

# Defying Conventions: Celebrating Feminist Iconoclasm in Kamala Das's *Summer in Calcutta*

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**Abstract:** *Woven into a web of controversies and confrontational poetry, 'Summer in Calcutta' is heralded as a sacrosanct literary work for feminists. Charged with a radical nature, it brought to the forefront the female desire and rage that had been suppressed by patriarchy for ages. Kamala Das, often known as the 'Mother of Modern Indian Poetry' uses this book as a vehicle to further her iconoclast views that subvert the traditionally established norms while carving a space for women to be themselves, unapologetically. This paper aims to identify and celebrate the poems that fearlessly defy the social conventions and the traditional expectations of womanhood. By imparting a voice to the marginalized sections of the society, she offers an iconoclastic and feminist resistance. Her candid exploration of love and desire coupled with the raw language, aspires to reclaim agency over her life and body. Her quest for identity serves as an underlying theme through which she rewrites the patriarchal narratives and embraces self-expression. By celebrating her unorthodox approach, this study focuses on the lasting impact of Das's work that captures the essence of the discourses surrounding gender and empowerment.*

**Key Words:** Kamala Das, Summer in Calcutta, Feminism, Iconoclasm, Patriarchy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Kamala Das popularly remarked, "Like other women writers of my class, I am expected to tame my talent to suit the comfort of my family" [1] Fearlessly treading upon topics like female consciousness and sexuality, Kamala Surraya, famously known as Kamala Das became a prominent name among the revolutionary figures of Indian Literature. Rising to fame in 1960s during the artistic turmoil and instability in Calcutta, Das brought to the foreground topics that were considered as a taboo and transformed it into one that compelled people to acknowledge its presence. These included female desire, sexual liaisons and an unflinching honesty about her love affairs and relationships. Critiquing patriarchy and delving deeper into the limitations and norms that bound women to the domestic sphere, her voice was identified as the beacon call for the marginalized to speak up and reclaim the spaces they had been ousted from.

She had begun to identify with the colonial streets of Calcutta, where she spent her young years. Her book titled *Summer in Calcutta* was written in 1965 and was amongst the first of her English poetry collection. Kamala Das who was widely recognized in Malayalam literature under her pen name, Madhavikutty. This collection was a path breaker since the book departed from the conventional form of themes and forayed into avenues that supported the branching out of movements like Feminism and Iconoclasm. The free verse poetry symbolized a break from the traditional rhyme scheme which was the norm while she wrote. The poems are wrought with vivid imagery and symbolism which stem from her own life. The evocative language and her raw pain bring to the table a varied kind of harmony. The unabashed treatment of years of idealized structures and her passion, mirrored the intensity of heat one feels during the summer months. The book introduced the conservative Indian audience to the booming and influential voice of Kamala Das who was not afraid to step on the toes of the authorities.

## 2. INCORPORATION OF ICONOCLASM:

Iconoclasm can be defined as challenging the traditional norms particularly those related to gender, sexuality and identity. Placed within an Indian context, Kamala Das deeply understands and identifies the complex view of women sensibilities. In the article titled 'Feminist Ethos in Kamala Das' Poetry' by Dr. G. Charyulu says "She

[Kamala Das] was bitterly wounded by her patriarchal prejudice ever from her childhood days which lead to unhappy and dissatisfied life [5]. Through her poetry she embraces her ethnicity and identity as a woman. She challenges society by explicitly stating its role in the social and cultural construction of gender. She attempts to masculinize herself to escape the discrimination she faces as woman living in a patriarchal society. In her poem, *An Introduction* she says,

“Then ... I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness.” [2]

Along with women, Das often spoke of for the marginalized communities and their woes being forced to exist voicelessly in the male dominated society. In *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, she talks about the pain of the eunuchs who are alienated and are unable to embrace the sexual identity the society thrusts upon them. As a result they are alienated, symbolizing the lack of self-fulfilment associated with the gender roles. At a certain point, she begins identifying with them as well because they too are unable to have lovers or children who love them just like Das herself. They both continue doing the dance of life whether in rain or sunshine irrespective of the audience around them.

“Their voices/ Were harsh, their songs melancholy, they sang of/ Lovers dying and of children left unborn...” [2]

Drawing from her own experiences, she was against the established idea of arranged marriages, because they taught women that their ultimate goal is marriage. Further it pushed unwilling men to be husbands and live in a loveless marriages. They neither cared nor reciprocated the feelings of their wives, only concerned with quenching their lust. Being married for the first time at the tender age of 15, she recalls of her husband lacked warmth or kindness, but neither did he mistreat her. His indifference to her needs points to the futility of the institution of marriage. In her poem *The Sunshine Cat*, she refers to being in a loveless marriage like an animal caged within four walls of domesticity, leaving her to be a ‘Half-dead woman’.

