

KAMLA DAS: AN INTRODUCTION

B. Madhavi

Research Scholar, Department of English, CCS University, Meerut

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Suraiyya aka **Madhavikutty** (31 March 1934 – 31 May 2009) was an Indian writer who wrote in English and Malayalam, her native language. Her autobiography and short stories are the primary contributors of her popularity in Kerala.

She was an iconoclast of her generation because she spoke and wrote candidly and frankly about the sexual wants of Indian women. At the age of 75, she passed away at a Pune hospital on May 31, 2009.

EARLY LIFE

Kamala Das was born in Punnayurkulam, Thrissur District, Kerala, to Nalappatt Balamani Amma, a well-known Malayali poetess, and V. M. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely read Malayalam daily Mathrubhumi.

She spent her early years moving back and forth between the Nalappatt family home in Punnayurkulam, south Malabar, and Calcutta, where her father worked as a senior officer for the Walford Transport Company that marketed Bentley and Rolls Royce automobiles.

Kamala Das was a talented writer, just like her mother. Because of the influence of her well-known great uncle Nalappatt Narayana Menon, a poet, she developed a love of poetry from a young age. However, she didn't start writing professionally until she was married and had kids.

CAREER

When Kamala decided she wanted to start writing, her husband encouraged her. She needed to increase the family's income. She would frequently write till dawn after her family had gone to bed at night: *"There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing"*. This rigorous schedule took its toll upon her health.

She was renowned for both her numerous Malayalam short stories and her numerous English poetries. Additionally, Das wrote syndicated columns. Though she famously asserted that *"poetry*

does not sell in our country [India]," readers flocked to her outspoken essays, which spoke candidly about everything from politics to women's issues and childcare.

PERSONAL LIFE

M D Nalapat, her oldest son, is wed to a princess of the Travancore Royal House. He is a geopolitics professor at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education and holds the UNESCO Peace Chair. He formerly served as the Times of India's resident editor.

At the age of 75, she passed away at a Pune hospital on May 31, 2009. Her body was flown to Kerala, where she was born. Numerous people lined the path of the funeral procession from Kochi to Trivandrum and showered the hearse with flowers. In an extraordinary display of unity, all religions gathered for Kamala's funeral at the Palayam Mosque in the heart of Thiruvananthapuram. On the premises of the mosque, she was interred in a forest. Her youngest son planted two trees, one on each side of the tomb.

AWARDS AND OTHER RECOGNITIONS

Kamala Das has received many awards for her literary contribution. Some of them are

- Asian Poetry Prize
- Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries
- Asian World Prize
- Ezhuthachan Award
- Sahitya Academy Award
- Vayalar Award
- Kerala Sahitya Academy Award
- Muttathu Varkey Award

BIOGRAPHY

Kamala Das, regarded as one of India's greatest poets, was born on March 31, 1934, in Malabar, Kerala (Dwivedi 297). Her great uncle Nalapat Narayan Menon, a well-known author, had an early impact on her love of poetry. When Das saw him "work from daylight to night," he thought he was living a "blissful life" (Warrior interview). The poetry of Das's mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma, as well as the holy texts preserved by the Nayars' matriarchal community had a significant impact on her as well (IndiaWorld). She received private instruction until the age of 15, the year she wed K. Madhava Das (IndiaWorld). She claims that she "was mature enough to be a mother only when my third child was born," as she was just 16 when her first son was born (Warrior interview). For both Das and her sons, her husband frequently took on the role of a father. Kamala's husband frequently urged her to get out with individuals her own age because of their significant age gap. He was always "extremely understanding," according to Das (Warrior interview).

Das's husband encouraged her to start writing when she wanted to increase the family's income. Das, however, was unable to follow her great uncle's morning to night regimen because she was a woman. There was simply the kitchen table where she would cut vegetables, and when all the dishes and other items were cleaned away, she would sit down and start typing at dusk after her family had gone to bed (Warrior interview). Das' health suffered as a result of this demanding schedule, yet she has a positive attitude about it. She was able to spend more time at home and write as a result.

As her career progressed, her greatest supporter was always her husband. Even when controversy swirled around Das' sexually charged poetry and her unabashed autobiography, *My Story*, Das' husband was "very proud" of her (Warrior interview). She was incredibly happy and comforted by his presence, despite the fact that he was sick for three years before he passed away. There "shall not be another individual more proud of me and my achievements," she declared (Warrior interview).

