sexual pleasure; but his unemotional or mechanical manner of performing the sexual act and his subsequent desertion of her gave rise to thoughts of suicide in her mind.

The Emptiness of Sexual Act Without Love

In all these poems, the fact of her sexuality amounting to lust has candidly been admitted by Kamala Das; and the absence of love on the part of her sexual partners in all these cases has also been candidly stated. It is clear, then, that she believes the sensual or the sexual experience to be hollow if it is not accompanied by a feeling of love on the part of a sexual partner. Her failure to receive love from any of her sexual partners led her to say in the poem entitled *Substitute* that a stage came when she no longer thought mere sensual gratification to be of any importance whatsoever; love became a swivel-door: when one went out, another came in. The sexual experience had become for her a purely mechanical act, fulfilling a bodily need but affording no pleasure or satisfaction to her.

Kamala Das's Definition of Love, According to a Critic

According to a critic* Kamala Das's definition of love is entirely different from that of other poets as she thinks that the basis of ideal love is in its experience through sex. In the poem entitled *Ghanashyam*, Kamala Das speaks about a husk-game** which she and her lover had played because his body needed hers and because his ageing body in its pride needed her body to gratify his lust. Kamala Das has always sought sexual-spiritual fulfilment in her extra-marital relationships. She is never ashamed of admitting that her husband allowed her to toss her youth like coins into various hands, that he allowed her to sleep with other men, and that he wanted her to seek ecstasy in other men's arms. This confession she makes in the poem entitled *A Man is a Season*. And she makes a similar confession in the poem entitled *The Sunshine Cat* in which she says that her husband was a "ruthless watcher" of her sexual acts with other men.

Love, a Spiritual Experience, Possible Only Through a Sexual Relationship

The same critic goes on to say that the love-theme in Kamala Das's poetry is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. On the one hand, she realizes love as the mechanical act of bodily union and says that, like a convict studying his prison's geography, she used to study her lover's limbs and organs. On the other hand, she seeks emotional and spiritual sustenance and

* Nasreen Ayaz in Iqbal Kaur's book, *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*.

** *Husk-game*—game involving the bodies and bodily movements as in the course of the sexual act.

food from a lover. She yearns for a kind of love which is a spiritual experience, and she seeks that love through a sexual relationship. She feels that getting a man to love is easy but that living without him afterwards is unbearable. It is like "living without life" (*The Looking-Glass*).

Kamala Das, the Victim of a Sado-Masochistic Malady

According to another critic*, Kamala Das's poetry, from her earliest poem to her latest (till the year 1973) is one long, endless stream of misery and sexual humiliation, an endless tale of a woman too wronged by the male world around her. Within the walls built by her with her tears, she projects herself as a person suffering from an incurable malady of sado-masochistic kind.

Q. 4. Discuss the poetry of Kamala Das as the poetry of protest.

Or

Evaluate Kamala Das as a feminist poet.

Or

What light does Kamala Das's poetry throw on the depressed females in India ?

Her Confessional Poetry the Poetry of Protest Against the Callous Treatment of Women in India

The poetry of Kamala Das has justly been labelled as confessional poetry; but it may, with equal justice, be labelled as the poetry of protest. The bulk of her poetry consists of her confessions with regard to the failure of her marriage, her vain search for love and affection by forming sexual relationships with other men, her giving free reins to her sensuality till love became a "swivel-door" with one lover going out of her bedroom and another coming in. Now, this confessional poetry is the poetry of protest in the sense that it conveys Kamala Das's strong and vehement disapproval of the way in which women in India have been treated for ages and ages. Kamala Das's marriage proved a failure because her husband treated her merely as a means of providing himself with sexual gratification while giving her no real love or affection. She has described her husband's unemotional and mechanical way of performing the sexual act with her, thus undoubtedly satisfying her sexual urge but denying to her the love and affection which every woman expects from her husband and the want of which brings not only disappointment to her but also misery and even torture. These poems describe not only Kamala Das's own resentment against her husband but, by implication, the resentment of other women who find themselves in a similar predicament.

