

Feminist Expression in Kamala Das's "Summer in Calcutta": Analyzing Gender Roles and Identity

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Abstract

This study examines Kamala Das's (an Indian-English writer) 1965 poetry anthology *Summer in Calcutta* via the feminist themes it contains. It contends that Das's poetry practice and aesthetic mirror her gendered identity, in which she questions patriarchal gender norms that limit women to the home and immanence and males to the public realm and transcendence. Arranged marriage, emotional torture at home, seclusion, and sexist ideals of female beauty are just a few of the gendered expectations that Das's poetry attacks. Das draws inspiration from the 'I'-centered work of Western confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. In this intimate and communal writing, the author shares not only her own story but also that of women everywhere who face social, linguistic, political, and cultural marginalization as a result of rigidly enforced gender norms and expectations.

Keywords: gender roles, confessional poetry, domesticity, Kamala Das, feminist

Introduction

One of the forbears of contemporary Indian-English poetry, Kamala Das published her first collection of fifty poems, *Summer in Calcutta*, in 1965. Critically acclaimed and remembered for its glimpse into the poet-speaker's life, the collection's poems about relationships, love, betrayal, nostalgia, and women have garnered accolades from critics. Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell are postmodernist American poets whose confessional manner is said to have influenced their taste and style of writing. Bruce King

elucidated the formation and focus of the style as mentioned earlier before restating its influence on Das in his seminal work, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*:

The open, associational poetry, with its surprising attitudes, prominence of such topics as guilt, sexuality, ambition, memories of past rebellions, conflicts, shame, childhood and love affairs, and the assertion of an articulate but fractured self, was part of the confessional mode that started in America during the early '50s and which was practised internationally during the '60s. . . .Kamala Das's highly emotive, self-revelatory, moody poems were much more confessional; she wrote openly about varied, often conflicting emotions, values and hopes..." (King 7)

Das' poetry, according to this article's analysis of the collection, is abundant in textual confrontation and questioning of gendered notions connected to the issues mentioned above. The speaker's conscience is contrasted with her own, drawing on her experiences as an Indian woman in 20th-century India. This contrast is essential to her poetry.

Domesticity, Immanence, and Transcendence

Written by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* is widely regarded as a seminal book in feminist philosophy. Here, she first laid forth the ideas of transcendence and immanence. Since males enter the public realm and simultaneously transcend both the home and private spaces, the latter is traditionally seen as men's domain. The former is defined in this dichotomy as lacking such a transcendent quality, as per Beauvoir's reasoning. She is defined and characterized in relation to man, not the other way around; she is the tangential, the unnecessary, in contrast to the crucial. The culturally associated "normative" with masculinity stands in stark contrast to the immanence that underpins the feminine realm and social function. Beauvoir claims in her essay from 505 that "he is the Subject, he is the Absolute, and she is the Other to him."

The orator and poet The poet-speaker's real-life experiences provide concrete examples of this philosophy in Das's poetry, as is suggested by the premise of "An Introduction." In portraying herself in this poem, Das employs her words and perspectives to construct her markers of identity. Das, in her works, seems to find the strength to forge her own identity apart from the one that society has constructed for her. This goes against the

grain of societal conditioning, which has traditionally seen women as little more than objects of men's gaze. In the opening lines of the poem, the poet-speaker seems to be caving into the societal bias that women are still unheard in the public sphere of politics. However, she swiftly overcomes this prejudice by comparing it to knowing the days of the week, symbolizing her knowledge: "The names are familiar, but I am ignorant of politics."

One interpretation of the woman's immanence is that she is meant to take care of the home and the species. 5. The truth is that every single human being possesses qualities of both transcendence and immanence. To transcend, one must first preserve; to propel forward, one must incorporate the past into oneself; and to reaffirm oneself in oneself while relating to others is an essential aspect of being human. As Beauvoir (506) says of those in charge, they can recite things like the months and days of the week, beginning with Nehru (Das 62).

Afterwards, the next statements vehemently reject this classifying of women, which is supposed to be done in the context of their immanence function:

Dress in sarees, be a girl

Be wife, they said. Be an embroiderer, a cook, And a quarreller with servants. Fit in.
Oh, Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit

On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows. (62)

Words like "saree," "girl," "wife," "embroiderer," "cook," and "quarrelled with servants" paint a complicated picture of her, replete with the duties, expectations, and outward manifestations of her gendered social standing. All of her anticipated duties are firmly planted inside the cosy, private domain of domesticity, and she is forbidden from doing anything that would push her over the edge of this boundary between inevitable domesticity and transcendence. The preference for "peep" over "looking" emphasizes the controlled, hesitant desire that might be quickly corrected. The wall represents this physical separation of duties and responsibilities, and the word "peep" is substituted for "looking."

