



03

**KAMALA DAS' CONFSSIONAL VERSES AS THE DREAMSCAPES OF REALITIES CONCERNING SELECTED POEMS OF *SUMMER IN CALCUTTA***

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**Abstract:**

*The 1960s in Indian literature continued to be dynamic and transformative in various aspects of culture, art and politics. The shift from the conventional styles of writing marked it. Various literary figures marked their presence with their unique ideas. Among them, Kamala Das contributed as a significant Indian poet in English, reflecting the political, cultural and literary changes in the 1960s both within and outside India. She is widely known for her confessional and bold poetry showcasing her psychological turmoil, primarily about love, female sexuality and loneliness, in a realistic fashion while breaking the traditional silence instead of mirroring it. Her vivid choice of flamboyant imagery in her poetry portrays the feminine core and women's desire and unending search for individuality. This reinvention in her works deliberately blurred the gap between life and poetry and extended her innermost emotions and ideas aroused by actual and imagined events. This paper examines the imagistic novelty of Kamala Das' poems and the dreamlike imageries that overlap with the surrealistic descriptions and unveils the inner workings of the unconscious that her poetry apprehends.*

**Keywords:** *Kamala Das, Imagery, Female Consciousness, Confessional Poetry, Dreamscapes, etc.*

Modernism in India in the 1960s was a transformative phase in culture, politics and literature. It was a time of significant conventional changes in all the fields of art, be it cinema, the emerging new ideologies in Indian politics or the fearless articulation of ideas in Indian literature-pioneers like Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Shiv. K. Kumar, K. N. Daruwalla, Adil Jussawala, Kamala Das, Eunice D'Souza, Gauri Deshpande and P. Lal created a raw model and a new foundation for change and innovation. The poets of this age were highly intellectual and displayed their creative prowess through their beautiful verse. Following India's independence, Indian English poetry emerged as a realm of experimentation. A novel form of subjective poetry emerged, characterised by personal experiences and candour. Within this movement, Kamala Das emerged as one of the most influential Indian English poets in history.

Being a woman of a time when the patriarchal mindset heavily surrounded art, she barged in with her confessional and intellectual poetry, talking fearlessly about her own experiences through her writings. "A rebel who defied categorization"- This comment by the Times magazine was indeed the right way to describe Kamala Das, who influenced women



writers like Eunice D'Souza and established a comfortable and potential platform for the Feminist movement in India. Being a modernist writer, Das chooses confessional poetry as the frame for her writing. This paper intends to discuss the selected poems from her poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) to explore the surrealist imageries in her confessional verses and the inner workings of her unconscious in her poetry.

Before diving into her poetry, one should understand her life first because Kamala Das' poetry is all about her experiences from her childhood to her disgruntled marriage, from her memories of love to her lonely experiences. Kamala Das was born into an aristocratic Nalapat Nair family in Punnayurkulam of Thrissur district in Kerala, also known as the Malabar region. She was married at fifteen to Kalipurayath Madhava Das, a banker with whom she never felt compatible, and most of her life, she yearned for that kind of love and solace from her partners that stood beyond bodily pleasure. Her poetry consists of the psychological turmoil she faced as a woman, be it the upheaval of her disintegrated marriage or her being crushed in an estranged world as a woman writer writing about her personal life and female sexuality fearlessly. The uniqueness of her work comes from her unending search for an identity for herself and the people she chose to add to her life. That craving for love is almost in all of her poems, portraying her deliberate efforts to cross the physicality to receive emotional support.

Kamala Das' first book, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), was an encouraging sign of the changing paradigm in the critical reception of Indian English poetry. Her experiences of seeking love from others, who neither emotionally nor physically gave her love, significantly influenced her poetry. Her frustrations and emotional turmoil are well put in her poetry to cope with her loneliness and loveless life. The symbols she uses to portray her ideas are sharp and fierce. She has used abundant symbols in her poetry that resonate with her experiences and convey a universal womanhood. Talking about the imagery in her poems, she chooses sensory and evocative images that the reader can visualise, as it is a well-known fact that she uses pictures from her daily life.

The images she borrows are part of her life, which she has encountered at some point and are symbolic. One can assume that her poetry is the pages of her diary, which contains the deepest of her memories of the past, which she does not bury but transforms into images to convey her nostalgic memories. Her poetry has this universality that captures the pleasures and sufferings of the women folk and represents the common unconscious of women, particularly the sun-drenched abundance or nostalgic memories of *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). The spirit of her poems is conceived in such a manner that they engage, work and converse with the reader; at times, it sounds like one of our dreams.