And Das' achievements extend well beyond her verses of poetry. Das says, "I wanted to fill my life with as many experiences as I can manage to garner because I do not believe that one can get born again" (Warrior interview). In keeping with her promise, Das has dabbled in politics, writing, and even art (Raveendran 53). Das was not successful in getting elected to the House of Representatives in 1984, but she has recently had much more success as a syndicated writer (Raveendran 53). Since poetry "does not sell in this nation [India]," she has abandoned poetry, but happily, her blunt pieces do (Warrior interview). In her essays, Das discusses everything from politics to women's issues and childcare.

In December 1999 Kamala Das converted to Islam, creating a furore in the press. Less than a year later, Kamala Surayya announced on plans to register her political party 'Lok Seva'.

WOMANHOOD IN DAS' POETRY

Das explores womanhood and love with an unusual level of candour. The narrator in Summer in Calcutta's poetry "An Introduction" declares, "I am every/ Woman who seeks love" (de Souza 10). Despite Amar Dwivedi's criticism that Das' universality is "self-imposed and not natural," this sense of oneness penetrates all of her poems (303). According to Das, being a woman comprises a number of shared experiences. Due to social mores, Indian women do not talk about these experiences, though. Das persistently challenges their quiet. Longing and loss emotions are not just a matter of personal suffering. They are welcomed into society and given respect. They appear to be common, as women have experienced them throughout history, according to Das. The Descendants collection poem "The Maggots," by Das, demonstrates how old women's pains are. She uses traditional Hindu mythology to express the agony of a lost love (de Souza 13). On their final night together, Krishna inquires with Radha about her reaction to his kisses. No, not at all, but I wondered what would happen to the corpse if the maggots nipped. (Souza, 6-7) Das gives

voice to Radha's silence as a result of her excruciating anguish. Furthermore, it validates the feelings of common women by letting a strong goddess fall victim to such notions.

EROTICISM IN DAS' POETRY

Coupled with her exploration of women's needs is an attention to eroticism. In "The Looking Glass" from *The Descendants*, the desire to lose oneself in intense love is highlighted. In the poem, the narrator exhorts women to show their lover "what makes you women" (de Souza 15). The very things that women are supposed to provide are the ones that society believes are unclean or prohibited. The warm shock of menstrual blood and the "musk of sweat between breasts" shouldn't be kept a secret from a loved one (15). This kind of absolute honesty, in the narrator's opinion, should be the standard for what love is. Women should "Stand naked before the mirror with him" and let their partners see them as they truly are (15). The woman should also value even her lover's "fond details," such as "the jerky way he/ Urinates" (15). The narrator doesn't seem to advise controlling one's passions in order to protect oneself, even though the woman could have to live "Without him" at some point (15). Only complete immersion in love can do justice to this emotion; a constrained love seems to be no love at all. Das, like the artists of ancient Tantric art, does not attempt to conceal the sensuality of the human form; rather, her work appears to celebrate its potential for delight while also recognising its associated risks.

FEMINISM

I always craved affection, and if you don't have it at home, you start to stray a little, as Das once said (Warrior interview). Although some people would refer to Das as a "feminist" due to the openness with which she addresses the concerns and aspirations of women, Das "has never tried to align herself with any particular version of feminist movement" (Raveendran 52). Like her poems, Das' opinions can be described as "a gut reaction," ones that are unrestrained by other people's ideas of right and wrong (52). Das has nonetheless "carved out the ground for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms," according to poet Eunice de Souza (8). Das has explored socially taboo territory and given her coworkers a point of reference. She is no longer a poet; instead, she has adopted the role of a very sincere woman.

HER WORKS

Under the pen name "Madhavikutty," Das has published numerous books and short tales in English and Malayalam, an Indian language (de Souza 7). She also wrote five books of poetry, including *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). Some of her works in English include the novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), as well as her autobiography, *My Story* (1976). She has written other Malayalam books more recently, such as *Palayan* (1990), *Neypayasam* (1991), and *Dayarikkurippukal* (1992). She is currently the author of a syndicated column in India.

