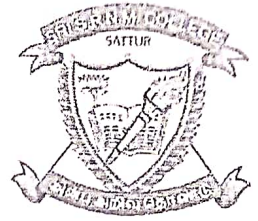


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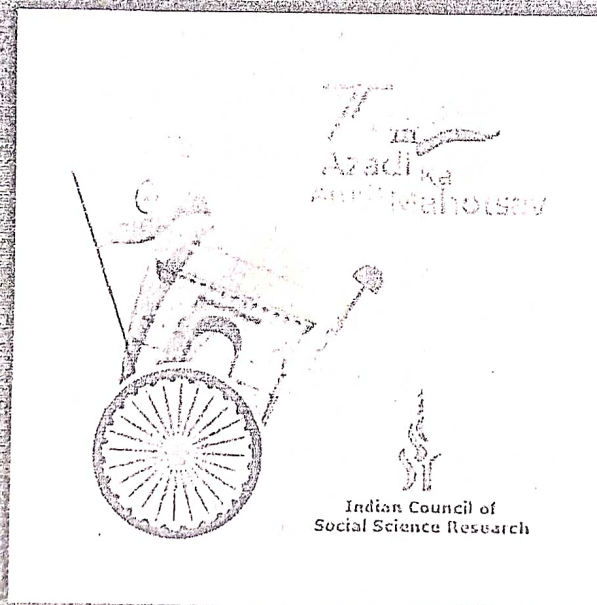


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# Narratives of National Consciousness in Indian Writing in English in Pre and Post Era of Independence

Conference Papers Published by  
**SMART MOVES JOURNAL, TAMILNADU**

(International Journal of English Language, Literature & Linguistics)  
Peer Reviewed, Indexed and Open Access Journal



ISSN: 2582-4406

Organised by

The Research Department of English

Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College

(A Co-educational Autonomous and Linguistic Minority Institution, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University)  
(Recognized with 'A' Grade by NAAC)

Sattur, Virudhunagar (Dist.), Tamil Nadu 626203



# Kamala Das Reflects the Niche for Feminine Desires in Post Independence Indian Writing in English

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## Abstract

Kamala Das can be called a modern-day Draupadi who is trying to find her place in a patriarchal society. For her explanation, she elucidates herself as a woman writer who finds herself at fault in the plots and settings of the community. Male writers were perfectionists at finding flaws in women's writings. Still, she could not stop adoring the women's writing and quotes Eliot's words: "degree of critical enthusiasm has no logical relation to the quality of the work. When women show talent, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point."

Keywords: Rewriting, Women, Contemporary, Feminist, Identity

Writers have acknowledged Kamala Das as the first Indo-English woman poet who writes convincingly about her femaleness. Das is one of the well-known contemporary Indian

women writers who has written autobiographical novels, essays on culture and society, numerous short stories in Malayalam, and a few well-received anthologies of poetry in English. Her works have been translated into thirty Indian and foreign languages. Many of her short stories have been made into films, and some movies have also been made about her life.

Das has been considered a rebel with a cause trying to voice the voiceless. Her contemporary generation has admired her since her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta*, was published in 1965. Her provocative poems are well known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, highlighting the women's roles in traditional Indian society. Her unusual imagery and distinctly female Indian persona have often been lauded. Das's strength lies in the spontaneity with which she records 'her most private responses, an uninhibitedness which even now is more or less unique in the Indian context. She has endured much in her life and wrote about in her poetry regarding issues such as childmarriage, maritalrape, and teen motherhood which is hardly uncommon in India. She contributes to modern IndianEnglish poetry by making public intimate agonies and insights concerning women's psychic experiences, much of which has lain hidden for centuries in the female private sector.

Das's first volume of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), was published by Everest Press in New Delhi and contained fifty poems, varied in range but with a dominant tone of old exuberance. In 1967 Das's second volume of verse, *The Descendants* was published by the Writers' Workshop. It carried similar themes of love, sexual desire, and exploring a woman's role, as expressed in her first volume. However, it had less of an uninhibited abandon and abundant enthusiasm for life than the first volume. Perhaps her growing responsibilities as a mother during her composition of *The Descendants* had a somewhat sobering effect, as many poems contain the shadow of suicide, disease, and old age.