To begin with her collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, opens with the bold description of a sweltering summer and the dancing of the eunuchs barefoot till they bled. The initial poem of the inaugural volume, *Summer in Calcutta*, serves as a potent symbol depicting unattained desires reaching towards the spiritual aspects of love portrayed throughout the poems, yet halting at a state of 'vacant ecstasy,' akin to the portrayal in *Dance of the Eunuchs*. Kamala Das gives a vivid picture of the landscape with every minute detail of the accessories of the dancers, how they were singing and dancing and how the





surrounding evokes a pessimistic atmosphere. She builds a picture of sorrow, giving themselves a punishment when she says,

Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of  
Lovers dying and of children left unborn...  
Some beat their drums; other beat their sorry breasts  
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They

The gloomy picture of the wide-eyed children, meager rain and silent crows makes it a saddened spectacle, symbolising her state being suppressed in a patriarchal society. The second poem, *The Freaks*, gives the first picture of her loveless married life. It does not seem like a union of two people, but a sight of an emotionally drained woman with "the heart an empty cistern" looking for help to retrieve what is not there between them. The description of the man as:

He talks, turning a sun-stained  
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark  
Cavern, where stalactites of  
Uneven teeth gleam, his right

It gives an image of a male person's lust, and calling herself a freak poses her to be an equal partner in the sexual act with "coiling snakes of silence". This silence in her frustrations gets enraged in her following poem, "Words", where she talks about the power of words that fill her up, and she keeps confessing without any filter what she feels in her poems. She refers to her poetry as leaves that keep growing on her and become obstacles for society and her friends, calling it "blast" and "knife".

Chasm where running feet must pause, to  
Look, a sea with paralysing waves,  
A blast of burning air or,  
A knife most willing to cut your best  
Friend's throat... Words are a nuisance, but

*The Fear of the Year* depicts the mood of sadness. There is a sense of gloominess as she refers to death as "virgin whiteness", and she considers her forced smile a paperweight. That might suggest that she fears the ultimate silence and the strange faces around her, even though she is quite welcoming of them. The unconscious craving for being with love when she "Perceives the flying steel hands sow over mellow cities those dark" is visible in this verse. She only received affection when she was a young girl living with her grandmother, which she describes in the poem *My Grandmother's House*. She looks back at the most loving memory at a place that has now "withdrawn into silence" and has lost the matriarchal tradition. That desire to return to the place, bring it here in her bedroom and keep it like a brooding dog showcases her deep nostalgia and pain that is in the past and cannot be fathomed. The images she creates of that haven are full of warmth. It is now a dreamscape for her to imagine her grandmother's love as she felt devoid of that affection among other people when she says,



Can you, that I lived in such a house and  
Was proud, and loved... I who have lost  
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to  
Receive love, at least in small change?

The nostalgic memory and warmth of grandmother's house is the opposite of the love she describes in the poem *In Love*, which reflects a violent and ugly form of love, nothing more than "this skin-communicated thing". She begins the poem with a dreadful picture of a partner calling him,

Of what does the burning mouth  
Of sun, burning in today's  
Sky remind 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.

The emotionless love between the poet and her partner has a ghastly appearance as the corpse bearers cry "Bol Hari Bol" on a moonless night and "crows flying like poison on wings". The hollowness of the sexual act is what haunts her as she reminisces every detail of spending a worthless moment with someone.

In *The Wild Bougainvillea*, she attempts to take one step to rise above life's predicament and accepts life as it is with all its limitations. The poem describes her looking for solace in the real world, freeing herself from longing and dreams of the love she wished for. It shows a day when she remembered a walk in Calcutta and wandered through various places. The surrealistic picture of renewal of the emergence of hope and life among the dead and decay is a significant idea of this poem. There is hope in her conscience to renew herself from the dead and rotten memories of her life as she says in the line,

But I did see beside  
The olden tombs some marigolds bloom and the  
Wild red bougainvillea  
Climbing their minarets. I walked, I saw and  
I heard, the city tamed

The poem *Winter* also reflects the hope to rekindle herself like the new shoots of plants in the rain; simultaneously, she reminisces about her lover in winter, reminiscing the cold winds. This image of cold evenings suggests her inner feeling of being unloved by her partner, and she continues in *A Relationship*, where she says that he cannot betray her physically, and she returns to his embrace.

