UNIT 12: KAMALA DAS: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- appreciate Kamala Das as an Indian English poet
- discuss the life and works of the poet
- assess the significance of Kamala Das poetry

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we discussed the major Indian English poets and their works apart from receiving a brief overview on Indian English poetry. This unit intends to introduce you to one of the woman poets of India whose name is Kamala Das and who has immensely contributed to the development of Indian English poetry over the years. A significant aspect of her poetry is the range of subjects that include her own womanly response to a male dominated society with her unique poetic style. She occupies an important place among the poets of modern Indian poetry written in English.

12.3 KAMALA DAS : THE POET

Kamala Das was an Indian writer who wrote both in English and Malayalam, which is also her mother tongue. She has written under

pseudonyms like Madhavikutty and Kamala Suraiyya. However, she is better known as an Indian English poet, a short story writer, a novelist, a playwright, an essayist, a nonfiction writer, a children's writer, and an auto-biographer. Do you feel like knowing more about this great woman poet from India? Let us then learn about her life and works in the following sections.

12.3.1 Her Life

Kamala Das was born on 31st March in 1934 at Punnayurkulam in Southern Malabar in Kerala. It is interesting to note that she received her education mainly at home. Her father's name was V. M. Nair and her mother's name was Nalappatt Balamani Amma, who was a renowned Malayali poetess. So, naturally Kamala **inherited** her talent as a writer from her mother. However, it is to be noted that she did not start writing professionally until she got married at an early age and became a mother.



Inherit: derive qualities from parents or ancestors

Embrace: accept and take an idea or religion willingly

Controversial: causing controversy which means angry discussion or arguments about something which many people disagree with

Kamala Das' first book, *Summer In Calcutta* was a promising start. She wrote mainly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent suffering. At the age of 42, she published her autobiography *My Story*, which is a source of information regarding the facts of her life. In this autobiography she has discussed the tightly knit Kerala society from where she was uprooted when her father was tansferred to Calcutta. For some time she attended a Catholic boarding school but suddenly, at the young age of 16, she married a cousin for whom she had little affection. This led her to serious troubles in her married life as her husband was busy more with his career than with her emotional needs. This came as a blow to her womanly ego as she felt that her expectations of life would not be fulfilled. Naturally, Das turned towards other thoughts like pursuing a career in writing that would enable her to express her hidden feelings. It is interesting to note that so many of her poems are about the memories of her childhood and her family home at Kerala. In her poems there has always been an idealized vision of childhood as reflected in her famous poem "My Grandmother's House".

She was born in a conservative Hindu Nair family having Royal ancestry. But, she **embraced** Islam in 1999 at the age of 65 and assumed the name Kamala Suraiyya. Her conversion was somewhat **controversial** among

the social and literary circles both inside and outside Kerala. Kamala Das died on May 31, 2009 at the age of 75.

12.3.2 Her Works

After you have read briefly about the life of Kamala Das, you should have some more idea about her works which include a number of genres like poetry, short story, novel, autobiography etc. But, it is primarily as a poet that she enjoys a national as well as international reputation. In this connection it is worthwhile to mention what she felt like being a poet. She felt that a poet should always try to capture the moments of deeply personal experience in all its uniqueness and immediacy. As a bilingual writer, Kamala Das has published extensively both in English and Malayalam. Some of her best known works in English include a novel entitled *Alphabet of Lust* (1977) and a collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992). In addition to these, she has written five books of poetry: *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996) which is a collection of poetry with Pritish Nandy (1990), and her famous autobiography, *My Story* (1976).

Her poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta* marks a new beginning in Indian English poetry. Das' contemporary Indian poets wrote mainly about British Colonialism, about Indian traditions and legends, and about the peasants in the villages. But deviating from this tradition, Kamala Das moved towards writing more about personal experiences and feelings. This collection also marks a significant development in the life of the poet. The period between 1968 and 1973 seemed to be less productive poetically as Das devoted much of her time to prose-writings. It is interesting to note that almost all her prose works are autobiographical. Hence, you will never find them difficult to understand once you start reading them in detail. One of her short stories, "Frigidity and the Sepia Tainted Photograph" clearly expresses her feelings for love and emotional discontent. Her other powerful writings are available in the

form of essays such as, "I Studied all Men", "What Women Expect out of Marriage and What They Get", "Why Not More than One Husband?". But, these essays only led to more controversies. Yet these works established Kamala Das as a writer who was unconventional but honest. *My Story*, her autobiography was serialized in *The Current Weekly* from January to December, 1974. Similar autobiographical prose pieces like "I Study All Men" were published in the reputed magazine *Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1971.



LET US KNOW

Kamala Das' work in English has been widely anthologized in India, Australia, and the West, and she has won various prestigious awards in recognition of her talent as a poet. She was given the Philippines Asian Poetry Prize (1963), the Poetry Award of The Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, Chiman Lal Award for fearless journalism (1971), the ASAN World Prize (1985), and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 for *Cold*, a collection of short stories in Malayalam. Her poems have been published in *Opinion*, *New Writing in India* (Penguin Books, 1974) and *Young Commonwealth Poets* (Heinemann, 1965)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Mention True or False :

a. Kamala Das inherited her poetic talents from her father. (True/False)

b. *Summer In Calcutta* is her first important poetry collection (True/False)

c. Many of her poems refer to her childhood days (True/False)

d. Kamala Das has never won any awards (True/False)

Q2: Fill in the gaps :

a. Kamala Das has written extensively in ..... and .....

b. All her prose works are .....

c. Das has written more about .....

d. The name of her autobiography is .....

Q3: Name the best known works in English by Kamala Das.



12.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have read about one of the important Indian poets writing in English. We have also read about the life and works of the poet. We need to refer to our reading on the poet's life because her poetic works are personal and confessional in nature.



12.5 FURTHER READING

1. Paniker, K. Ayyappa (ed.). (1991), *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Sahitya Akademi: New Delhi, 1991.

2. Parthasarathy R. (ed.). (1976). *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. OUP: New Delhi, 1976.

3. King, Bruce. (1987). *Modern Indian Poetry in English.* New Delhi: OUP, 1987.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamala_Surayya



12.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: a. False b. True

c. True d. False

Ans to Q2: a. English and Malayalam

b. Autobiographical

c. Personal Experiences and Feelings

d. *My Story*

Ans to Q3: *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996)



12.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Assess the significance of Kamala Das as an 'Indian' poet?

Q 2: Discuss the life and works of Kamala Das.

Q 3: Do you think Kamala Das' writing was inspired by her troubled marriage? Discuss.

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