Das claims that when she states, "I am every Woman who seeks love," she is drawing a comparison between her individual confessional experience and that of women as a community. As for the preceding reference to binary classification, her statement, "I am a

sinner and a saint,” runs counter to it. This exemplifies how multifaceted her personal experience is as a woman and, by implication, as an individual. “I have no joys that are not yours, no aches that are not yours.” These last lines of the poem show an angry, assertive tone as she expresses her frustration at not being able to be herself fully. Like you, I, too, use the pronoun “I” (63). Ultimately, the poet-speaker’s seeming capacity to solidify her identity via her boundaries and markers leads to the rejection of attempts to define and quantify a woman’s pain and delight in relation to her connection with male figures in her life. She adamantly rejects the binary identity markers placed by social conditioning on her by virtue of her gender.

Arranged Marriage and the Violence of Sexual Subservience

Das wed Kalipurayath Madhava Das in February 1949 when she was fifteen years old, following the tradition of child marriage that was common in early 20th-century India. Arranged marriages, which perpetuate caste endogamy in India, meant that young Kamala had no choice but to submit to her parents’ wishes. Beauvoir posits a conflict between immanence and transcendence, and it is the marriage that, within its institution, highlights the differences between the duties and obligations of men and women. The arranged marriage norm of female domesticity entails subservience and the suppression of female sexuality, which Kamala Das challenged and attempted to undermine on occasion. This was done in much poetry that dealt with sexual awakening, feminine desire, relationship problems, and broken hearts. Poems written in this style are often confessional.

“The Sunshine Cat” is a crucial example of how her honest assessment of the limitations of domestic life contrasts with the ‘every-woman’ scenario of varied degrees of exploitation in an arranged marriage. The title alludes to the fact that the woman’s humanity and self-esteem are beginning to crumble. As a social institution, marriage gives men the power to control their wives, to the detriment of women’s autonomy:

Her husband shut her.

Every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near
the door, like

A yellow cat to keep her company, but soon, winter came, and one day, while locking her in, he noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a

Line, a hair-thin line (51)

The tragic fallacy that embodies the woman's experience of being imprisoned by both the literal limitations of the door and the metaphorical shackles of the arranged marriage is symbolized by the change from sunshine, which represents hope, to winter, which represents the harshness of her predicament.

The poet-speaker, with the use of phrases like "They did this to her, the men" and "...the husband who neither loved nor used her, but was a ruthless watcher" (51), exposes the debasement of her female identity that is linked to the experience of being different from men. Patriarchal violence against married women's minds and bodies is believed to be perpetrated by males, and husbands are perceived as complicit in its continuance. Although the speaker's husband is not physically harming her, his position of authority makes him complicit in her exploitation within the framework of their marital relationship.

This poem's concluding lines, "He returned to take her out, she was a cold and / Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men," provide a vivid picture of the consequences that follow from a fundamental breakdown of identity. - show how the woman is helpless and enslaved by her domesticated private world, leading to the total and utter destruction of her identity. Because the poet-speaker woman's pain has to coexist with her value (or lack thereof) to males, the last lines of the poem only serve to heighten her misery. One gendered form of Marxist reification² is the commodification of women's bodies and the ego's dehumanization that goes hand in hand with it.

"With Its Quiet Tongue" and "Afterwards" are poems that portray this loss of identity in an arranged marriage in a more nuanced way. The submissive position that women are assigned in the gendered power relations that accompany marriage is exemplified in lines like "For sleep - a sleep which has like an Indian Bride, proud loveless eyes / And a quiet tongue" (58) and "A man who let me take his name to make me feel I belonged" (32). Brides in traditional Indian culture are required to be quiet as a condition of gaining a feeling of social belonging via marriage. These statements make her feel that her self-worth isn't that

important when compared to the importance of fulfilling gendered roles in marriage. In “The Married Woman” (510–513), Beauvoir argues that economic and social insecurity serve to solidify the subservient position and transaction.

“An Introduction” uses a strong tone to highlight the potential for sexual and physical violence linked to the subservience discussed before within the framework of arranged marriage.

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask For, he drew a youth of sixteen
into the

Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me

But my sad woman’s body felt so beaten. (62)

Starting with the poet-speakers immaturity emotionally, these words go on to the bedroom, almost dragging readers into the painful truth of a child growing up in a sexualized setting. In the bedroom, the woman-child is treated like a commodity, without agency, symbolizing the callous and demeaning way women are sometimes treated during sexual encounters. There is a strong association with the bedroom as a place of home life. The sexual dynamic inside a marriage provides the setting for the psychologically violent acts that take place. Throughout this period, the woman’s autonomy and individual needs are disregarded in favour of treating her body like an impersonal object.

