



Research Paper

Transformation of Kamala Das from Madhavikutty to Surayya

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyze the autobiographical elements with respect to the poems of Kamala Das which lead to her transformation from Madhavikutty to Surayya.*

Keywords: *Kamala Das, womanhood, Madhavikutty, Surayya, My Story, Summer in Calcutta.*

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The twentieth century has witnessed a growth and development in Indian English poetry with the publication of Kamala Das's first collection of poems *Summer in Calcutta*. Her treatment of poems is unusual and interesting. Kamala Das's contemporary poets both male and female like Ramanujan, Mahapatra, Ezekiel, and Sarojini Naidu considers more with Indian life, myths, and legends. While Ramanujan was concerned with the conflict between the culture and conventions of the east and west and the post-colonial ethnic identities revealing it with jarring realism, Mahapatra revealed the stark reality including hunger, rites and rituals, Ezekiel moved beyond spiritual and oriental theme, to include a wide range of concerns and interest including mundane familial events and skeptical societal introspection, Sarojini Naidu's poems expressed the patriotic note nature of India, common Indian life, legends and myths. Kamala Das's poems marked a stark deviation from the way Indian life was depicted and portrayed in the poems of her contemporaries. Sarojini Naidu's poems despite its strength and importance lacked a sense of intimacy of personal experience. She was more concerned with establishing their credential as an Indian poetess writing in English than with the exploration of their inner urge her personal self and suffering were relegated to the background. She wrote of "Savitri's sorrow and Sita's desire / Draupadi's longing, Damyanti's fears / And sweet Sankuntala's magical tears" ("Nasturtiums"). When she left these mythological heroines, she came to the milkwoman of Brindawan or the veiled Muslim lady of Hyderabad. There was hardly any attempt on her part to correlate their situation with her own. Her poems on love were also less real and more romantic, reminding one of golden past "where there youth mine, beloved, I would fling it / Like a rich pearl into love's lustrous wine"(The Offspring"). But unlike Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das's poems were spontaneous, complex and unusual. Her poems explored the intricacies of her own varied and complicated responses to her social and personal circumstances. She opened up new fields of feelings and emotions in an earnest manner. She presented a synthesis of rare and contrasting thoughts of lonely mind. While Naidu never exposed her personal experiences and was concerned about the 'beauteous forms' of Nature and womanhood, Kamala Das attempted to explore the stark realities of within and around her, focusing profusely on her personal experiences. She could never forget that she is a woman who craved for love, companionship and understanding. Subhas C Saha has observed in the case of Sarojini Naidu that she "is a notable example of ordinariness and absence of originality". He would have certainly changed his words to define Kamala Das's poetry saying she 'is a notable example of originality and absence of ordinariness'. She deconstructs the patriarchal structure by assassinating or violating the cannon frame by the misogynic society. Kamala Das delineates all the events and situations she comes across and shows them to the reader without any reticence. "Kamala Das's poetry and prose reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male dominated society. She raises her vigorous voice against the male tyrannies and comes out as an ardent spokesperson for Women's Liberation in India" (Silent Suffering and Unheard Agony in the Regional writings on Women by S.P.Sree). Her poetry is a celebration of the universal experience of self, love-despair, anguish, failure and disgust against the traditional mode of gender manifestation apprehended through a feminine Indian awareness. Being a confessional poet Kamala Das takes the reader to her personal and private life and unveils the delicate facts. The themes of most of her poems are love or lust and marriage relating her own experiences of marrying at a tender age of 15. In dealing with these themes, she hides nothing so that her poetic persona and public are

