SUMMER IN CALCUTTA

KAMALA DAS
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Recognized as one of India’s foremost poets, Kamala Das (also known as Kamala Surayya) was born on March 31, 1934 in Malabar in Kerala. She has published many novels, poetry collections and short stories in English, as well as in the Indian language of Malayalam under the name 'Madhavikutty.' Some of her works in English include the novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), *My Story* (1988, Autobiography) poetry collections, *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). She got several awards including The PEN Poetry Prize, The Asan World Prize, Sahitya Akademi Award, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, The Vayalar Award, The Ezhuthachchan Award, N. V. Krishna Warrier Award, Sahitya Parishad Award, etc. She was nominated in 1984 for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Worked as Poetry Editor, Illustrated Weekly of India; Orient Editor, Poet Magazine. Travelled to read poetry to Germany’s Essen, Bonn and Duisburg Universities, Adelaide Writers' Festival, Frankfurt Book Fair, University of Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore and South Banks Festival London, Concordia University Montreal, Canada, Columbia University, New York, Qatar, Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi etc. Her works are available in French, Spanish, Russian, German and Japanese.
Books in English by Kamala Das from D C Books

Only the Soul Knows How to Sing

My Story
An Introduction

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 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 which are not yours, no 
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.
Death Brings No Loss

Each night when darkness turns
Me blind, I think of death,
Understanding it to
Be like night-fall, just a
Temporary phase, which
Brings no loss, for what was
Here before sun-down will
Be here tomorrow when
Light shall reveal it. I
Shall lose not a thing. Each
Little thing shall wait for
Me, these trees, these roads, these
Songs, these men who call me
Beautiful, not seeing
Me with eyes but with hands
And, even... even... love...
Drama

It was a tiny drafty stage
With bleary footlights, wooden boards
And just a red, red lamp above
Like an angry sun and a huge
Untagged bouquet lying behind,
Somewhere in the green rooms chaos
Like confidence, slowly dying...

It was soon my turn to be the
Tragedienne, to take vague steps
Black gowned, black veiled
And wail, and beat my breast
And speak of unrequited love.
I am wronged, I am wronged,
I am so wronged...

Then at me, from rows and rows of
Cavernous mouths where reason died
A hundred deaths, the laughter rose
Like locust hunger; I turned round
And asked them why, they said ha ha
ha ha ha ha...

There is no such stage today, no
Footlights, no veil, no lamp shining
Like a crimson sun. I sip my tea
In sunlit balconies, adore
A married man; and, when I sepak
My lines, though his lips do not move,
I hear him laugh, ha ha ha ha
ha ha...
The Testing of the Sirens

The night, black-cloaked like a procuress, brought him to me, willing, light as a shadow, speaking words of love in some tender language I do not know...
With the crows came the morning, and my limbs warm of love, were once again so lonely...
At my doorstep I saw a pock-marked face, a friendly smile and a rolleiflex. We will go for a drive, he said. Or, go to see the lakes. I have washed my face with soap and water, brushed my hair a dozen times, draped myself in six yards of printed voile. Ah...does it still show, my night of love? You look pale, he said. Not pale, not really pale. It's the lipstick's anaemia. Out in the street, we heard the sirens go, and I paused in talk to weave their wail with the sound of his mirthless laughter. He said, they are testing the sirens today. I am happy. He really was lavish with words. I'm happy, just being with you. But you... you love another, I know, he said, perhaps a handsome man, A young and handsome man. Not young, not handsome, I thought, just a filthy snob. It's a one-sided love, I said. What can I do for you? I smiled. A smile is such a detached thing, I wear it like a flower. Near the lake, a pregnant girl bared her dusky
breasts and washed them sullenly. On the old cannon-stand, crows bickered over a piece of lizard-meat and the white sun was there and everywhere...

I want your photo, lying down, he said, against those rusty nineteen-thirty-four guns, will you? Sure. Just arrange my limbs and tell me when to smile. I shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was no more light, no more love, or peace, only the white, white un burning, burning, burning...

Ah, why does love come to me like pain again and again and again?