Classic Poetry Series

Kamala Das

- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Kamala Das

Kamala Surayya / Suraiyya formerly known as Kamala Das , (also known as Kamala Madhavikutty, pen name was Madhavikutty) was a major Indian English poet and littérateur and at the same time a leading Malayalam author from Kerala, India. Her popularity in Kerala is based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography, while her oeuvre in English, written under the name Kamala Das, is noted for the fiery poems and explicit autobiography.

Her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt, infused her writing with power, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation. On 31 May 2009, aged 75, she died at a hospital in Pune, but has earned considerable respect in recent years.

Early Life

Kamala Das was born in Punnayurkulam, Thrissur District in Kerala, on March 31, 1934, to V. M. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely-circulated Malayalam daily Mathrubhumi, and Nalappatt Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poetess.

She spent her childhood between Calcutta, where her father was employed as a senior officer in the Walford Transport Company that sold Bentley and Rolls Royce automobiles, and the Nalappatt ancestral home in Punnayurkulam.

Like her mother, Kamala Das also excelled in writing. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalappatt Narayana Menon, a prominent writer.

At the age of 15, she got married to bank officer Madhava Das, who encouraged her writing interests, and she started writing and publishing both in English and in Malayalam. Calcutta in the 1960s was a tumultous time for the arts, and Kamala Das was one of the many voices that came up and started appearing in cult anthologies along with a generation of Indian English poets.

Literary Career

She was noted for her many Malayalam short stories as well as many poems written in English. Das was also a syndicated columnist. She once claimed that "poetry does not sell in this country [India]", but her forthright columns, which sounded off on everything from women's issues and child care to politics, were popular.

Das' first book of poetry, Summer In Calcutta was a breath of fresh air in Indian English poetry. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Ms. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian poets were still governed by "19th-century diction, sentiment and romanticised love." Her second book of poetry, The descendants was even more explicit, urging women to:

"Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers ..." - The Looking Glass

This directness of her voice led to comparisons with Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath

At the age of 42, she published a daring autobiography, My Story; it was originally written in Malayalam and later she translated it into English. Later she admitted that much of the autobiography had fictional elements.

Kamala Das wrote on a diverse range of topics, often disparate- from the story of a poor old servant, about the sexual disposition of upper middle class women living near a metropolitan city or in the middle of the ghetto. Some of her better-known stories include Pakshiyude Manam, Neypayasam, Thanuppu, and Chandana Marangal. She wrote a few novels, out of which Neermathalam Pootha Kalam, which was received favourably by the reading public as well as the critics, stands out.

She travelled extensively to read poetry to Germany's University of Duisburg-Essen, University of Bonn and University of Duisburg universities, Adelaide Writer's Festival , Frankfurt Book Fair, University of Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore, and South Bank Festival (London), Concordia University (Montreal, Canada), etc. Her works are available in French, Spanish, Russian, German and Japanese.

She has also held positions as Vice chairperson in Kerala Sahitya Academy, chairperson in Kerala forestry Board, President of the Kerala Children's Film Society, editor of Poet magazine[6] and Poetry editor of Illustrated Weekly of India.

Although occasionally seen as an attention-grabber in her early years, she is now seen as one of the most formative influences on Indian English poetry. In 2009, The Times called her "the mother of modern English Indian poetry".

Conversion to Islam

She was born in a conservative Hindu Nair (Nallappattu) family having royal ancestry, After being asked by her lover Sadiq Ali, an Islamic scholar and a Muslim League MP, she embraced Islam in 1999 at the age of 65 and assumed the name Kamala Surayya.

After converting, she wrote:

"Life has changed for me since Nov. 14 when a young man named Sadiq Ali walked in to meet me. He is 38 and has a beautiful smile. Afterwards he began to woo me on the phone from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, reciting Urdu couplets and telling me of what he would do to me after our marriage. I took my nurse Mini and went to his place in my car. I stayed with him for three days. There was a sunlit river, some trees, and a lot of laughter. He asked me to become a Muslim which I did on my return home."

Her conversion was rather controversial, among social and literary circles, with The Hindu calling it part of her "histrionics". She said she liked being behind the protective veil of the purdah. Later, she felt it was not worth it to change one's religion and said "I fell in love with a Muslim after my husband's death. He was kind and generous in the beginning. But I now feel one shouldn't change one's religion. It is not worth it.".

Politics

Though never politically active before, she launched a national political party, Lok Seva Party, aiming asylum to orphaned mothers and promotion of secularism. In 1984 she unsuccessfully contested in the Indian Parliament elections.