Orient, Longman published her third collection, *The Old Playhouse, and Other Poems*, in 1973. Critics say that it is the book of an older woman. Even *The Descendants* had a certain youthfulness about it because disenchantment, cynicism, and despair had been new emotions. This sense of novelty is absent from the third volume, where a definite feeling of having lived life in all its variety manifests itself.

Her autobiography contains numerous accounts of ill health throughout her life, likely to have influenced the increasing number of references to illness, fatigue, and death in her poetry. *The Anamudi Poems* (1985), Das's fourth volume, was written during her vacation at the Anamudi Hills in Tamil Nadu after her defeat in the 1984 parliamentary elections.

Das's poetry has been widely anthologized in India, Australia, and the West, and she received many awards and honors, including the Kerala Sahitya Academy award for her writing in Malayalam (1969), the Chimanlal award for fearless journalism (1971) and the ASEAN World Prize (1985). In 1984, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature ('Kamala Surayya,' 2010:1). She is also the only Indian English poet ever to publish a full-length autobiography, *My Story*, which was first serialized in *Current*, a Mumbai-based weekly, and then issued in book form by Sterling Publishers in 1976.

Although Das and her husband were romantically incompatible (Das's autobiography controversially describes his homosexual liaisons, emotional abuse, neglect, and supposed indifference towards her extramarital affairs), Madhava always supported her writing, as mentioned by her in her works. Drawing on religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, her results speak of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love both in and outside of marriage, her frustration with the imposition of social conventions on her, and her life in rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home.

Das is the only Indian writer so far in English 'to tread the challenging untrodden area of exploring and sharing one's experience as a body by 'discarding the superficiality of others who try to grapple with the acute problems of their existence while avoiding any talk about their bodies.' I agree that Das never shies away from confronting her body with unparalleled sincerity and openness. It takes power to make one's will become a reality. This blunt, confessional honesty is a foundation for her emotional, psychological, sociological, and spiritual development. Even a quick skim through Das's moreerotic poems, or autobiography reveals her bold and unconstrained creativity in this area. What further adds to the uniqueness of her poetry is the high degree of intensity and the almost compulsive candor present in her poetic voice, as well as whatNabar (1994:19) describes as a disregard for "nice" feminine concealments and aggressively independent assessment of the man-woman relationship.

Despite her rebellion against the norms of traditional Indian morality concerning her love life, she was always aware of her deviation from the expectations that her gender, society, and role as a wife imposed upon her. Often she returns to her culturally defined self only to be reminded of her inability or unwillingness to live following the cultural prescription: as observed, 'from such a vacillation between the traditionally defined role model and her yearning to carve out an undefined, independent role for herself springs an apparent inconsistency in her narrative, for which she has often been blamed.' At times her writing can seem frustratingly equivocal, but I think this inconsistency reveals the conflict within her. It also accounts for the fact that although she challenges certain popularly held cultural beliefs (such as those about arranged marriages and a woman's role), her writing may still be interpreted as retaining a certain conservatism – what Hanvecalls 'an Indianness of sensibility.'

Despite her frequent criticism of restrictive socio-cultural traditions and norms in her work, which often gives her writing the impression of being relatively liberal, her poems reveal



that her mindset is entrenched in similarly discriminatory thinking. Due to patriarchal assumptions about the superiority of the male experience, the work of Indian women writers has traditionally been undervalued. It contributed to this prejudice because most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space and the women's biased perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, their work is believed to automatically rank them below the positions of males who deal with "weightier" themes.

Indian women writers in English are subject to a second prejudice, this time from regional counterparts who feel that the English writers are removed from the harsh realities of Indian life. This is because proficiency in English is available only to those in the education and thus more affluent classes. So a frequent judgment is made that the writers and their works belong to a high (and therefore more isolated or 'Westernised') social stratum. The imposition of the English language in the system of Indian education and literature by British imperialists and Indian writers in English is sometimes frowned upon because many critics view their use of English as a postcolonial mimic activity. Das herself dismissed the politics of language

From this metaphysical desire, she initiates a new quest for identity. I believe Kamala Das used poetry to bring herself a step closer to attaining her desires for emotional fulfillment and quelling within her the conflict between warring aspects of her identities. Thus the poet remains ever the seeker, sometimes exhilarated, more often tearful, but always insatiable.