

Kamala Das as a Symbol of Free Will: A Critical Study on 'Summer in Calcutta'

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Abstract: Kamala Das, an iconic literary figure in Indian English Literature, always inspires the readers and scholars to understand her time to time from different perspectives. By the course of time she has been mostly tagged as a feminist writer for her uncompromising approach to the issues of women mainly of their loss of freedom and human dignity in the male dominated society. On the other hand, Kamala Das has been considered merely as a female writer exposing the female sensibility. In spite of these views, it appears very clearly that Kamala Das as a human being and a writer is a relentless fighter against any type of injustice to woman in the society; she leads her life as she believes and thinks. Her thought process is deeply intertwined with her writings; she does not bother for any social barrier in action and writing. Her literary works again and again prove that she is a writer of free will, not motivated by any outside force. Kamala Das determines to unfurl woman as a human being of flesh and blood, not formulated by society or doctrines.

Keywords: Feminist, Sensibility, Identity, Barrier, Free Will, Desire, Conventional, Confessional, Experiences, Sexual

1. Introduction

Kamala Das (1934–2009), also known by her pen name Madhavikutty, was one of India's most prominent and influential English-language and Malayalam writers. Celebrated for her bold, honest, and deeply personal style, she wrote poetry, short stories, memoirs, and essays that explored themes such as love, identity, womanhood, desire, and emotional conflict. Her autobiographical writing—especially *My Story*—challenged traditional social norms and brought unprecedented openness to Indian literature. In poetry, her collections like *Summer in Calcutta* and *The Descendants* marked a shift towards modernism, characterized by conversational tone, raw emotion, and confessional narrative. Kamala Das too is widely regarded as a pioneering feminist voice who used her writing to express the inner life and struggles of women with rare candor. Kamala Das is often remembered as a free soul because she lived and wrote with remarkable honesty, fearlessness, and emotional independence. At a time when women were expected to remain silent, obedient, and confined within social boundaries, she openly expressed her desires, frustrations, vulnerabilities, and inner conflicts. This courage made her a symbol of personal and creative freedom.

As a writer, she broke away from conventional literary styles and embraced confessional poetry, speaking boldly about love, female sexuality, loneliness, and identity. Her works like *Summer in Calcutta* and her autobiography *My Story* reflected a woman who refused to hide behind masks. She insisted on living according to her own terms, challenging patriarchal norms, and claiming the right to her own voice, body, and choices. Her urge for freedom was not just social but also spiritual and artistic. Throughout her life, she explored different identities—including her late-life conversion to Islam—demonstrating her belief that selfhood is fluid and personal. Kamala Das's life and literature thus reflect a person who sought truth, autonomy, and self-expression, making her a true free spirit in Indian literature.

2. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to disclose what type of poet kamala Das is as exposed in her first published book 'Summer in Calcutta'. Very often kamala Das is regarded as a feminist writer and also sometimes she is considered as a poet of feminine sensibility. But it is also assumed that Kamala Das is a poet representing the spirit of free will crossing all types of barriers. The study will try to unearth the real identity of Kamala Das as a poet and as a human being. The study will only deal with few remarkable poems of the book 'Summer in Calcutta' published in 1965.

3. Literature Review

In a research paper by Preeti (Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education), "Fair's Fair: A Feministic Analysis of Kamala Das in 'Summer in Calcutta'", the author argues that Das uses sensual imagery (lust, desire) to reveal how a woman's identity is constrained by societal expectations. Younus Ahmad Lone (in *Quest Journals: Journal of Research in Humanities & Social Science*) in "Feministic Reading of Kamala Das' Summer in Calcutta and The Descendants" focuses on how Das channels her personal experiences ("as wife, lover, mother, daughter") to articulate broader feminist concerns of self-assertion, patriarchal oppression, and sexual desire. Anushree Joshi, in her essay "Reading Kamala Das' Summer in Calcutta in the 21st Century", contends that the poetic persona in the poem challenges gender roles rooted in Indian social norms—particularly the confinement of women to domestic/private spheres. She connects Das's confessional mode of writing to that of Western poets like Sylvia Plath, emphasizing how the "I" in her poem voices both personal and communal (women's) identity. Vijay S. Ganvir, in *IJRASET (International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology)*, describes Das's poetry as deeply autobiographical, highlighting how her personal experiences, particularly her emotional and sexual desires, constitute a central strand of her work.