not two but the same never before. Has any woman in India dared to describe so distinctly about the physicality or longing of a woman as Kamala Das. In giving full vent to woman's causes Kamala Das is simply 'every woman who seeks love'; she is 'the beloved and the betrayed', expressing her 'endless female hungers', 'the mutual whisper at the core of womanhood'. She practices what he proposes in her autobiography *My Story*, 'A writer's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality'. She lays bare her personal life in her poetry. Her first Volume *Summer in Calcutta* contains poems on a variety of subject including her childhood experiences, identity crisis, social consciousness and her experience in sex so much so that she has earned the title 'queen of Erotica'. She articulates her love longing, frustrations and disillusionments. In "An Introduction" she sketches her growing from child to woman – "I became tall, my limbs / Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair". She reveals that her early marriage seems to have given a rude jolt to the sensibility as a woman. – "... my sad woman-body felt so beaten." She wishes to be left alone by the critics, friends and visiting cousins. She rebels against the injunctions laid by society,- to be a girl, to be a woman, to be in sarees and to be restricted in choirs and strictly declares that she likes to be dressed in shirts and to cut her hair short. Her early marriage at the age of 15 to Mr. Das was a burden to her as she remarks time and again. She grew up more or less neglected in her parental house with her 'autocrat' father as she writes in her autobiography: that her birth "... disappointed our parents a great deal". So she longed for a peaceful relationship where she could make ample amends for all the loss but unfortunately her husband was more concerned with files and affixing signature and their relationship was more of lust than of love: "I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace". She was given the job of a domestic woman, looking after her callous, selfish and lustful husband, and three sons. But she desired freedom from bondage and dull routine of domesticity:

"You build around me with the moving love words flung from the doorway and tea of carve. You tired lust; I shall someday take wings, fly around as often petals. Do when frame in air, and you are, just the sad remnant of a root on double-beds. And grieve".

Her unfulfilled love is manifested in her poem "The Freaks". The poet writes in the beginning:

He talks, turning a sun sustained

Cheek tome, his mouth a dark

Carven...

But they only wander, tripping, idly over puddles of

Desire...

This reflects her disgust to her lover, may be her husband. The brutality of sex that she experienced was to her only a "skin – communicated / Thing. She felt miserable when her husband fell on her on their wedding night and when an unknown and drunken man tried to assault her in her bedroom and later her experiences of his lust, 'loud and savage' intensifies in her poem "The Corridors" where she writes "I / See the bed from which my love / Has fled, the empty rooms, the / Naked walls". Disgusted and exasperated with love that is merely physical she writes in "wild despair" "My Grandmother's House". The only place she found solace was her dear grandmother's old Nalapat house but that too was locked up after her death. She writes that she wants "to peer through blind eyes of windows or/ Just listen to the frozen air".

Even her childhood experience comes forth in her poem "Punishment in Kindergarten". Her teacher rebuked her saying "What a peculiar child you are" for not joining other children in the picnic at Victoria Gardens. The same line is incorporated in the poem too. She felt ignored by her parents whom she thought to be disappointed by her birth with dark skin. Thus she felt lonely and to spend time she used to slip out from her home at Park Street and walk to the old cemetery and watch the tombstones like yellowed teeth trying to read the named etched on it. This experience is reflected in "The Wild Bougainvillae": "their tombstones... yellowed like grotesque teeth, a ...harvest of/Old teeth." She revolves around two things ---- her inability to find a satisfactory source of love and her longing for freedom from emotional bondage. Her emotional pressures expose in various images she incorporates in the poem. Brought up and "fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi's legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her"(My Story 23) it was unusual for a Nair woman to talk of sex and love. She was devoted to Krishna and this she gained as a legacy from her great grand mother's younger sister who remained faithful to Him throughout her life and wrote many poems that was discovered by Madhavikutty after her death. "My chastity is my only gift to you , oh Krishna, she wrote in her last poem"(My Story). This legacy Das practiced to get relief after her illness and also after she was reduced to a bundle of nerves after child birth. This is reflected in her poem "Radha". It offers aesthetic delight, to the readers who know Krishna's myth. The motif is to assert the poet's individuality while giving along with it a pleasurable sensuous experience: O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting

Nothing remains but

You...

In "Ghanashyam" the metaphorically present Krishna is the lover whom the speaker expects to put an end to her longings: Ghanashyam

The cell of the eternal sun
Then blood of the eternal fire,
The hue of the summer air
I want a peace...