Poems of Protest: An Introduction and Glass

In the poems, which express Kamala Das's strong dissatisfaction with her conjugal life, she has protested against the passivity and the timidity of

* S. Murali in Iqbal Kaur's book.

sexual gratification and at the same time its need for love and affection. What, after all, is body language? It is the language or the medium through which the human body, in the present case a woman's body, expresses its physical or sensual desires. Kamala Das's poetry is confessional, and she makes no secret of her sensuality or of her lust. All the imagery which we have cited above depicts that sensuality or lust; and, in addition to that, this imagery articulates Kamala Das's emotional and spiritual needs which become more pressing and urgent in her poems centring round Lord Krishna and the legend of Radha's love for him.

Q. 7. Discuss Kamala Das's contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry.

Or

Assess the poetic achievement of Kamala Das, giving illustrations from the poems you have read.

Or

Bring out Kamala Das's distinctive qualities as a poet.

Her Candid Self-Analysis; Her Bold Disclosures; Her Sense of Alienation

Kamala Das is one of the most original Indo-Anglian poets, and she has certainly made a name for herself by virtue of her craftsmanship as much as by the novelty or the innovative quality of her treatment of her themes. Hers is the poetry of introspection and self-analysis; and in this respect she equals poets like Nissim Ezekiel while she surpasses them in her frankness and candour in expressing the thoughts, ideas, longings, yearnings, and disappointments which lay in the depths of her heart but which she has most effectively been able to bring to the surface. Her unusual frankness in dealing with the subject of sex and her sensitive awareness of her outward surroundings, their sordidness, their ugliness, their horror constitute the strength of her poetry which shows her complete and absolute alienation from those surroundings as well as from the social context in which she has always lived. Even in respect of the feeling of alienation from her social environment she seems to have gone far beyond Nissim Ezekiel.

The Confessional Quality of Her Poetry

Sex is an obsessive theme with Kamala Das. Indeed she writes incessantly about sex, about love or rather the failure of love, about her unhappy personal life, about her lust and her unsuccessful sexual encounters and sexual relationships with other men, besides her own husband who seems to have caused her both physical and mental pain to which also she has given a most emphatic and effective expression. Kamala Das's poetry has justly been described as autobiographical and confessional; and it reminds us in some ways of the work of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath who have tried to work out their traumas in their poetry.

Disappointment and Frustration in Her Sexual Relationships

Kamala Das's greatest contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry, as already pointed out, is the bold and daring manner in which she has expressed the secrets of her heart, the secret of her disappointment with her marriage, and the secret of her frustration in her extra-marital sexual relationships. The greatest disappointment in her life and the most painful frustration in her life are due to her sense of failure to have won any man's love or affection. She has had a varied sex-life and her lust has more than fully been satisfied. But in the midst of all this she received no love or affection from any man, so that she became fed up and disgusted with sex altogether. She has given a very frank and striking expression to this feeling in the following two lines in a poem entitled *Substitute*:

After that, love became a swivel-door,
When one went out, another came in.

What she means to say here is that sexual relationships with men became a routine in her life and, just as she received no love from any man, she could give no love to any man either. As she says in another poem, namely *Glass*, she had a feeling that she was looking for a father whom she had misplaced, meaning that, having failed to find love in the heart of any sexual partner, she thought of her father from whom she had received much love as a child.

The Freaks; The Sunshine Cat; The Invitation

The Freaks is an early poem in which she says that, although she had lived for a very long time with her husband, she had not been able to get any love from him, so that her heart resembled an empty cistern waiting, through long hours, to be filled. She then calls herself a freak, adding that it is only to save her face that she flaunts, at times, a grand, flamboyant lust. In the poem entitled *My Grandmother's House*, she says that she has lost her way in life, and now stands at strangers' doors "to receive love, at least in small change". In the poem entitled *The Sunshine Cat*, she bluntly says that her husband did not love her because he was a selfish man and a coward; and she then goes on to say that her successive extra-marital relationships also brought her no satisfaction because of the want of love in the hearts of all her sexual partners. A streak of sunshine falling at her door, and looking like a yellow cat, kept her company, but this streak of sunshine was reduced to a hair-thin line when winter came; and then her husband, who used to treat her as if she were a prisoner in this house, found her half-dead and of no use to any man any longer. In the poem entitled *The Invitation*, she speaks of a lover (or perhaps her husband) who used to come to make love to her in the intervals of his office-work and used then to go back. She had certainly enjoyed the pleasure of sex with him but eventually she found herself forsaken by that man, so that she was driven to thoughts of suicide. Here, then, are frustration and also a deep sense of alienation—frustration in her sexual relationships, and deep alienation from all the men with whom she had formed sexual relationships, and alienation also from society at large and society's code of conduct.