4. Discussion

Kamala Das remains one of the most compelling confessional poets in Indian English literature, and her work is marked by a rare honesty that exposes the emotional landscape of a woman struggling between desire, loneliness, and the search for identity. In her poems, she does not theorize feminism; rather, she articulates the lived realities of love, sexuality, and pain. The poems "*The Freaks*," "*In Love*," "*My Grandmother's House*," "*A Relationship*," "*Love*," "*Summer in Calcutta*," "*The Sunshine Cat*," and "*An Introduction*" represent the breadth of her poetic world, where the personal becomes the central lens through which larger themes of womanhood and emotional deprivation are explored.

In "*The Freaks*," Kamala Das presents the stark reality of a loveless marriage. The poem exposes the emotional vacuum in her marital life, where physical intimacy is reduced to an uncomfortable ritual. The speaker's sense of alienation is reflected in the disturbing imagery—her husband's "sun-stained cheek," his cold touch, and the "hideous snakes" that stand for their awkward, painful physical exchanges. She calls herself a "freak," not because she is abnormal, but because she cannot respond naturally to a relationship that offers no affection. The confessional tone reveals her desperation for genuine emotional connection, something she seeks outside marriage but without any sense of triumph. Instead of presenting this as rebellion, Kamala Das simply lays bare the truth of her emotional condition. Here she represents every woman in Indian society. In "*The Freaks*," Das describes the physical act of marriage as mechanical and humiliating. The poet remarks,

"But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of Desire...."

Instead of advocating feminist rebellion, she is more interested to seek emotional connection elsewhere. This raw confession is not theoretical feminism—it is emotional simply tells the truth about her personal pain: She feels trapped in a relationship with a man incapable of giving love.

This sense of conflict between bodily desire and emotional emptiness continues in "*In Love*." Here, love is described as intense, overwhelming, and animalistic. The lover is likened to a lion, suggesting dominance and raw passion. The woman experiences both attraction and fear, revealing the contradictory nature of desire. The poem captures the way the body responds even when the heart does not find fulfillment. For Kamala Das, love is rarely pure joy; it is almost always laced with pain, dependence, and emotional turmoil. The power of the poem lies in its intimate portrayal of a woman torn between yearning and disillusionment. "*In Love*" shows Das's conflict between physical desire and emotional dissatisfaction. She portrays the male lover as "a lion," symbolizing dominance and predatory passion. Her focus is not on feminist critique but on inner turmoil—the craving for affection alongside guilt, shame, and need. Her openness about female desire is radical, but again, it is not ideological. In fact she intends to expose her inner feelings

and thinkings as she feels without maintaining any social code of conduct.

The complexity of adult relationships is further explored in "*A Relationship*," where she writes about an extramarital bond that is both comforting and unsettling. There is no moral judgment in the poem, only a sheer openness in describing the emotional confusion that results when a woman seeks tenderness beyond marriage. The relationship offers some respite from loneliness, yet it brings no lasting happiness. Das's portrayal emphasizes her inner fragmentation, her desire for love clashing with the guilt and uncertainty of such attachments. Her confession is sincere, unembellished, and deeply human. In this poem, Das exposes the complexity of extramarital relationships and female longing. She writes openly about desire outside the boundaries of marriage, not to challenge patriarchy, but to record her experiences without shame. Her courage to speak about forbidden emotions is what makes her "outspoken", not feminist.

The theme of emotional hunger reaches an even more intense expression in the poem "*Love*." Here, love is depicted as a consuming force that overwhelms the self. The speaker surrenders completely, losing her identity in the process, only to discover that love often fails to provide stability or fulfillment. The emotional vulnerability of the woman becomes painfully visible as she realizes that love can leave her empty, dependent, and wounded. Kamala Das shows love not as an ideal but as an experience filled with desperation and fragility. The poem resonates with her characteristic blend of passion and disillusionment. The poem "*Love*" presents love as a force that consumes and disappoints. Das writes of surrender, yearning, and betrayal. This is not feminist rhetoric against patriarchal love, but a personal confession about the pain caused by romantic relationships.

Yet, in "*Summer in Calcutta*," Kamala Das shifts the emotional register by celebrating sensuality and bodily pleasure. The warmth of the Calcutta summer becomes a metaphor for ripe desire and unapologetic physicality. The poem rejects the guilt and restraint traditionally imposed on female sexuality, embracing instead the joy of sensual experience. The heat, the summer fruits, and the vivid imagery evoke a sense of liberation, suggesting a moment in which the body and the self are harmoniously aligned. Unlike many of her other poems, this one revels in physical pleasure without shame or sorrow, representing a rare affirmation of the body.