“They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man/ She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish/ And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor/ Used her, but was a ruthless watcher...” [2]

### 3. DEFYING THE ESTABLISHED SOCIAL NORMS:

An advocate of counter-cultural discourses Das, expressed her strong views through her use of the colonial language English to to express her own Indian identity. While she rejected the traditional female roles, she also explored female sexuality and desire. She portrayed a liberated woman who her own agency of body and held the power to sexual pleasure within herself. Belonging to the upper caste from Kerala, “The Nair ethos that gave a sense of liberty to its women is perceptible in Kamala Das' writings, especially in the characterization of female characters in five different ways: idealization of the grandmother and the family house; in her close affinity with the other members of the family including domestic servants; and the several reference to Nair customs, rituals and ceremonies; and the powerful desire to freedom and freedom to rebel; and finally is her essential domestic and religious sensibility and devotion to lord Krishna at Guruvayoor temple in Kerala.” [4] She faced a lot of criticism from the conservatives within the society who believed that woman's modesty lays in monogamy and chastity and not pleasure seeking. In her autobiography *My Story*, she speaks at length about spontaneous sexual encounters and affairs within and outside the realm of marriage that allowed her to embrace biological and psychological needs. She strongly believed that a woman's pleasure is not meant to be chained within a bedroom but rather explored and embraced. In her poem *The Freaks*, she explores the intimate aspects of a transient physical relationship and the need for women to celebrate the erupting desire.

“Desire...Can this man with/ Nimble finger-tips unleash/ Nothing more alive than the /Skin's lazy hungers? Who can...” [2]

Her poems were also a means for her to embrace her multifaceted identity. Her Dravidian culture in particular played an important role because she was multilingual Keralite born in a Hindu Nair family, who later converted to Islam. This has helped her embrace different aspects of her life that re vividly reflected in her poetry. Within Nair family, the matrilineal system gave women freedom and even right to exercise a divorce in marriages. Ingrained with this mindset she found it extremely hard to respect and obey her autocratic father. She idealized the feminine side of her family and respected a culture that placed women in par with men. Thus, her grandmother's house was represented a space of belongingness where she felt nurtured and safe. The nostalgic aspect and the internalized feeling of loss stemmed from her psychological suffering. She draws from the Dravidian mythology and refuses to be a ‘Devi’ who suffers silently. In the poem *My Grandmother's House* she explored unmet needs and desires of women in the

psychological aspect. Her childhood home also houses painful memories of neglect and reprimand. This reminded her of her own pregnancy and untimely motherhood which forced her to take up the role of the nurturing and self less mother which she saw as a burden.

“...you cannot believe, darling,/ Can you, that I lived in such a house and/ Was proud, and loved... I who have lost/ My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to/ Receive love, at least in small change?” [2]

#### 4. DAS- THE RADICAL FEMINIST:

Das’s experiences with love, desire, emotions and relationships as she waded through life, left her feeling desolate yet empowered. Writing with the power she earned after the freedom of seeking physical and emotional fulfilment through extra marital affairs, she ponders deeply, the wave of changes that forced marriage and unexpected motherhood brought into her life. Nevertheless, writing was her only escape and she spent her life seeking love and fleeting emotional connections which left her unhappy. She speaks candidly about her marriage being a misfit and mirroring the one her parents had where her mother did not love her father. Often even feeling humiliated in the relationship, writing about female desire, sexuality and struggles of a woman to embrace her innate identity, gave her the much needed escape. As she became vocal the line between her personal and political life began to blur, Often bogged down with the weight of her extra marital affairs, she continued to express the need for women to have sexual freedom. In her poem *The Testing of the Sirens*, she uses the mythological figure of the siren, a highly a lusty seductress who lures sailors to their doom thereby exploring the consequences of pining after sexual freedom.

“Near the lake, a pregnant/ girl bared her dusky/ breasts and washed them sullenly. On the old/ cannon stand, crows bickered over a piece...” [2]

As her audience grew, so did the critics. Unbothered about the moral policing and the societal condemnations, she continued her journey as a liberated woman who resented against patriarchy. She questioned the role of women being seen as domesticated pets, and often wrote about becoming a ‘new woman’ even in her autobiography *My Story*. Her conversion from Hinduism to Islam in 1999, seven years after her husband’s death was much debated upon. She cited the reason as a spiritual search for identity though many believe it was to marry her long term lover. Discussions erupted in various parts of the country about the intersection of religion and identity. But Das unflinchingly maintained that a woman who has agency over her own body also had the personal freedom to change her religion. In the poem *The Bangles*, the same search for spiritual identity is presented as she expresses superstitions related to Hinduism which play no role in making a woman’s life better.

