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## KAMALA DAS' POETRY: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE PALLAVI

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### Abstract

Kamala Surayya, or Kamala Das, was a prominent Indian poet and writer who used her work to challenge the patriarchal norms of Indian society. Her poetry, particularly in collections like "Summer in Calcutta," "The Descendants," and "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems," is marked by a strong feminist ethos that celebrates the power, autonomy, and agency of women. In her poetry, Kamala Das critiques the restrictive gender roles imposed on women by society, and advocates for the freedom and self-expression of women. She often uses her own experiences and emotions to illuminate the struggles and triumphs of women everywhere. Her poetry also explores themes of love, sexuality, and identity, often defying societal norms and taboos. One of the key ways in which Kamala Das subverts patriarchy in her poetry is through her depiction of female desire and sexuality. She openly writes about her own sexual experiences and desires, challenging the traditional notion of women as passive and chaste. Through her poetry, Kamala Das empowers women to embrace their sexuality and reject the shame and stigma attached to it. Kamala Das' poetry is replete with feminist ethos. Her poetry is remarkably realistic and feminist. The paper aims at a feminist reading of Kamala Das' poetry whereby she effectively subverts the ingrained elements of patriarchy, privileging female will, choice and strength.

### Keywords

Domesticity, Feminine Identity, Individuality, Patriarchal Society, Self-Identity  
Unequal Treatment, Psychological Turmoil, Emotional Bonding, Female  
Psyche, Marital Prerogatives.

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Feminism is a social and political movement that advocates for gender equality and the rights of women. It seeks to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression and discrimination that are based on gender, and to promote equal opportunities and rights for all genders. It is a diverse movement with different branches and ideologies, but at its core, it aims to challenge the societal norms and power structures that perpetuate inequality and discrimination based on gender (Hooks 7). Feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to the oppression and marginalization of women in various aspects of life, including the workplace, politics, and culture. Feminist activists and theorists have fought for a range of issues, including reproductive rights, equal pay, ending gender-based violence and discrimination, and promoting gender diversity and inclusivity. The movement has made significant strides in advancing gender equality over the past century, but there is still much work to be done. The movement continues to be relevant in contemporary society as gender-based discrimination and violence persist in various forms around the world. Today, feminism encompasses a broad range of perspectives and movements, including intersectional feminism, ecofeminism, and trans-inclusive feminism, which aim to address issues related to race, class, sexuality, and other forms of oppression that intersect with gender.

Kamala Das, a prominent Indian writer and poet, is known for her bold and candid portrayal of female sexuality and experiences. Through her works, she often exposed the patriarchal prejudice and oppression that women face in a male-dominated society. One of Das' most famous works is her autobiography, *My Story*, which describes her experiences growing up in a conservative family and society where women were expected to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. In the book, Das exposes the ways in which patriarchal structures limit women's autonomy and agency, and how they are forced to suppress their desires and ambitions.

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In her poetry, Das often challenges patriarchal norms around sexuality and relationships. Her poem "An Introduction" is a powerful statement of feminist defiance, in which she rejects the labels and expectations imposed on her by society and declares her right to self-expression and fulfillment. Overall, her work exposes the pervasive influence of patriarchy on every aspect of women's lives, and challenges readers to question and resist these oppressive structures. She was a trailblazer in her time, and her writing continues to inspire and empower women to speak out against gender-based oppression and discrimination (Iyengar193).

Kamala Das expose the patriarchal prejudice of the male-dominated society by portraying the indifference of man to woman's miseries in her poem "The Stone Age":

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

She expresses her frustration caused by her disillusionment with real love in a male-dominated society in her poem "The Freaks":

Can this man with  
Nimble finger-tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers?

"The Looking Glass" is another poem in which Kamala Das underlines Patriarchal prejudices. The poem exposes the hypocrisy and the hollowness of the male dominated society:  
Stand nude before the glass with him  
So that he sees himself the stronger one  
And believes it so, and you so much more  
Softer, younger, lovelier. (qtd. in Iyer 214)

Das' works were able to capture the complexities of the female experience in India during the post-colonial period. She was celebrated for her exploration of the topics of love, death, and religion in her writing, and her works often challenged traditional expectations of women. Her poetry is characterized by its frankness, honesty, and fearlessness in addressing issues related to gender, sexuality, and the human condition (Kumar 27).

One of the key themes in Das' poetry is the oppression and marginalization of women in a patriarchal society. She challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, and advocates for women's rights and autonomy. In her poem "The Looking Glass," for example, she questions the beauty standards imposed on women and the ways in which women are objectified and judged by their appearance. Her poetry also explores the complexities of female sexuality, including desire, pleasure, and the social stigma attached to female sexuality. In her poem "The Sunshine Cat," she describes a woman's desire for sexual fulfillment and the societal pressures that prevent her from expressing it freely.

Kamala Das' poetry is indeed deeply rooted in her experiences as a woman, a wife, a sexual partner, and a mother. Her poetry often reflects her dissatisfaction with the patriarchal society that imposes restrictions on women and denies them the freedom to explore their sexuality and desires. In "The Old Playhouse," Das expresses her revulsion towards her husband's treatment of her as a mere object of his desire. She questions the traditional notion of marriage, where women are expected to fulfill their husband's sexual needs without any

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consideration for their own desires. Similarly, in "The Sunshine Cat," Das portrays her husband as a selfish and cowardly man who fails to love her properly. She feels trapped in her marriage and compares her life to that of a prisoner with only a yellow cat for company.