Reclamation of the Narrative of Desire

“She claimed her space by refusing to conform to socially defined roles, even while fulfilling them,” writes Devindra Kohli of Kamala Das in her poetry book *Selected Poems: Kamala Das*. Throughout her journey of self-discovery, she purposefully merged her poetry with her everyday existence, creating a paradoxical statement like ““It’s my poems that are my life, and not my prose.”” number ten. Since Das considered her poetry to be a reflection of herself and her experiences, it is clear that her philosophy of questioning and defying gender norms established by society and culture is present in her work. According to what has been said, Das’s depiction of the poet-speaker self in her work is heavily impacted by the restrictions and immanence of domesticity in her roles as an Indian lady and a wife in an

arranged marriage arrangement. Due to the nature of the arranged marriage, Das was really a wife.

Nonetheless, Das uses poetry as a vehicle to highlight feminine desire and reflect it in her unique way. This goes against the grain of conforming to patriarchal cultural norms around female sexuality and identity. All of her poems, including “In Love,” is a sexual statement of female desire:

...burning mouth

Of sun, burning in today’s Sky reminds me, oh, yes, his

Mouth . . . and his limbs like pale and Carnivorous plants reaching

Out for me, and the sad lie Of my unending lust. (12)

In this case, the poet-speakers sensuous expression isn’t just euphemistic; rather, she uses words like “his limbs,” “burning mouth,” and the comparison to “carnivorous plants,” which highlights an inverted objectification, to make fairly utilitarian references to the male substitute. The style of these lines elevates her desires and cravings above the male presence, which is subtly but surely sexualized in animalistic ways.

Lines like “...yes, It was my desire that made him male / And beautiful” (“A Relationship” 17; my italics) attempt to illustrate female agency, even while Das’ poet-speaker stresses the importance of her desire in making the male acquire qualities of beauty. The significance of the guy achieving physical attractiveness is emphasized in these verses. This is a strong attack on the central narrative, which holds that patriarchal systems teach women to enhance their appearance so that men will see them as objects to be objectified.

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon You built around me with morning tea,

Love words flung from doorways and, of course, Your tired lust. (“I Shall Some Day” 54)

In this stanza, the strength and autonomy of women are emphasized, while the idea of “tired lust” is used to challenge the idea that desire derived from men is admirable. The speaker’s sense of personal progress and the journey from immanence to transcendence is

symbolized by the cocoon metaphor and the intricacy of household confinement, respectively. Distinctly different from the self-destruction shown in “The Sunshine Cat.”

An integral part of Das’s oeuvre, “Loud Posters”, exposes the brutality inherent in gendered roles as they pertain to the performance of desire. Just the title is a challenge to the preconceptions and assumptions about women and their roles in society. “Posters” are more often associated with public-spirited causes than with the shackles of domesticity that women face. Contrasted with the Indian bride’s demureness, which is mentioned in another part of the essay, the loudness is a direct contrast.

I’ve stretched my two-dimensional Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I’ve put

My private voice away adopted the typewriter’s click as my only speech (22)

The cultural commercialization of women as objects of desire and the excessive sexualization of women, both of which the public has consumed via magazines and other media, is exemplified by the statements mentioned earlier. The use of the word “two-dimensional” highlights how the poet-speaker’s complex female identity is reduced to a commodity for sale. In contrast, the poet-speaker subtly affirms her own experience in this stanza as she focuses on the typewriter and her own words. Women are seen as little more than sexualized beings, expected to quietly submit to men’s whims, according to Das’s life experiences and the society in which she resides. But Das feels like she’s reclaiming the gendered narrative when she writes poems about this event. The preceding lines of this verse, “Spent long years trying to locate my mind / Beneath the skin, beneath the flesh, and underneath / The bone” (22), suggest that a woman’s intelligence is more valuable than her sexuality, which is often diminished in order to appease patriarchal male desires.

The film “Forest Fire” passionately portrays the reclaiming of the story that was previously presented. The term forest fire supposedly represents the poet-speaker’s spirit, which is a slap in the face to fertility often linked with women’s sexuality and their role as caregivers. In epics like the Mahabharata, where Draupadi is supposedly created from fire, fire is both a destructive and all-consuming natural force and a metaphor for creation. The cultural myth-making and dissemination of the idea of concurrent creation, fertility, and

destruction is where this phenomenon's resonance occurs. Because of this, when Das writes, the tale of fruitful nurture is turned on its head.:

Of late, I have begun to feel hungry.

