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AN INTRODUCTION - KAMALA DAS

Life

- ❖ Kamala Das was born on **31st March 1934** and her original name was **Kamala Surayya**.
- ❖ A part of her childhood was spent in her ancestral home in **Malabar, Kerala** and the **other part in Calcutta** where her father was posted for work.
- ❖ Her mother **Balamani Amma** was a famous poet and her **grand uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon** a respected writer.
- ❖ She was married off to **Madhava Das, an employee at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** at the age of 15 and moved to Bombay with her husband
- ❖ On account of her extensive contribution to the poetry she is known as "**The Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry**".
- ❖ She has also been likened to literary greats like Sylvia Plath because of the **confessional style** of her writing.
- ❖ Kamala Das died in Pune, on 31st May 2009, at the age of 75.

Works

- ❖ She wrote regularly for the popular weekly, **Malayalanadu**.
- ❖ In 1973, her autobiography '**Ente Kadha (My Story)**' was released in Malayalam. It consisted of a compilation of her weekly columns in Malayalanadu that had already become a sensation across the state.

- ❖ In 1988, fifteen years later, the work was translated into English with more text added. many parts rewritten and published with the title '**My Story**'.
- ❖ 1977-**Alphabet of Lust (novel)**
- ❖ 1992 - **Padmavati the Harlot and other stories** (short story collection)
- ❖ 1973- **Summer in Calcutta** (poem collection)
- ❖ In Malayalam, her works include Balyakalasmaranakal (The Memories of Childhood) and Chandanamarangal (Sandalwood Trees)

Awards

She won

- ❖ **The P.E.N.'s Asian Poetry Prize** in 1963
- ❖ **The Kerala Sahitya Academy Award** in 1969 for the short story **Thanuppu (Cold)**
- ❖ **The National Sahitya Academy Award** in 1985
- ❖ She was also shortlisted for the **Nobel Prize for Literature** in 1984

Points to remember

- ❖ So wide was her reach that much of her work has been translated into numerous foreign languages including French and German.
- ❖ Kamala Das was one of the most prominent feminist voices in the postcolonial era. She wrote in her mother tongue Malayalam as well as in English.
- ❖ To her Malayalam readers she was Madhavi Kutty and to her English patrons she was Kamala Das.
- ❖ She is known for her honest treatment of female sexuality without guilt. Her themes include love, betrayal and anguish

TEXT

I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,

I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one.

Don't write in English, they said, English is

Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like? The language I speak,

Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses

All mine, mine alone.

It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,

It is as human as I am human, don't

You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my

Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing

Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it

Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is

Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and

Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech

Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the

Incoherent mutterings of the blazing

Funeral pyre. I was 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.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank Pitifully.
Then ... I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love ... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants. a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me... the oceans' tireless
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I
In this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
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 that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

SUMMARY

Lines 1-6

- ❖ Kamala Das says that her knowledge of Indian politics is very superficial.
- ❖ She knows only the names of the politicians of the post-Nehru era.
- ❖ She is an Indian. (But her ways of thinking are strikingly unlike those of conventional Indians.)
- ❖ She is brown in complexion. She was born in Malabar, a part of Kerala.
- ❖ She knows three languages fairly well, writes in two languages (that is, Malayalam and English) and dreams in one language.
- ❖ She does not mention which her dream language is. Probably it is her mother tongue, Malayalam.

Lines 6-7

- ❖ Those around Kamala Das are fanatics.
- ❖ They fiercely object to her writing in the foreign language, English.
- ❖ They brand her anti-Indian.

Lines 7-10

- ❖ The poetess gets angry with her critics, friends and cousins who oppose her writing in English.
- ❖ She asks them to allow her to write in whatever language she likes.

Lines 10-15

- ❖ The poetess says that she familiarizes herself with the foreign language that she speaks so much so that it becomes almost equal to her mother tongue.
- ❖ She gets accustomed to the peculiarities of the new language. They become hers. The language that she speaks is partly Malayalam and partly English.
- ❖ It is a funny mixture but it has a human quality. It is as human as she is.

Lines 15-20

- ❖ Kamala Das welcomes this hybrid language because it easily expresses her joys, longings and hopes.
- ❖ It comes as naturally to her as cawing does to the crow and roaring to the lion.
- ❖ Her mixed language is a human language.
- ❖ It freely expresses what she sees, hears and knows.

Lines 20-23

- ❖ Her hybrid language is not the deaf, blind speech of trees swayed by the wind, of rain pouring down and of funeral pyre burning.

Lines 23-25

- ❖ From this point onwards, Kamala Das starts describing the anatomical and physiological changes that she underwent.
- ❖ Her description is quite frank.
- ❖ She says that she became tall and her breasts grew big and hair started growing on her private parts.