Das' poetry is often labelled as feminist due to its focus on women's issues and her willingness to challenge patriarchal norms. Her frankness about sexual matters was groundbreaking in Indian literature and earned her both praise and criticism. However, some critics have also pointed out the lack of attention to the structure of her poetry. Nonetheless, Das' poetry remains an important contribution to Indian literature and feminist discourse, as it provides a powerful and unapologetic voice for women's experiences and desires.

Regarding her conversion to Islam, it is a matter of personal choice and belief, and it should not detract from her contributions as a poet and a feminist. Her longing for an eternal life with her body and soul reflects her search for meaning and fulfillment in life, and it is an expression of her individual spirituality. Overall, Das' poetry is a powerful expression of feminist ideals and a call to challenge the societal norms and structures that limit women's freedom and agency. She remains an influential figure in Indian feminist literature, and her work continues to inspire and empower generations of women.

Kamala Das' experiences in her childhood and marriage were marked by patriarchal prejudices and discrimination, which left a deep impact on her life and work. Her early marriage, at the age of 13, robbed her of her childhood and forced her into a role of a wife and mother that she was not prepared for. In her autobiography, *My Story*, she describes her father as an autocrat who imposed his will on the family, while her mother was vague and indifferent towards her. She felt burdened and unwanted in her own family, which pushed her towards seeking love and acceptance outside of it. Her marriage, too, was a result of patriarchal norms and family pressure. She was married off to a cousin who was much older than her and too busy with his job to provide her with the emotional support she needed. In her poem "Of Calcutta," she expresses her bitterness towards this experience, saying, "I was wedded off to a man much older than me/ in Calcutta, amidst the sound of crackers and gongs" (lines 1-2).

Despite these challenges, Kamala Das found a way to express her experiences and emotions through her poetry, which resonated with many readers and provided a voice for women who faced similar struggles. Her poetry is a testament to the power of literature in challenging patriarchal norms and empowering women to speak up for their rights and desires. Kamala Das' poetry often reflects her feminist sensibilities and her protest against patriarchal attitudes and practices in society. In the poem, "In Love," she expresses her dilemma regarding a man's love and affection towards her, wondering if it was purely physical desire or genuine love. This reflects her critique of the attitude of men towards women, who often use them only for their physical desires without any emotional attachment or consideration for their feelings.

Similarly, in "The Sunshine Cat" and "The Freaks," Kamala Das protests against the behaviour of her lovers, who treat her as a prisoner and disgust her with their manner of making love. She calls herself a freak, flaunting her flamboyant lust only to save face. In her poem "The Looking Glass," Kamala Das speaks of the patriarchal prejudices that women have to face, and how they are expected to fulfill societal expectations of beauty and domesticity. She protests against the idea that a woman's worth is determined by her physical appearance and the way she is perceived by men. Similarly, in her poem "The Old Playhouse," Kamala Das protests against the way men view women as objects of sexual desire and how they treat

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women as mere instruments to fulfill their own desires (*The Old Playhouse* 1). She speaks of how her husband treats her as a mere object of pleasure, with no regard for her own feelings and desires.

She also protests against the way society views female sexuality as something to be ashamed of. In her poem "The Freaks," she speaks of the shame and guilt that women are made to feel about their own bodies and desires (*Only the Soul* 59). She asserts her right to express her own desires and refuses to be silenced by societal expectations. Her poetry reflects her dissatisfaction with societal norms and expectations that limit women's freedom and autonomy. Her poetry can be seen as a feminist protest against patriarchal prejudices and discrimination. Her work highlights the struggles of women to assert their agency and challenge societal norms that constrain their choices and experiences.

She is critical of the institution of marriage and believes that it often leads to the subjugation of women. Her poems express her frustration with the constraints placed on her by her husband and society at large. In her poem "Of Calcutta," Kamala Das describes her husband's treatment of her as a degrading and oppressive experience. She compares herself to a "walkie talkie," implying that her sole purpose was to provide sexual pleasure for her husband (34-35). She questions the loss of her individuality and desires, asking where her soul and spirit have gone.

Similarly, in "The Stone Age," Kamala Das mourns the loss of her identity and freedom due to her marriage (*The Best of Kamala Das* 12-13). She is critical of the traditional gender roles that dictate the subordination of women to men. She describes the masculine world as aggressive and violent, while the feminine world is passive and submissive. Kamala Das' feminist views are evident in her critique of the patriarchal society that she lives in. Overall, Kamala Das' poetry expresses her spirit of rebellion against the oppressive and patriarchal society that she lives in. She challenges traditional gender roles and the institution of marriage, asserting the importance of individual freedom and autonomy (Bhattacharya 59-60).

Her poetry often depicts the struggles of women in a male-dominated society, especially in the realm of sexuality and relationships. In the poem "The Descendants," she questions the idea that a woman's happiness is defined by her sexual relationship with a man. She emphasizes that there is much more to life than being confined to a man's physical presence and desires. She desires to break free from these constraints and seek new forms of love and ecstasy. In "The Prisoner," Kamala Das depicts herself as being trapped by the physical attraction of her husband or lover (*Collected Poems I* 56-60). She feels the need to escape this entrapment and seeks a greater sense of freedom and independence. Her poetry often reflects a longing for a life beyond the limitations of societal expectations and traditional gender roles. In another poem, she expresses her desire to break free from the cocoon that her husband or lover has built around her. She compares herself to a flower that is trapped but will someday break free and fly away, seeking new experiences and opportunities.

Overall, Kamala Das' poetry is a powerful expression of her feminist views and her struggle to find her own voice and identity in a patriarchal society. She challenges traditional ideas of womanhood and relationships, and seeks to create a new world where women can be free to explore their own desires and aspirations.

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