On his lips was hard indeed. Betray me?  
Yes, he can, but never physically;  
Only with words that curl their limbs at



Touch of air and die with metallic sighs.

She suggested that there were two Kamalas, the loved and the unloved versions. These versions incorporated varied identities- Amy, Madhavikutty and Suraiyya- which she explored and tried reconciling through writing. However, the unloved versions of its persona are more predominant than the others. She often ends the poem on an incomplete note with three dots and claims that she does it deliberately to 'voice' questions in the reader's mind as she did in her poem "Radha Krishna". The short poem builds a beautiful image of a riverside of Kadamba tree where she refers through Radha to her misery living in this physicality and hopes to leave it one day to meet the eternal love beyond these bodily boundaries, without any fear. Deep down in her conscience, it seems like that one dreamscape she aspires to fulfil, leaving everything behind, especially the fear of betrayal from her partner whom she doubts in *The End of Spring* says, "The spring dehydrating like a grape". This is also written in a pessimistic tone where she expresses her loneliness, and she tries to take a leap of faith that she conveys through

And night begins, a change of colour, what  
Else? So might my senses fail and death like  
Night arrive. A journey while alone just  
Backwards, taking secret steps inwards and  
Choosing roads none has walked before. My fear

Her outspoken portrayal of the emotional and sexual life of a middle-class housewife was generally hostile and hypocritical, especially in Kerala, which made the cosmopolitan cities curious. "Loud Posters" speaks about her confession against the conventional thought of women who were not allowed to express their opinions. She describes the evolving psyche of Indian women, targeting the radical patriarchal society and their attempt to silence the female voice.

Spent long years trying to locate my mind  
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath  
The bone. I've stretched my two-dimensional  
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,  
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice.

The poem projects her scream after a long psychological battle along the way, again ending on the unconventional punctuation in the middle, suggesting a pause or incompleteness that continues in *Someone Else's Song*, speaking in every woman's voice through her suffering and expressing the similarities of every woman via cosmic human concern. Also, it includes the previous themes of disappointment in her love life and searching for oneself in someone else's life. It embodies the various forms of women from "million, million deaths" to "million, million births" and the agony through continuous cycles of hope and despair, love and lust, birth and death-

I am a million, million deaths





Pox-clustered, each a drying seed  
Someday to be shed, to grow for  
Someone else, a memory.

She continues to confess her despair with the men in her life with "With Its Quiet Tongue", where she feels like a "pale green mirror" people just come to flatter themselves and walk away. The poem projects a personified imagery of the poet accepting the temporary love from men, like "The night wind walks my street", which she craves at that hour. She considers "sleep", suggesting the loveless companionship, as all that matters, even at the cost of being "Left a great, sprawling crack, shaped Like a spider's web..." for a temporary escape from reality, which she accepts with a quiet tongue.

For sleep-sleep which has like an Indian  
Bride, proud loveless eyes  
And a quiet tongue.

She moves to *Farewell to Bombay*, a warm and affectionate farewell to Bombay, where she spent a few memorable years of her life. The poem reminiscences *The Wild Bougainvillea*, where she shows gratitude to Calcutta for giving her peace in her despair when she was in a muddled phase in her life. It shows her deep attachment to Bombay, which she remembers as her faithful companion in her solitude. The verses provide a saddened picture of the poet, who compares her memorable souvenir to an unmoving stone in a river and remembers the lonely nights in the city around the "birds, flesh-hungry, circling in the sky". It also gives a vision of a town that accepts strangers with a smile and all the lures around it to provide people with a temporary dreamscape. The ending reflects a sorry image of her unfulfilled wish and craving for the love she was deprived of and the streets she never walked as she remembers as,

Your anger and your smile for others,  
Young, who come with unjaded eyes;  
Give them your sad-eyed courtesans with tinsel  
And jasmine in their hair, your marble  
Slabs in morgues, your brittle  
Roadside laughter...

In *Punishment in Kindergarten*, she returns to her childhood days, remembering the days in her school when she was again a black sheep among the other kids. She has a prominent image of that one day on a picnic, calling it a "honey-coloured day of peace" and being called "a peculiar child" by her teacher. It suggests her budding insecurity due to the experience with the people around her since childhood and the love and respect she craved all her life but never felt. The poem gives a background picture of her being isolated and "peculiar" and claims the memory is blurred now but yet has a precise nostalgic experience of hiding as she says in the line-

My face in the sun-warmed hedge  
And smelt like flowers and the pain.