Unsatisfied in her marital life and thoroughly disgusted and shattered by her husband's indifference to her desire to hear loving words she slowly turned outside to seek love. She became greedy for love "like a forest fire that consumes and with each killing gains a wilder/Brighter charm" ("Forest Fire"). In *Summer in Calcutta* she celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over 'the defeat of love'. It projects through action and gesture, a self-contained mood of sensuous luxury. But this temporary satisfaction turned to the wretched coldness of heart in "Wild Its Quiet Tongue". She hoped for the moment of blossoming of a flower but the images like the 'ugly tree' and the 'fleshless limbs' of the tree in "My Morning Tree" sustained no hope. In "The Testing of the Sirens" her realization of her fruitless attempt to find love is revealed. She wakes up and feels physical loneliness but still she goes with a man with 'a pork-marked face' to fulfill her keen desire of love but that too is doomed to fail. Thus in *Summer in Calcutta* personal moods and feelings triumph over impersonal ones. Her growth and treatment of themes are ubiquitously related to her own experiences in real life. Personal and poetic self meet and merge in case of Kamala Das.

In her later volume of collected poems, *The Descendants*, published in 1967 she slightly turned away from her theme of love and sex and becomes "bitterly death conscious and perhaps death-obsessed." (Kamala Das and Her Poetry by A N Dwivedi). In poems like "The Descendants", "The Invitation" and "Composition" her tone is sobered by compassion or humility. Her longing for attaining love proved futile and she realized that the poise that she thought to have attained was nothing but pseudo-metaphysical poise:

To be frank
I have failed.
I feel my age and my
Uselessness ("Composition")

In "A Request" the "meaninglessness" of the poetess's life is conveyed and she thinks of the time after her death. She makes a request to be followed after her death:

When I die
Do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up...

"The Descendants" borders on nihilism where she negates everything positive and moves in an opposite direction to the faith that she suggests in her early poem "Death Brings No Loss". "The Suicide" reveals her suicidal urge but the "impassioned freedom towards death" gives the self "unshakable joy". (The Aesthetics of Sensuality: A Stylistic Study of Poetry of Kamala Das by N.V. Raveendran). Thus she converts the negative into positive. Body and soul are inseparable and the poet cannot choose between a physical death and a spiritual death. But she ultimately rejects it through a renewal of the sense of life:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare

She was conscious of growing old and like the yellowing leaf in autumn her skin turned gross and wrinkled. She thought that perhaps she was "finished as a charmer" (My Story) but she was under constant relationship as she says "he conquered me, the last of my lovers, the most notorious of all, the king of all kings,..." and then again "He drew me to him as a serpent draws its dazed victim. I was his slave." But although these adulterous thought belies in most of her poems its mood and ambience changed in *The Descendants* where she mostly dealt with her fate accompanied with her sad and disconsolate state of mind. Numerous deaths within the Nalapatt family, causing much sorrow and mental agony, brought home to Kamala Das also the inexorable nature of death. The sense of desolation evoked by the death of her dear ones and an awareness of the futility of human aspirations for worldly glory are poignantly etched in the poem "A Requiem for My Father":

You are laid out on the drawing room floor,
A dead Nayar gets only the cold floor to lie on

Since the death of her Muthassi (great grand mother) and Amamma (grandmother) "the long clawed birds of death" have stayed by her: "I have seen death/ And I shall not forget". In "A Holiday for Me", Kamala Das visualizes the journey to the other world as a holiday jaunt. With the ready sense of detachment that comes with age, Kamala Das says "I shall leave all the luggage behind/I shall travel as light as I can". The desire of escape makes suicide very attractive for the confessional poets as she shares in "Composition":

All I want now
Is to walk a long walk
Into The sea

And lie there, resting

Completely uninvolved

In the "Suicide" and "Invitation" the poetess contemplates death by drowning. In the first poem her intention is to search the inner chambers of the sea where she expects to find "a sun slumbering" very different from the "hostile cold" of the surface. In the second the sea invites her in:

...come in,
Come in. What do you lose by dying.

...

End in me, cries the sea.

But "The Suicide", too, exposes her restlessness with the fetters of femininity using sarcasm:

But

I must pose

I must pretend

I must act the role

Of happy woman

Happy wife

Das's later poems reveals a more mature and profound expression on the theme of death. Now death appears serene and silent resembling the closing of lotuses in dusk. She realizes that the soul is immortal and that death is only a temporal cessation: "I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence." (My Story 280).