Her Feeling of Alienation

Her sense of alienation finds a most striking expression in the poem entitled *An Introduction*. In this poem she first refers, in a sarcastic and intensely censorious manner, to those critics, friends, and visiting cousins who urged her not to write poetry in the English language because this language was not her mother-tongue. Kamala Das's reply to this advice is that she would write in any language she likes. Whichever language she uses, would become hers, with all its distortions and its queernesses. This sense of alienation from her friends and cousins voices her protest against people who think that Indians should not write poetry in the English language.

Her Uninhibited Treatment of the Themes of Love and Sex

The same poem, namely *An Introduction*, contains a few lines which illustrate the candid manner in which she speaks about matters in respect of which most people, and even most poets, would speak in a veiled manner. She here tells us that, when she grew up from a child to an adult and when she felt the need of love, a man pulled her into the bedroom, closed the door, and performed the sexual act with her in such a rough manner that she felt beaten and bruised. And she then adds: "The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me." Subsequently her sex life became so reckless that people began to describe her as a schizophrenic and even a nymphomaniac. *The Looking-Glass* is another poem in which she speaks frankly about sex. She does not mind suggesting to women to stand nude in front of a mirror, with their lovers also standing nude by their side, in order to look at their reflections in the mirror. She then urges women not to keep their sexual yearnings to themselves but to let their lovers know what they expect from them. She would want a woman to let her lover smell the scent of her long hair, to smell the musk of sweat between her breasts, to feel the warm shock of her menstrual blood, and to feel all her "endless female hungers".

A Powerful Feminist Poet; Her Technical Lapses

In the light of what has been said above, we can affirm that Kamala Das has helped the Indian women of her time to liberate themselves from domestic restrictions and restraints and from social taboos. This may be regarded as her chief contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry. She has established herself as a leading feminist poet. Her protests against the way she has been treated by her husband and by her other sexual partners, are, by implication, strong arguments in support of the rights of women. But she has made a significant contribution to the art and technique of writing poetry as well. Apart from her mastery of the English language and the wide range of the poetic effects which she is capable of producing in her poems, she also shows herself to be a master craftsman. It is true that much of her poetry is marred by her omission of punctuation marks, especially commas; thus making her poetry difficult for the average reader. Her poetry is also marred by the varying length of her lines and the omission of capital letters at the

beginning of the lines. In the technical sense, her poems are extremely irregular and often bewildering because there may sometimes be only one word in a line or two words, thus making the reader wonder why this method of composing a poem has been preferred to the usual manner of writing. Of course she shares these faults and lapses with most of the other Indo-Anglian poets who take a special and perverse pleasure in violating the norms of poetic technique.

Her Choice of Words in Writing Her Poems

In the choice of words, Kamala Das exercises a special care; and her words and the combination of those words into phrases, clauses, and sentences, she shows a rare understanding of the meanings, the appropriateness, and the subtleties of words. Her words are neither splendid nor glittering, nor conceived on a gigantic scale. She is a poet in the confessional mode and her diction is, therefore, most often colloquial. Her poetic diction has nothing to do with philosophical musings or religious chants. Nor is it a Pandora's box from which magic words of miscellaneous kinds would come. Diction is not a tool in her hands but a poetic medium pure and simple. The words come to her effortlessly, and become one with her emotions. This is evident in *My Grandmother's House* and *A Hot Noon in Malabar*. The phrase "jungle voices" in the second of these poems adequately conveys the poetess's emotion, enacts a real drama, and imparts to the poem its peculiar tone. Every epithet in this poem is effective and glows with emotion; and there is also a perfect fusion of sense and sound here.

Her Mastery of Rhythm

At the same time Kamala Das's poetry reveals a mastery of, and a control over, rhythm. Her best poems display a strong feeling of rhythm. The poem entitled *An Introduction* employs the rhythms of conversational speech, with the attempt of Kamala Das's family to define a role for her in life:

Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.....

And then the poem moves suddenly into the urgent driving rhythm which is characteristic of some of Kamala Das's best work:

Who are you, I ask each and every one
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself.....

According to a critic*, *The Wild Bougainvillae*, with its continuously alternating long and short lines, captures the restlessness of the poet, and strains through its rhythm towards the longed-for end.