Personal Life

Kamala Das had three sons - M D Nalapat, Chinnen Das and Jayasurya Das. Madhav Das Nalapat, the eldest, is married to Princess Lakshmi Bayi (daughter of M.R.Ry. Sri Chembrol Raja Raja Varma Avargal) from the Travancore Royal House. He holds the UNESCO Peace Chair and Professor of geopolitics at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education. He was formerly a resident editor of the Times of India.

She had a sexual relationship with Sadiq Ali, an Islamic scholar who was much younger in age. She herself describes her visit to Sadiq Ali's home as follows:

"I was almost asleep when Sadiq Ali climbed in beside me, holding me, breathing softly, whispering endearments, kissing my face, breasts ... and when he entered me, it was the first time I had ever experienced what it was like to feel a man from the inside."

Womanhood in her Poetry

Das' uncanny honesty extends to her exploration of womanhood and love. In her poem "An Introduction" from Summer in Calcutta, the narrator says, "I am every/ Woman who seeks love" (de Souza 10). Though Amar Dwivedi criticizes Das for this "self imposed and not natural" universality, this feeling of oneness permeates her poetry (303). In Das' eyes, womanhood involves certain collective experiences. Indian women, however, do not discuss these experiences in deference to social mores. Das consistently refuses to accept their silence. Feelings of longing and loss are not confined to a private misery. They are invited into the public sphere and acknowledged. Das seems to insist they are normal and have been felt by women across time. In "The Maggots" from the collection, The Descendants, Das corroborates just how old the sufferings of women are. She frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths (de Souza 13). On their last night together, Krishna asks Radha if she is disturbed by his kisses. Radha says, "No, not at all, but thought, What is/ It to the corpse if the maggots nip?" (de Souza 6-7). Radha's pain is searing, and her silence is given voice by Das. Furthermore, by making a powerful goddess prey to such thoughts, it serves as a validation for ordinary women to have similar feelings.

Eroticism in her Poetry

Coupled with her exploration of women's needs is an attention to eroticism. The longing to lose one's self in passionate love is discussed in "The Looking Glass" from The Descendants. The narrator of the poem urges women to give their man "what makes you women" (de Souza 15). The things which society suggests are dirty or taboo are the very things which the women are supposed to give. The "musk of sweat between breasts/ The warm shock of menstrual blood" should not be hidden from one's beloved. In the narrator's eyes, love should be defined by this type of unconditional honesty. A woman should "Stand nude before the glass with him," and allow her lover to see her exactly as she is. Likewise, the woman should appreciate even the "fond details" of her lover, such as "the jerky way he/ Urinates". Even if the woman may have to live "Without him" someday, the narrator does not seem to favor bridling one's passions to protect one's self. A restrained love seems to be no love at all; only a total immersion in love can do justice to this experience. Much like the creators of ancient Tantric art, Das makes no attempt to hide the sensuality of the human form; her work seems to celebrate its joyous potential while acknowledging its concurrent dangers.

Feminism

Das once said, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little"(Warrior interview). Though some might label 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 52). Das' views can be characterized as "a gut response," a reaction that, like her poetry, is unfettered by other's notions of right and wrong. Nonetheless, poet Eunice de Souza claims that Das has "mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms". Das has ventured into areas unclaimed by society and provided a point of reference for her colleagues. She has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very honest woman.

Death

On 31 May 2009, aged 75, she died at a hospital in Pune. Her body was flown to her home state of Kerala. She was buried at the Palayam Juma Masjid at Thiruvanathapuram with full state honour.

Awards and other Recognitions

Kamala Das has received many awards for her literary contribution, including:
Nominated and shortlisted for Nobel Prize in 1984.
Asian Poetry Prize-1998
Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries-1999
Asian World Prize-2000
Ezhuthachan Award-2009
Sahitya Academy Award-2003
Vayalar Award2001
Kerala Sahitya Academy Award-2005
Muttathu Varkey Award

She was a longtime friend of Canadian writer Merrily Weisbord, who published a memoir of their friendship, The Love Queen of Malabar, in 2010.

Works:

English

1964: The Sirens (Asian Poetry Prize winner)
1965: Summer in Calcutta (poetry; Kent's Award winner)
1967: The Descendants (poetry)
1973: The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (poetry)
1976: My Story (autobiography)
1977: Alphabet of Lust (novel)
1985: The Anamalai Poems (poetry)
1992: Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories (collection of short stories)
1996: Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (poetry)
2001: Yaa Allah (collection of poems)
1979: Tonight,This Savage Rite (with Pritish Nandy)
1999: My Mother At Sixty-six (Poem)

Malayalam

1964: Pakshiyude Manam (short stories)
1966: Naricheerukal Parakkumbol (short stories)
1968: Thanuppu (short story, Sahitya Academi award)
1982: Ente Katha (autobiography)
1987: Balyakala Smaranakal (Childhood Memories)
1989: Varshangalkku Mumbu (Years Before)
1990: Palayan (novel)
1991: Neypayasam (short story)
1992: Dayarikkurippukal (novel)
1994: Neermathalam Pootha Kalam (novel, Vayalar Award)
1996: Chekkerunna Pakshikal (short stories)

1998: Nashtapetta Neelambari (short stories)
2005: Chandana Marangal (Novel)
2005: Madhavikkuttiyude Unmakkadhakal (short stories)2x
2005: Vandikkalakal (novel)
1999: My Mother At Sixty-six (Poem)

A Losing Battle

How can my love hold him when the other
Flaunts a gaudy lust and is lioness
To his beast? Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood.