It reflects a painful and humiliating memory of the poet she had in her childhood but has overcome now as she is an adult and, in the present, she feels no need to carry it with her.

She swings back to her sense of unfulfillment in *The Morning Tree*, where she expresses her life through the allegory of a tree in front of her house with no bud and flower and relates her condition with the tree. The beginning gives a fair picture of hopelessness: "An old hag's fleshless limbs. A hand thrown up, in despair; no hope, no hope, no hope at all". The poem resembles the story *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry, which has a similar approach to seeing life as the last leaf of the tree that falls. In the story, the protagonist depends her life and death on the movement of the falling leaves and Kamala Das, in *My Morning Tree*, also tries to look forward to death with the blossoming of a sudden flower as she says,

Morning tree, on your brown bony branch, one day,  
I shall see a sudden flower, and know at once  
That my death is just a flower, a red, red,  
Morning flower, and then, from behind the cold

The state of unfulfillment continues in *A Hot Noon in Malabar*, where she goes nostalgic, remembering her grandmother's place in Malabar and recollecting her childhood memories of a hot noon at her favourite place. She reminisces about the clear images of the men coming from hills, the fortune readers reading palms, the voices of the bangle sellers selling their dusted bangles, and the strange eyes lurking through the window when she was in Malabar. The poem tosses between memory and desire, as it is a lost childhood now, and she is so far away from that happy place, living in estrangement. For her, it is torture to be in the present, and the memory of the scorching noon is all she yearns for and goes for a temporary escape, ending with ellipses symbolising her longing for her grandmother's place.

The urge to leave her present to the pleasant childhood memories comes from the emotional instability and torture she has in her life from the romantic relationships that she expresses in *The Sunshine Cat*. It evokes the state of emptiness and utter frustration of her experience in her marriage. The poem exhibits a giant scream due to the emotional neglect she faced and projects a terrible nightmare she has in her conscience that haunts her. The dreadful vision of being trapped in a male-dominated world and still hoping to look at that "streak of sunshine lying near the door" showcases her failure to receive love and affection from all the "cynics she turned to". The sun becomes a companion of the sad and the helpless, but it offers her no health or comfort in her depressing situation. She has instead left "a cold and /half-dead woman" with no escape but one, which is death; she confesses in *I Shall Some Day*.

In *I Shall Some Day*, she longs for that gateway to freedom from all sufferings and restrictions, that is, death., leaving all the tortures and earthly frustrations as she says,

Do when free in air, and you dear one,  
Just the sad remnant of a root, must  
Lie behind, sans pride, on double-beds  
And grieve.

She has no desire to achieve the fierce happiness she was longing for. The words "defleshed,



de-veined, de-blooded" intensify her will to attain refuge because they have no meaning when written as hyphenated, just like she finds no meaning in this torturous life, showing that she will be free from all restrictions and will have no fear of hurtful instances as she quotes "Just a skeletal thing, then shut my eyes and take refuge".

Apart from death as the only refuge, she expresses sleep as her comfort for the momentary peace in *The Siesta*. The "anonymous peace" comes from the afternoon sleep that gives her a meaningful escape from the real world of Gods and casual sins that she has to face at the evening hour, as she explains in

In all those unfenced hours, she had felt  
No fear, nor even joy, but  
An anonymous peace.  
The dreams glow pearl-white, to her,  
They seem hardly mortal.  
But as evening comes,  
Snake-like, she sheds

It suggests the benefits of this tranquillity, which is helpful even for a short while but enables her to pick herself up again to challenge the reality of her life. The siesta comes with a peaceful escape, like a "sun-lit tank", but eventually takes her to the "dim-lit gloom", where she has to wander for love again.

The title poem, *Summer in Calcutta*, continues this unconscious intimacy with the scorching Indian summer. The gentle and cosy escape she usually finds is the sunny day that provides her with peace, whether it is *A Hot Noon in Malabar*, *The Sunshine Cat*, *The Siesta*, or *Summer in Calcutta*, all the nostalgia and surreal comfort she has comes from the sunny day. In *Summer in Calcutta*, she shares her sensual repletion when she sees the sun in April. The warm intoxication of the orange juice calms and inspires her to let go of her worries and stay in the intoxicated Indian summer. The poem also evokes her sexual desires that mingle with the orange juice and take her to a dreamlike place out of the patriarchal burden she carries. It is full of images that create the impression of summer heat and reflect her ooze under the drunk sensation.