To take in with greed, like a forest fire that Consumes, and, with each killing, gains a wilder, Brighter charm, all that comes my way. (53)

This places the female in a world that is active and consumes, in contrast to the passive role that is conventionally associated with womanhood and is expected of women. Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*, in which the poet-speaker states that she has been forced to murder her father and that the spirit of destruction is apparent, is reminiscent of the feminist confessional tone that is present in this work. The progression of the lyric occurs without Das' typical use of the ellipsis in her poetry of melancholy and regret, such as "My Grandmother's House" and "A Hot Noon in Malabar." This gives the impression of an intertwining of form and content that conveys the idea of swallowing everything that stands in its way.

This section of "Forest Fire" undermines the power of the stereotype to denigrate women by suggesting that the poet-speaker is playing the role of the stereotype. In "An Introduction," the poet-speaker uses a slightly depressed tone to say, "Don't play at schizophrenia or be a / Nympho," alluding to the socio-cultural stereotype³ that links women with hysteria and witchcraft as a means of asserting their independence or agency.

Bald child in

Open pram, you think I only look, and you Too, slim lovers behind the tree and you,
old Man with paper in your hand and sunlight in Your hair . . . (53)

With the last lines, which reiterate the poem's central contrast between creation and destruction, the poem ends. A conscience that finds satisfaction in preservation is born from this paradox. Now we have it. Also, women's rebellious tendencies have been demonized and stigmatized via the practice of witchcraft. An act criminalizing witchcraft with the potential for the death sentence was passed by the English Parliament in 1542. According to scholars who have examined the three witches in *Macbeth*, the necessity of controlling women's sexuality is what defines them as "witches." This blurs the gender binary, which assigns

women the roles of nurturers or witches based on how well they conform to societal expectations of gender and gendered behaviour.:

In me shall sleep the baby.

That sat in prams, and, sleep and wake and smile its Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers, hand In hand, and in me, where else, the old shall sit.

And feel the touch of the sun. (53)

Conclusion

Scholarship on Kamala Das has frequently been of the opinion that Das' private life becomes the subject matter in her poetry, in accordance with the confessional mode. However, it is also distinctive in the sense that the private experience is elevated on an aesthetic level to amplify the long-standing, marginalized, and repressed narrative of ordinary Indian women as a community. This is a unique aspect of Das' poetry. According to the writings of a critic, Kamala Das is comparable to Sylvia Plath:

[In Plath] It is ultimately the poetry that matters, with all its direct and metaphorical implications. In Kamala, on the other hand, it is the confession that matters, and sometimes it seems that poetry is incidental. . .The overwhelming majority of her Indian readers respond largely to her personality. (Dabar qt. in Kumar Das)

The confession in her poems is often subversive of the gender norms and expectations placed on her, and the spirit is fiercely inquisitive. This has been brought up before. Throughout *Summer in Calcutta*, the poet-speaker is constantly confronted with Beauvoir's concepts of transcendence and immanence. In contrast, this anthology from the twentieth century keeps circling back to the binary genders, which makes us, the readers of the twenty-first, suspicious of how gender politics play out. Specifically, in "An Introduction," the poet-speaker expresses her dissatisfaction with the imposed gender-based standards for clothing and appearance and resorts to performative self-defeating behaviours: "Then... I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored / My womanliness" (62). The only way the downtrodden lady seems to understand how to protest against patriarchal norms is by

adapting culturally masculine attire using her brother's clothes. It would be best if you thought about this intriguing truth. Her resistance is clearly influenced by gendered conditioning, as she follows the gender binary that is set by societal and cultural norms for how one should present themselves.

Regardless, this would be a simplistic way of looking at Das's varied and broad work after *Summer in Calcutta*, which is about resisting gendered assumptions and advancing feminist politics. Poetry like "The Dance of the Eunuchs" advances the LGBTQIA+ cause as it challenges the dominant culture and treats the transgender body with dignity while also pointing the finger at society for marginalizing the community. Writing about the eunuchs' dance as an outward display of pleasure to earn their position in society and livelihood, Das inculcates a stunning unity of the disadvantaged while they struggle with interior feelings of estrangement and socio-cultural depression. Being a woman is another disadvantaged group that he draws parallels to. This goes against the grain of society's pervasive patriarchal training.

Thus, it is crucial to analyze *Summer in Calcutta* for what it teaches us about resistance that is communal, private, confessional, and poetic. Many of Das's poems, including "Farewell to Bombay," "My Grandmother's House," "A Hot Noon in Malabar," and the title poem "Summer in Calcutta," express a persistent longing and sadness for different places and times. Finding out why this trend is happening is a reasonable question to ask. She lost her freedom and agency to choose her path in life when she was married off at the tender age of fifteen. Perhaps this was a factor in her decision to go through with the marriage. So, speaking her native tongue is therapeutic in the sense of confessional poetry, but it's also a performance of empowerment as she reasserts her identity and challenges the patriarchal narrative that has kept her powerless.

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