Kamala Das

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 amIndian, very brown, born inMalabar,
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, halfIndian, 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.
WhenI 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.

Kamala Das

Annette

Annette,
At the dresser.
Pale fingers over mirror-fields
Reaping
That wheat brown hair.
Beauty
Falling as chaff in old mirrors,
While calenders
In all
The cities turn….

[From Only The Soul Knows How To Sing]

Kamala Das

Forest Fire

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest fire that
Consumes and with each killing gains a wilder,
Brighter charm, all that comes my way. Bald child in
Open pram, you think I only look, and you
Too, slim lovers behind the tree and you, old
Man with paper in your hand and sunlight in
Your hair... My eyes lick at you like flames, my nerves
Consume ; and, when I finish with you, in the
Pram, near the tree and, on the park bench, I spit
Out small heaps of ash, nothing else. But in me
The sights and smells and sounds shall thrive and go on
And on and on. In me shall sleep the baby
That sat in prams and sleep and wake and smile its
Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers hand
In hand and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of sun. In me, the street-lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, the
Wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl coloured
Skirts and sing sad songs of love, the wounded moan,
And in me the dying mother with hopeful
Eyes shall gaze around, seeking her child, now grown
And gone away to other towns, other arms."

Kamala Das

In Love

O 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.
Where is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each
Embrace a complete thing a finished
Jigsaw, when mouth on mouth, i lie,
Ignoring my poor moody mind
While pleasure, with deliberate gaeity
Trumpets harshly into the silence of
the room… At noon
I watch the sleek crows flying
Like poison on wings-and at
Night, from behind the Burdwan
Road, the corpse-bearers cry ‘Bol,
Hari Bol' , a strange lacing
For moonless nights, while I walk
The verandah sleepless, a
Million questions awake in
Me, and all about him, and
This skin-communicated
Thing that I dare not yet in
His presence call our love.

[From Summer in Calcutta]

Kamala Das

Krishna

Your body is my prison, Krishna,
I cannot see beyond it.
Your darkness blinds me,
Your love words shut out the wise world's din.

[From Only The Soul Knows How To Sing]

Kamala Das

Love

Until I found you,
I wrote verse, drew pictures,
And, went out with friends
For walks…
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel
My life lies, content,
In you….

[From Summer in Calcutta]

Kamala Das

My Grandmother's House

There is a house now far away where once
I received love……. That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books, I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon
How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog…you cannot believe, darling,
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?

Kamala Das

Punishment in Kindergarten

Today the world is a little more my own.
No need to remember the pain
A blue-frocked woman caused, throwing
Words at me like pots and pans, to drain
That honey-coloured day of peace.
'Why don't you join the others, what
A peculiar child you are! '

On the lawn, in clusters, sat my
schoolmates sipping
Sugarcane, they turned and laughed;
Children are funny things, they laugh
In mirth at others' tears, I buried
My face in the sun-warmed hedge
And smelt the flowers and the pain.

The words are muffled now, the laughing
Faces only a blur. The years have
Sped along, stopping briefly
At beloved halts and moving
Sadly on. My mind has found
An adult peace. No need to remember
That picnic day when I lay hidden
By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun
Standing lonely in the sky.

Kamala Das

Relationship

This love older than I by myriad
Saddened centuries was once a prayer
In his bones that made them grow in years of
Adolescence to this favored height; yes,
It was my desire that made him male
And beautiful, so that when at last we
Met, to believe that once I knew not his
Form, his quiet touch, or the blind kindness
Of 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.
Why care I for their quick sterile sting, while
My body's wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayer's arms...

Kamala Das

Summer in Calcutta

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
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. Wee bubblesring
my glass, like a brides
nervous smile, and meet
my lips. Dear, forgive
this moments lull in
wanting you, the blur
in memory. How
brief the term of my
devotion, how brief
your reign when i with
glass in hand, drink, drink,
and drink again this
Juice of April suns.

Kamala Das

The Dance of the Eunuchs

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... There were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some
Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and or children left unborn....
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children wide-eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....