“Front door, protruding into street/ Like a cervix, she hangs some/ Mango-leaves. The will bring us luck.....In sleep, the woman lashes/ At pillows with bangled arms; in/ Vain, she begs bad dreams to fade. [2]

The prolific Indian writer K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, aptly describes Das, “aggressively individualistic”[3]. Das exposes the hypocrisy of society who worship women as goddess yet refuse to respect them within society, chaining them to domesticity and disregarding their opinion in public or political matters. She frankly discusses the pitiable situation of the naive women are ‘given’ by their fathers to the husbands and spend the rest of their lives struggling emotionally and sexually. In her poem *The Fear of the Year*, she speaks of women who continue living monotonously for the sake of the family until they are dead. The women are expected to set aside their dreams, futures and needs.

“Thing; for fear has warped us all: even/ In the freedom of our dreams,it/ Thrusts its paws to incarnadine.../ [2]

#### 5. DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS :

Acknowledging the privilege of the male sex, Das uses her poetry to create a powerful space for women by addressing themes of female desire and sexuality. A space crafted exclusively for them apart from the domestic sphere that they are a part of. Her works carry a tinge of the post colonial fervour where she sifts through the influence of the western civilization which was male centered and ‘ruled by the father’. Her greatest works are those which highlight the restlessness of women in male dominated society. Their woes silenced and grief glossed over, the society paints the picture of a content family whilst constantly burdening women into roles of a wife and mother, slowly erasing their individual existence. Through the confessional style of poetry, Das dismantles this notion much similar to the approach of Virginia Woolf and Judith Wright, actively speaking against the ‘angel of the house’ in terms of the Indian context [6]. Recreating the image of a woman as her own person with desires, frustrations and needs which have been down trodden for centuries to favour the patriarchal male. In the poem *Words*, she feels intensely weighed down the words

and opinions that she dare not utter in the patriarchal society. Hence they grow and die a painful death within her. Soon enough she begins to hate those words for they grow slowly and are willing to even cut her open to escape.

“They grow on me like leaves on a tree/ They never seem to stop their coming/ From a silence, somewhere deep within” [2]

The poems of *Summer in Calcutta* serve as an inner monologue to the women who harness the power of language to articulate their needs and express them in a society where they are culturally bound. Das writes extensively about loneliness, her experiences with infidelity and about the essence of being a woman who is always expected to give but never demand anything back in return. She manages to split upon the barrier where women can enter into a space where they are valued, respected and have a chance to live according to their will. The sensual imagery and witty play on words introduce a varied and heterogeneous representation of women in literature, which has often been absent. Women's needs go beyond the realm of physical intimacy and sexual desire and vie upon the psychological and emotional needs of a woman who yearns for her freedom. In the poem *A Quiet Tongue* she speaks about a Indian woman who should embrace self-expression lest her tongue forgets to speak. She expresses how the eyes, smiles and even heart of a woman speak to those who understand that language.

“For sleep- a sleep which has like an Indian Bride, proud loveless eyes/ And a quiet tongue” [2]

The complex female characters much like herself are a part of unhappy marriages, The women are vulnerable, unseen by their husbands, have forgotten the loving touch. The poem *A Hot Noon in Malabar* begins with a happy description of various people on the beach side in Kerala. Some earning money for their livelihood while others enjoy the seas. But Das herself pines for an intimate moment from her husband but can instead only feel the hot sun on her face and is forced to trust strangers who she believes will give her what she has been seeking.

“Yes, this is/ A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love. To/ Be here, far away is torture. Wild feet” [2]

## 6. CONCLUSION / SUMMARY:

A path breaking anthology of poems that seek to redefine femininity and critique Patriarchy, *Summer in Calcutta* by Kamala Das, presents her raw and honest musings on themes such as female desire, sexuality and the lives of the marginalized. The poems are presented as an extension of herself and arise from her personal experiences which blur the line between personal, political and societal. It focuses to epitomize the woman having agency of herself, thus contradicting the dilemma of Indian women. The poems, simple in language are multilateral with symbolism and imagery pointing to the greater grief of women caged within institutions like marriage and motherhood. The voice of the marginalized echo through the pages of the book. Women voices are not just heard but celebrated. They refuse to be victims of patriarchy and are beginning to subvert established narratives. Poems like *The Freaks*, *A Quiet Tongue*, *The Bangles*, *The Testing of the Sirens* and many more which are a part of *Summer in Calcutta*, express the themes pertaining to iconoclasm and feminism. The conventional norms of the society are defied and rewritten from the perspective of women asserting individual liberty.

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