This poem is a striking example of her uninhibited voice. The hot Calcutta summer becomes a metaphor for: intense desire, bodily pleasure, acceptance of female passion. Writing about sensuality from a woman's perspective is intensely bold, but Das does not theorize it as feminist liberation—she simply writes her truth.

Such affirmation, however, is short-lived in her poetic universe, and "*The Sunshine Cat*" returns to the emotional bleakness of failed relationships. In this poem, the woman is compared to a sunshine cat—once bright, vibrant, and affectionate, but gradually stripped of her warmth by

neglect. The husband imprisons her emotionally, treating her as a decorative object rather than a partner. Her attempt to find love outside marriage also ends in abandonment, leaving her emotionally exhausted and broken. The poem portrays the suffocating world of a woman whose need for love is repeatedly denied. Her transformation—from sunshine to a fragile, wounded creature—captures the devastating effects of emotional neglect. The poem depicts a wife who is “a sunshine cat”—attractive, warm, loyal—but used and abandoned by men. The poem exposes: male cruelty, marital neglect, female desperation. Yet Das’s aim is not to propose feminist solutions. She merely reveals the emotional decay inside such relationships, speaking with painful clarity.

The poem “*An Introduction*” stands apart as Kamala Das’s most overtly autobiographical and assertive work. Here, she articulates her identity as a woman, a poet, and an individual searching for selfhood in a patriarchal society. She declares her right to write in English, a language she claims as her own despite criticism. She recounts her early marriage, speaking candidly about menstruation, physical intimacy, and the confusion of womanhood imposed prematurely upon her. The poem is a culmination of her confessional style, where she embraces her contradictions—calling herself both sinner and saint, beloved and betrayed. Her tone is bold yet vulnerable, asserting her right to express her desires, fears, and failures. This is her most famous autobiographical poem. Das boldly declares:

“I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar.”

Kamala Das speaks of political awareness. She asserts her right to write in English. She describes her puberty and marriage candidly. Her straightforward narration of personal experience—menstruation, female sexuality, and marital pain—shocked traditional society. But Kamala Das clarifies in the poem itself that she is not aligned with any organized feminist worldview. She is simply asserting her identity as an individual. Kamala Das moves beyond personal pain to articulate a broader sense of female identity and freedom.

Across these poems, Kamala Das constructs a poetic world that is intensely personal yet universally resonant. Her exploration of love, desire, nostalgia, and identity reveals the emotional struggles of a woman who is both fragile and defiant. Whether she describes the sterility of marriage, the intoxication of desire, the memory of lost affection, or the complexities of selfhood, her voice remains unmistakably honest and courageous. Her poetry does not merely describe experiences—it embodies them, offering readers a vivid and intimate journey into the depths of the female psyche. This continuity of emotional intensity and confessional candor is what makes Kamala Das one of the most powerful voices in modern India literature.

5. Conclusion

Kamala Das occupies a unique place in Indian English poetry. She is often *labelled* as a feminist because her poems foreground female desire, suffering, loneliness, and rebellion. Yet Kamala Das herself repeatedly insisted that she never wrote with any ideological or feminist agenda. Her

writing is driven not by theory, but by *truth-telling*—an unfiltered expression of her private emotional world. Thus, it is fair to argue that she is not a feminist in the doctrinal sense but an outspoken, honest writer who articulates the lived experiences of women. Her poems expose the emotional confinement, the emptiness of loveless marriages, the yearning for identity, and the craving for affection. Through the poems listed—“The Freaks,” “In Love,” “My Grandmother’s House,” “A Relationship,” “Love,” “Summer in Calcutta,” “The Sunshine Cat,” and “An Introduction”—one can see how her outspoken voice, not feminism, defines her poetic identity. Thus, Across these poems, Kamala Das emerges not as a doctrinal feminist but as an outspoken, intensely personal, confessional writer. She does not write to represent a movement or challenge patriarchy systematically. Instead, she writes to express her loneliness, to confess her desires, to confront her emotional wounds, to reveal the truth about her relationships, to assert her personal identity.

Her fearless honesty about the female body, desire, and marital suffering made critics call her feminist—but, in truth, she is a poet of naked self-revelation, not ideology. The power of her poetry lies in her courage to say what others were afraid to say, making her one of the most outspoken voices in Indian English literature. Kamala Das is a lady who does not bother to follow any conventional rule of family; she vehemently opposes all accepted rules of life and dares to break all barriers in order to follow her inner self. She artistically presents woman as a human being of flesh and blood without hiding anything in the name of morality or ethical and social codes. As a writer she expresses her unrefined feeling, and thoughts in her own artistic style. It illustrates Kamala Das unique as a human being and as a writer.

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