[From Summer in Calcutta]

Kamala Das

The Freaks

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire. .... .Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers? Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence. .....
I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

Kamala Das

The Looking Glass

Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your
Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinates. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. A living without life when you move
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only
His last voice calling out your name and your
Body which once under his touch had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.

Kamala Das

The Maggots

At sunset, on the river ban, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...

That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

[from The Descendants]

Kamala Das

The Old Playhouse

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
Lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer
Begins to pall. I remember the rudder breezes
Of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves. Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,
For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

Kamala Das

The Rain

We left that old ungainly house
When my dog died there, after
The burial, after the rose
Flowered twice, pulling it by its
Roots and carting it with our books,
Clothes and chairs in a hurry.
We live in a new house now,
And, the roofs do not leak, but, when
It rains here, I see the rain drench
That empty house, I hear it fall
Where my puppy now lies,
Alone..

[From Only The Soul Knows How To Sing]

Kamala Das

The Stone Age

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby room,
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. And
Yet, on daydreams, strong men cast their shadows, they sink
Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood,
Secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities.
When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.
Though peep-holes, the neighbours watch,
they watch me come
And go like rain. Ask me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price....

[From The Old Playhouse and Other Poems]

Kamala Das

The Suicide

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.
Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead
Of the two?
I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell.
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of sea.
Only the souls know how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.
Your body shall be dead,
Poor thing,
Dead as driftwood, drifting
And drifting to the shore.
Your body shall ride the tide,
Rider, slumped dead
On white war-house.
Charging.
Your body shall bruise white
Against the coral reefs,
Your body,
Your lonely body.
I tell you, sea,
I have enough courage to die,
But not enough.
Not enough to disobey him
Who said: Do not die
And hurt me that certain way.
How easy your duties are.
How simple.
Only roar a hungry roar,
Leao forward,
And retreat.
You swing and you swing,
O sea, you play a child's game.
But,
I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.
I must keep the right distance
Between me and the low.
And I must keep the right distance
Between me and the high.
O sea, i am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved

And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead
While I enter deeper,
With joy I discover
The sea's hostile cold
Is after all skin-deep.
The sea's inner chambers
Are all very warm.
There must be a sun slumbering
At the vortex of the sea.
O sea, i am happy swimming
Happy, happy, happy ...
The only movement i know well
Is certainly the swim.
It comes naturally to me.
I had a house a Malabar
And a pale-green pond.
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months.
I swam about and floated,
And divided into the cold and green
I lay speckled green and gold
In all the hours of the sun,
Until
My grandmother cried,
Darling, you must stop this bathing now.
You are much too big to play
Naked in the pond.
Yes, the only movement i really know
Is swimming,
It comes naturally to me.
The white man who offers
To help me forget,
The white man who offers
Himself as a stiff drink,
Is for me,
To tell the truth,
Only water.
Only a pale-green pond
Glimmering in the sun.
In him I swim
All broken with longing.
In his robust blood i float
Drying off my tears.
Yet i never can forget
The only man who hurts.
The only one who seems to know
The only way to hurt.
Holding you is easy
Clutching at moving water,
I tell you, sea,

This is easy,
But to hold him for half a day
Was a difficult task.
It required drinks
To hold him down.
To make him love.
But, when he did not love,
Believe me,
All I could do was to sob like a fool.
O sea,
You generous cow,
You and I are big flops.
We are too sentimental
For our own
Good.
Lights are moving on the shore.
But I shall not return.
Sea, toss my body back
That he knew how to love.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be free.
Take in my naked soul
That he knew how to hurt.
Only the soul knows how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.

Kamala Das

The Sunshine Cat

They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh, to forget, and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.
They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears,
She said, walls to shut me in. Her husband shut her
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like
A yellow cat to keep her company, but soon
Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a half-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

Kamala Das

The Testing of the Sirens

The night, dark-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 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
anemia. 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 am 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 yoou? 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,
nineteen-thirty-four guns, 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 night, no more love, or peace, only
the white, white sun burning, burning, burning...
Ah, why does love come to me like pain
again and again and again?

Kamala Das

Winter

It smelt of new rains and of tender
Shoots of plants- and its warmth was the warmth
Of earth groping for roots… even my
Soul, I thought, must send its roots somewhere
And, I loved his body without shame,
On winter evenings as cold winds
Chuckled against the white window-panes.

[From Summer in Calcutta]

Kamala Das

Words

All round me are words, and words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop their slow growing
From within... But I tell my self, words
Are a nuisance, beware of them, they
Can be so many things, a
Chasm where running feet must pause, to
Look, a sea with paralyzing waves,
A blast of burning air or,
A knife most willing to cut your best
Friend's throat... Words are a nuisance, but.
They grow on me like leaves ona tree,
They never seem to stop their coming,
From a silence, somewhere deep within...

Kamala Das