In "The Old Playhouse" she introduces an interesting perspective of love. The poet is totally involved in a quest for identity, a quest for completeness. It is addressed presumably to the husband, and is largely personal. It lodges a protest against the constraints of married life:

"You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and

To offer at the right moment the vitamins"

It was because of her husband's failure to understand her psyche and emotional needs that she could not find peace in his arms and tried to seek it elsewhere. In some of her poems, she speaks about her affairs with other men as a kind of escape from her man or master. However, even in their company, she did not get much happiness. The poet does not want her readers to think that she is a woman with vast sexual hunger, hinted in "The Old Playhouse". A different kind of protest- against the fanaticism of- religion is obvious in "The Inheritance". It deals with the hatred and inheritance that goes in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christian or Hinduism. In "Blood" the onrush of emotions is admirably restrained. It is largely autobiographical and the poetess's nostalgia for the old house and for the great grandmother who lived in it is convincingly evoked. There is a pervasive sense of decay and death in the poem when she says:

I know the rats running now
Across the darkened halls

...

From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death

The darkened halls can be equated with her dark life with her husband. "Nani" ends abruptly with the poet admiring the "clotted peace" of the dead. Perhaps the poet identifies herself with the dead, but paradoxically the imagery which evokes the peace of the dead belongs not to the world of dead but to that of the living world.

A simultaneous reading of her volumes of poetry and a study of her autobiography reveals that her subject, mood and theme of poetry changes with the experience in personal life. Perhaps the failure of her married life gives birth to poetry asserting her own identity in Indian English poetry and casting a revolt against the constraints led by patriarchal society. Her poems breathe an air of love, amorousness and sexuality for love is the leit motif of almost all her poems. "Her self as woman and...her self as poet and artist...are tied together. The feminine sensibility can be described as her personal self: her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution from teenage bride to adulterous and mother figure" (Feroza Jussawalla, Kamala Das: The Evolution of the Self, The journal of the Indian Writing in English). From this it is evident that events in her personal life are important in understanding her growth in poetry. One such event is her conversion to Islam at the age of 65. Born in a conservative family it was unusual for a woman to convert her religion and that too at the fag end of her life. But for a lady who raised voice against male dominance it is not surprising enough. She embraced Islam in 1999 after her relationship with an Islamic scholar Sadiq Ali who was later recognized as M.P Abdussamad Samadani. She began to perceive life differently as she herself wrote: "Life has changed for me since Nov 14 when a young man names Sadiq Ali walked to meet me". This change is reflected in her

collected poems *Ya Allah* published in 2001 after her conversion. The poems were written by her as part of her search, and yearning to be with her God, Allah. She wrote the poems under her new name Surayya. But her conversion was not a sudden impulsive act, on the contrary, it was a decision taken after years of deliberation and intense evaluation of the Islamic faith as she herself says "I have always had a strong affection for the Islamic way of life. I adopted two blind Muslim children Irshad Ahmed and Imtiaz Ahmed, and they brought me close to Islam". In order to get them acquainted with their religion she began to read Islamic religion. "Recently, I was traveling in a car from the Malabar to Kochi. I started the journey at 5.45 am I looked at the rising sun. Surprisingly, it had the color of a setting sun. It traveled with me and at 7 am it turned white. It just dawned on me the beautiful wonders of Allah. Finally, I got the message. I embraced Islam". In her first poem "Of, the Boundless", Surayya goes back on the teachings of Prophet Mohammed who preaches that God is boundless but she also believes that the human heart if he be true believer can contain Him. She lives in these poems alone with her God. Her experiences are all very personal and reach out to divine yearnings. She submits herself to the divine firmament. She embraces the doctrines of Mohammed, "The last prophet/ Who fight for fidelity and truth". His luminance has spread all over and remains "In each tiny speck of sand." After three strokes and afflicted by many other sicknesses she thought of death to be the end but after her submission to God she is no longer disturbed by the thought of death:

You are not alone Surayya!

Allah's deep love is like the soft moonlight. ("A Forlorn Woman")

The sea that she portrays in "Suicide" and "Invitation" is recurrent in this poem too where she finds "The bewitching calmness/ Encased deep in the turbulent sea". In "Companion" she admits having "faltering steps" and "hazy vision" and seeks the help of Allah to lead her who is now her "kinfolk" and "companion". The omnipotent and omnipresent nature of Allah is reflected when she says that:

There are no doorways,

You have not entered;

There remain no beds,

You have not slept in.