* Eunice de Souza

A Frequent Repetition of Words in Her Poems

A stylistic device which reinforces the predominantly emotional quality of her poems is Kamala Das's frequent repetition of words and lines. This is a device which, according to a critic, reminds us of D.H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, and the Bible. However, Kamala Das does not always use this device skilfully. One of the poems in which this device works effectively is *Substitute* in which the repetition of the phrase "it will be all right" conveys the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life.

Q. 8. Attempt a critique of the theme of alienation in Kamala Das's poetry.

Or

Do you think that Kamala Das has given expression, among other things, to a feeling of alienation in her poetry? Give examples.

Alienation, Surely a Theme in Kamala Das's Poetry

Alienation is certainly a theme in the poems of Kamala Das (as it definitely is in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel). Kamala Das has always felt alienated from her husband; and subsequently she has felt alienated from the many other men with whom she had developed sexual relationships on account of her frustration in her married life. Her sense of alienation is due also to the spectacle of male domination over women in this country. She feels alienated from society at large because society makes it possible for the Indian men to dominate over the Indian women. Kamala Das is a feminist and, in her prime of life when she wrote most of her poems, women in India had yet to liberate themselves from male domination.

Her Complete Alienation from Her Husband

The poem entitled *The Old Playhouse* shows Kamala Das's complete alienation from her husband; and she has used very strong language to express her dissatisfaction and displeasure with him. Indeed, this poem may be described as an indictment of her husband; and a scathing indictment it is. Addressing him, she says that he had called her wife but had not given her the love or affection which a wife expects from her husband. He had certainly felt pleased with her response to his fondling and caressing of her in bed. He had allowed his saliva to flow into her mouth and had poured himself into every nook and cranny of her body during the sexual act. But there had been nothing of love in his sexual behaviour. He had also made her perform her duties as a housewife; he had taught her to put saccharine into his tea and to give him the vitamins at the right moment. Cowering beneath his monstrous ego, she had felt reduced to the position of a dwarf and had even lost her will and her reason. Her mind had become an old playhouse (or theatre-hall) no longer in use, and with all its lights put out. She then goes on to say that he had been using the strong man's technique in his relationship with her and

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FANCY DRESS SHOW-SUMMARY-454 WORDS

The poem "The Fancy-Dress Show" is a beautiful social satire. Kamala Das, better known as Kamala Suraiya is a great Indian poet writing in both English and Malayalam. According to her people are often deceived by outward shows. Kamala Das calls it "The Fancy-Dress Show". She laughs at the masked people of society.

Kamala Das says that now a day every virtue in society demands a fancy dress. The priest is forced to wear a cassock which is known as a holy-dress. It is priest's "uniform" without which he is not acceptable and respectable in society. The cassock is a beautiful mask for him and he can cover all his vices under it. Here the poet laughs at the human tendency to judge a man by his external appearance alone.

Kamala Das says that politicians appear to be poor, simple and honest in their dress which is suitable for a saint. But most of them are highly corrupted and amass wealth and power by any means. But as long as people judge them by their outward appearance, politicians and holy men continue to cheat people. Similarly, even the blessings of God go to the 'legitimate' people she says. People who have more money to visit the God's sanctum sanctorum directly without having to go through the process normal people would have to. She also suggests that even among the normal folk the blessings of God are only for people whom the scriptures deem worthy and it is decided through hierarchy of cast and birth not from their actions.

She criticizes the concept of 'confessions' by saying that it is like a shameful act which is done in a dark secret place and by 'mumbling' she says that it is very unclear. She questions the capacity of a priest's qualification to wash a sinner of his sins just because he has the 'courage' to 'mumble about it in the dark' without even revealing his self no matter how heinous the sin he committed.

Kamala Das refers to the fasting of patriots and poor children. Patriots and politicians undertake fasting to achieve their political game and they become famous and powerful. But poor children live in poverty and they are forced to undertake fasting because they have nothing to eat. After some time, their health declined, caught illness and finally died.

In concluding the poem, Kamala Das quotes Robert Browning who said: "God is in heaven and all's right with the world". She says that God is in heaven and does not notice human sufferings. In "King Lear", Shakespeare says: "As flies to wanton boys/ Are we to Gods/ They kill us for their sports".

Kamala Das adds that modern world is worse than Browning's period