LOVE AND LONGING IN KERALA

She once said, "Only the soul knows how to sing..." A quarter century later after her much-read autobiography, *My Story*, hit the Indian literary terrain, she is all set to tell another soulful tale in her new persona as the intriguing Kamala Suraiyya. Merrily Weisbord is now writing her biography, *Malabar to Montreal*. There has been a lot of water under the bridge between the novels. Not only has time passed, but her soul has also changed from being a young, frank, and irate poetess to a philosopher and lover of life and love.

Kamala, who was born in 1934 in Palghat, Kerala, skipped the traditional elementary school to pursue higher education. She has served as the editor of the poetry section of *Poet* magazine and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. She received recognition in the shape of the Vayalar Award for Literature and the Kent Award for Asian English Writing. In 1984, she was a candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature.

Kamala Suraiyya recently received the Ezhuthachan Award from the Keralan government in recognition of her excellent contributions to literature and language. And it has sparked debate once more. Despite the fact that she has not yet received the award, she is already making headlines since certain conservatives are criticising the government's choice and saying that "woman who writes on love and lust" is unworthy of such a distinguished honour!

"Lust is the fragrance of love, if love is a flower. Where would lust be without love, and how could life exist without lust?" Jayadeva's *Gita Govindam* is quoted by Kamala Suraiyya. "When I think of love, I picture Radha and Krishna. Life is all about the many facets of love."

The award event has also been threatened with being "hijacked" by fanatics. Unconcerned Das says, "I'll probably ask the government to present the award my home, where no one can prevent me from accepting it."

She received a lot of opposition and criticism following her 1999 conversion to Islam. Malayalathinde Madhavikutty, a newly completed 45-minute documentary, is still in the cans due to threats from fundamentalists that the production and theatre owners will face serious repercussions. Das is being as unflappable as usual. She claims, "I used to be a Hindu, and nobody came home. Islam gave me love and friends. I receive love from a number of underprivileged ladies and children who come to me."

Qatar will soon receive a prayer book that is being prepared in Arabic. This is the first Arabic prayer book authored by a woman, she claims. A Malayalam poetry addressed to Allah has just been published in a second edition.

Next: A movie about her is currently being produced by a Canadian studio. The writer and poetess Kamala Suraiyya and her encounters with Islam are the subject of the film. She believes it will take another six months for the movie to be finished while keeping the names of the producer and director, the film's title, and its major plot a secret. She continues, "I couldn't come to Canada owing to some health issues, so it's a little delayed."

Additionally, she has a lot more on her plate because the Raksha School for kids with numerous disabilities is one of her favourite charities and her charitable organisation, Lok Seva Trust, is often busy.

Her Story keeps us spellbound even while encomiums and brickbats continue to dot the landscape of her existence.

KAMALA SURAIYYA

One of India's most well-known and much discussed writers was Kamala Suraiyya, who passed away on May 31 at the age of 75.

She excelled at fusing disparate worlds together and took great pleasure in doing so. She gave English readers a glimpse into Indian village life and gave country folk a taste of life in the big metropolis. She informed her male readers about the lives of women as well as the wealthy and powerful. Her sexiness was unrelenting and divisive in a traditional society.

However, other writers' works also made an effort to harmonise ideas that appeared to be in conflict. Her conversion from Hinduism to Islam in 1999, at the age of 65, seemed to bridge one of the most significant divides that runs through India over the past ten years.

She was born Kamala Nair in Punnayurkulam, Kerala, in one of the most illustrious literary families on March 31, 1934, 13 years before India gained its independence. People of note from the worlds of literature, politics, and aristocracy frequented her steadfastly Hindu childhood household. Her father, VM Nair, was the managing editor of the significant Kerala newspaper *Mathrubhumi*, and her mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma, was a poet who received India's highest literary honour.

The majority of Kamala's youth was spent in Calcutta, where her father had a job. She began writing poems at the age of six, "about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless forever," and received her education at home. She was married to K. Madhava Das, executive director of the Reserve Bank of India, when she was 15 years old. After revealing that she wasn't "mature enough to be a mother until my third child was born," she gave birth to the first of their three sons a year later.

Kamala Das could only pursue her creative ambitions after the supper muck had been swept away because caring for the kids and running the home allowed little time for a writing career. There was simply the kitchen table, she later recalled, "where I would cut vegetables. Once all the plates and other items were cleaned away, I would sit there and start typing."