Lines 25-31

- ❖ Then her sexual activities began. She demanded sexual and emotional gratification.
- ❖ A man shut her and a sixteen-year-old boy in the bedroom.

- ❖ It is not mentioned who the **16-year-old boy** was. Nor is the man who arranged this compulsory cohabitation identified.
- ❖ What is the result of this single night's union? The poetess becomes pregnant.
- ❖ Her breasts grew still bigger. The poetess feels crushed by the weight of her enlarged breasts and womb caused by her unborn child.
- ❖ The description of this episode ends here abruptly. Abortion might have relieved her tension.

Lines 31-33

- ❖ The poetess shows her anti-feminine tastes by wearing a shirt and her brother's trousers, cutting her hair and ignoring her typical womanly features.

Lines 33-40

- ❖ The people around her are displeased with her wearing male dress.
- ❖ They ask her to wear a sari like a girl and be a wife.
- ❖ She is also advised to do the work that is done by conventional-minded Indian women such as embroidering, cooking and managing the household.
- ❖ She ought to fit into the roles carved for women by traditionalists.
- ❖ She should not sit on walls like boys or peep through lace-draped windows to have a glimpse of the sexual orgy inside the room.
- ❖ She should be a normal girl such as Amy, or Kamala or Madhavi kutty. She should choose an appropriate name and role for herself.

Lines 40-43

- ❖ She should not behave as though she is suffering from schizophrenia (a mental disorder marked by withdrawal from realities).
- ❖ She should not pretend to be a nymphomaniac, showing an abnormal interest in sex. She should not cry openly when jilted in love.

Lines 44-48

- ❖ Kamala Das recounts another of her memorable sexual adventures.
- ❖ She met a man and fell deeply in love with him. His name does not matter.
- ❖ For, he represented what every man wants to find in a woman.
- ❖ She was every woman who seeks a man's love.
- ❖ He was like a river pouring itself into an ocean.
- ❖ She was like an ocean which never gets tired of the rivers mingling with it.

Lines 48-52

- ❖ Kamala Das had many sexual adventures thereafter. She asked every man that she met. 'Who are you?' Every man invariably asserted: 'It is I'.
- ❖ The reply brought out the ego in every man. Every male has this ego packed in him - the man and his ego are as inseparable as the sword and its sheath.

Lines 52-56

- ❖ Because of this ego every man leads a lonely life, drinking liquor because of disappointment in hotels of strange towns.
- ❖ The egoistic man laughs, loves, feels ashamed of his love affairs and finally dies companionless, with a rattle in his throat.

Lines 56-59

- ❖ The poetess is also unfulfilled. She regards herself as pure but others regard her as a sinner. She is loved and then cast away by men.
- ❖ Her joys and sorrows are like those of thousands of sensitive women in India. She is also brimming with ego. She calls herself 'I'.
- ❖ It is because of this ego of hers that she is unhappy

Structure and Form

- ❖ '*An Introduction*' is a **sixty-line poem** that is contained within a single stanza.
- ❖ The lines range from three words up to eleven and do not follow a specific metrical pattern. Das also chose not to use a **rhyme scheme**.
- ❖ The lines also vary greatly in length and syllable number. This means that the poem is written in free verse.
- ❖ This style of writing allows the poet to explore various structures and make use of more sporadic rhymes. There are several examples of half-rhyme and internal rhyme in '*An Introduction*'.

Literary Devices

- ❖ Kamala Das uses techniques such as enjambment, repetition, and anaphora in '*An Introduction*'.
- ❖ Repetition and anaphora are seen at the beginning of a number of lines, such as four and five.
- ❖ In this instance, the speaker is giving two conviction-filled statements about who she is. This is conveyed through the **repetition of the pronoun "I"**.
- ❖ Later on, repetition is used again to define her language as both "**English**" and "**human**". She is a human being, as equal and valuable as any other.
- ❖ There are also several examples of **allusion**. She references specific a specific place and the name of a politician that requires some research in order to understand.
- ❖ **Enjambment** is another important technique. it can be seen throughout this poem, but one good example is the **transition between lines fifty-eight and fifty-nine**.

Themes:

- ❖ Explores powerful themes of feminism and equal rights
- ❖ Advocates for free choice for all women
- ❖ Emphasizes the importance of freedom in every aspect of life, particularly in marriage
- ❖ Compares and contrasts the roles of men and women in society
- ❖ Discusses how societal rules can infringe on personal freedom
- ❖ Encourages readers to reflect on their own lives in relation to the poem's themes
- ❖ Prompts consideration of privilege and its impact on individual experiences