My glass? I sip the  
Fire, I drink and drink  
Again, I am drunk,  
Yes, but on the gold  
Of suns. What noble  
Venom now flows through  
My veins and fills my  
Mind with unhurried  
Laughter? My worries  
Doze





*An Introduction*, the widely read poem in this collection, is wholly confessional and autobiographical, directly attacking the patriarchal ideology. In the poem, she shares her experiences as a multilingual writer whose people criticised her for not using the Indian language. She also talks about her early marriage, which brought nothing but misery and disappointment in her life. It portrays her cry to achieve freedom and seek her identity in a male-dominated society. She addresses herself as “I” as she lost herself in her failed marriage, nothing more than sexual torture, which she could not escape at an early age, and it made her lurk for love from every other man.

I was a child, and later they  
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. 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-body felt so beaten

This traumatic experience of marriage haunted her throughout her life as she felt crushed between her loveless life and her craving for love from other people. M. K. Naik states, “Another complaint one of Das’s women makes against her man is that what he has to offer is not true love, but merely sexual satisfaction...” (Naik 47).

The poet recalls the instances in the poem as a mechanism for self-revelation to release the burden she has been carrying since childhood. She fights for her individuality and finally leaves her identity as a wife, leaving all the restrictions and stereotypical demands from women. She reflects the universality of all women who suffer to create their individuality. It makes a cinematic story sequence that moves from one stage of life to another with sudden breaks. The poem evokes a powerful picture of a woman who has built her legacy and identity and has no shame in committing mistakes, recalling the nightmare of lost childhood with confidence and living as per her own rules as she is free to identify herself as “I”-

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love  
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying  
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,  
I am saint. I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed, I have no joys which are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

Poetry, like any other form, can only be written with inspiration. For Kamala Das, one can claim that her own life was full of ups and downs, as she always laid multiple hints in her poems about her sufferings and hardships at a time when female writing about sexuality and love was not a norm in post-Independent India. It is in poetry that this period witnessed the most crucial developments. Mary Erulkar has called the woman writing “the bitter service of womanhood” (Naik, 218). She could transcend the body and transport it into a nostalgic past to seek inspiration. In *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), her first poetry collection, she opens up



about her desire to find satisfaction in her love life not just emotionally but also physically, which the poems hint at as just the unfulfilled wishes she had.

Her compulsive expedition was to 'fish out' poetry from 'the ruffled sea' of her past. It can be assumed that the presence of sunshine is her escape from reality, giving her temporary comfort. Even the choice of her diction, idioms, syntactical construction, and narrative suggests her incompleteness and her longing for an escape, which she transfers to the readers to search. She often leaves the poem with ellipses, giving the reader the opportunity for continuation. This particular collection has a variety of poems, be it about betrayal, her search for identity, her wandering from one man to another to attain love, or her being the prisoner of her loneliness.

Throughout the reading, there is a back-and-forth movement of her mental state evoking restlessness in her mind; at one moment, she longs for true love from her partner and then, in another moment, she accepts her misery and waits for the ultimate end of her desire. The chronological order of her poems suggests a dreamlike picture of her mind as she goes into her pleasant memories with her grandmother at Malabar, then to her memorable souvenir in Bombay and suddenly recalls the traumatic sexual encounters with her husband and the transactions of lustful days with her partners she considers ugly and ruthless and wants to remove from her memory, eventually goes back to spirituality for the last resort.

One of the most fascinating features of this collection is that she writes freely about love and body, describes her most profound memory of her conscious sexual desires in her poems and shares her precious territories without any euphemistic approach. She brings forth all her insecurities and tensions, everything that captures her attention, which are the consequences of her complex childhood and early marriage. Every writer has a speciality that sets them apart from other writers; for Kamala Das, her confessional poetry can transcend one into her unconscious and show how she is the poet of moods and freaks because she shares her secrets with them through her poetry. Her skill in using her writing as a coping mechanism to get rid of her complexities and her ability to resonate with her experiences is what gives her poetry surreal texture as she always chooses the instances and symbols from her daily life and produces a familiar figure for the reader to peep into her conscience figuring out her dreamscapes.

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