No gardens

You have missed;

No ponds

You forgot to swim in.

The lady who was so long engrossed in human lover finds a lover in the divine Lord in "My Lover" who she says has no neck to wear garland, no mouth to chew betel leaves, even He has no body but "Where the/ Spirit and the body,/ Vanishes he exits". In "Prostration" the poet compares herself to a "sheep gone astray" and questions her offence to be subjected to ecstasy. She suffers the "jeers and sneers" of people. She has lost her desire to live and so living and departure are all the same for her. Ultimately the poet submits herself:

My spirit feels ashamed,

And it prostrates at your feet

The poet thinks of her final moments in "Hearths" where a hidden desire like fire kindling in hearth and pieces of cinders in barren ash lurks beneath her. The experiences of her life are summed up in her poem "Experiences". The speaker moves back to her childhood when as a young girl she stood before "appalling tests/ the pain and agony of the / Beastly deserts." Although at first she holds the God responsible for all his torment, torture and pain she ultimately believes that it is the same God who would possibly come and provide shelter to her. Allah is the sun and the poetess is the sunflower who basks under it as she writes in "I am Safe". She is aware of Him "Both in my hours of sleep,/ And in my conscience". The confusion that she feels that she might be saved attains a conformity in this poem. Society deemed her to be "Ill-starred and inauspicious". Rebuked and belittled by "the expectations of the guests" she lies in oblivion, imposed by the convictions and suffering from "terrible insufficiencies" she sought refuge at the feet of the God. Earlier she does not seem to be bothered by social accolades and declares in "An Introduction" "I am a sinner,/ I am a saint" but now her tone is tinged with morose and she seems to be bothered by social accusations in "Another String of the Moon":

I hear the ranting

Of the public

A sinner you are, and

Impure is your body.

A stainless soul,

Is it afar, for me?

The change in her life after her conversion to Islam comes forth in "Mercy Killing"

The moment you accepted me,

My form, my figure, and my nature,

All changed.

She craves for the love and her thirst was the hunger and yelling if thousand locusts but now she turns herself to merciful Allah:

Oh, Merciful Allah!!

I am in need of nothing,
You are my hunger;
And you are its satiation, too.
You are my thirst,
And also the water to slake. ("Locusts")
Similarly in "Fortunate Woman" she says:
It was you who
Quenched my thirst
You lent the halo
Of luminance to my face.

The concept of body and soul as in Hinduism is dealt with equal vigour in her later poems too. In "The Kingdom of the God" she is really concerned with both her body and her soul. God 'reap gold' in her soul and provide 'profound radiance' in her body. Her life is compared to the 'setting sun' and though she has lost 'a mere honeymoon' she gains 'the Kingdom of God'. If earlier she wanted peaceful sleep in the midst of her suffering now Allah slumbers her into sleep as she writes in "End of the Footsteps" --- You need sleep Surayya;/ Repose in me, and sleep Surayya!. When she is at the end of life Allah warns her:

You didn't have miles to tread
For you are on the doorsteps
Of eternal abode;
To the heart of gushing love;
Oh, surayya, the wayfarer
Your footsteps end here.

In almost all her poems she names her Lord calling him "Ya Allah" and her changed personality is not only recurrent in the theme of her poems but also by her repeatedly calling herself Surayya.

It is easy to reduce her writing, to a narcissistic obsession. However, there was in her a genuine desire to go beyond, to a greater love; the body was either discovered or means to attend that transcendence or encountered as an obstacle, a snare out of which she lounges to find an escape. She is preoccupied with bodily sexual experience. The subject of Kamala Das's work comprises of "woman" and the revelation of female experiences-- be it trauma of an unhappy marriage or humiliation of a desireless surrender in sex or disgust at the male domination. The frustration which she, contrary of expectations, discovered in her personal life finds out sufficient way in the form of her creations. Although some might label Kamala Das as 'a feminist' for her candor in dealing with women's needs and desires, Das "has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism" (Raveendran). A close reading of her poems help us understand her transformation from Madhavikutty to Surayya. How she finds solace from the pangs of life is well versed in her poems.

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