Under the pen name Madhavikutty, she started to write moving short stories in Malayalam, her native language. Additionally, she wrote extremely private poems (in English) under the pen name K Das.

"The saying said, "Dress in sarees, be girl/be wife." Cook, embroider, and argue with the servants. Fit in. Oh, /Belong," the categorisers shouted. Keep your distance from our lace-draped windows and walls. Be Kamala or be Amy. Or even better, be Madhavikutty, "she wrote in 'An Introduction' from Summer in Calcutta, her debut book of poems (1965).

It signalled the start of a brand-new age in Indian writing, one in which one could write in English while remaining Indian. It also included thoughts on love, sex, and even extramarital affairs that broke the mould.

More books, anthologies and awards followed, and she became poetry editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. She became best known in the English-speaking world for *My Story* (1976), a book variously described as an autobiography or a novel, which deals with a lot of women in a sexist society. It was published simultaneously with *The Alphabet of Lust*, not so well-received, in which a woman poet, Manasi Mitra, is trapped in a lifeless marriage to a much older man.

Her books were adapted into successful, long-running television programmes, and a syndicated daily column in India gave her direct access to fans. She was open in her writing about everything, from the trivial domestic disputes to God's boundless love.

Her unflinching observations inevitably caused offence to some in conservative Indian society, and her work, as in *The Looking Glass*, was often frankly erotic. And while she rejected the label "feminist", Kamala Das took an active role in addressing the social issues she commented upon. She was involved in organisations providing free legal services to widows, and education for women who could not afford it. That social engagement led to an unsuccessful campaign for the Indian parliament in 1984, the same year in which she was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

After her spouse passed away in 1999, Kamala Das converted to Islam and adopted the name Kamala Suraiyya. Even when her health started to deteriorate, she kept writing and gave readings and seminars all over the world. She won numerous honours, such as the Asian Poetry Prize. She relocated from Kerala to Pune in northwest India in 2007, where she passed away.

Perhaps her best example of bridging cultural differences was during her burial. Numerous thousands of mourners participated in the march, and more affluent followers threw roses. Wildflowers were thrown by villager.

The actual burial took place at the Palayam mosque in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital of Kerala. The Islamic community at the mosque, while being one of the most orthodox in the state, permitted women—including non-Muslims—to assist in the preparation of the body for burial and to be present at the grave. Leaders of the Hindu and Christian faiths, as well as one of the oldest Jewish families in the city, participated in the prayers at the mosque. Her three sons continue to live.

REFERENCES

1. 1964: *The Sirens* (Asian Poetry Prize winner)
2. 1965: *Summer in Calcutta* (poetry; Kent's Award winner)
3. 1967: *The Descendants* (poetry)
4. 1973: *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (poetry)
5. 1976: *My Story* (autobiography)
6. "PM mourns Kamala Das's death, praises her sensitive poems" (in English). *The Hindu*. 31 May 2009. <http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/holnus/002200905312123.htm>. Retrieved 04-06-2009.
7. Love and longing
8. Kohli, Suresh (August 13, 2006). "Still a rebel writer". <http://www.hindu.com/mag/2006/08/13/stories/2006081300080500.htm>. Retrieved June 23, 2009. "'I fell in love with a Muslim after my husband's death. He was kind and generous in the beginning. But I now feel one shouldn't change one's religion. It is not worth it.'"
9. Zee News article ("Noted writer Kamala Das Suraiya passes away")
10. "Kerala pays tributes to Kamala Surayya" (in English). *The Hindu*. 1 June 2009. <http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/holnus/004200906011831.htm>. Retrieved 04-06-2009.
11. "Tributes showered on Kamala Suraiya" (in English). *The Hindu*. 2 June 2009. <http://www.thehindu.com/2009/06/02/stories/2009060253900400.htm>. Retrieved 04-06-2009.
12. Literary Awards - official website of Information and Public Relation Department
13. The Ignited Soul by Shreekumar Varma
14. Varsha Bhosle on Kamala Das' conversion to Islam
15. "From Kamala Das to Dashi: Doing the right thing for wrong reasons?" by Dr Mohammad Omar Farooq
16. Translation of *Neypayasam*
17. Eroticism and feminism in Das' writings
18. The histrionics of Kamala Das
19. Funeral
20. Kamala Suraiyya - Daily Telegraph obituary
21. Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamala_Surayya"