UNIT 13: KAMALA DAS: "AN INTRODUCTION"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- explain the poem "An Introduction"
- write on the poetic techniques of Kamala Das
- appreciate the poem in its totality

13.2 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier unit, we discussed the life and literary contributions of one of the most prominent Indian English woman poets. This unit deals with Kamala Das' poem "An Introduction". How many of you feel that in our society women are oppressed and suppressed by men? Her poem "An Introduction" will be an interesting poem to read in this regard. Kamala Das often speaks with honesty and courage about the difficulties and problems of being a woman and a wife in a male-dominated Indian society. By the time you finish reading the poem "An Introduction", you will be able to discuss these issues thoroughly. The poem "An Introduction" has been taken from the collection of poems *Summer in Calcutta* published in 1965. It is always better if you can read the

other poems of Kamala Das and try to know the main themes and issues of Das as a poet.

13.3 TEXT OF THE POEM



Mother Tongue: the language that one first learned to speak as a child.

Critics: commonly refers to persons who express opinions about good and bad qualities of books, music, movies, etc.

Distort: to change the shape.

Queerness: state of being strange or unusual.

Cawing: loud, unpleasant sound made by crows.

Deaf: unable to hear anything or hear very well.

Blind: being unable to see.

Incoherent: unable to express oneself clearly.

Mutterings: complaints expressed privately rather than openly.

You have already read in the previous unit that this poem, "An Introduction" has been taken from her poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta.* This poem has 58 lines and is often considered to be one of her best known English poems. Please read the poem as it appears below and try to comprehend what the poet wants to say.

"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 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 is to 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 quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Army, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Chose 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 who seeks love. In him… the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me… the ocean's 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
If in this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its **sheath**. It is I who drink lonely



Funeral Pyre: Funeral or cremation ceremony.

Shrink: to become smaller.

Schizophrenia: a mental illness in which a person becomes unable to link thought, emotion and behaviour.

Nympho: a woman who has, or wants to have, sex very often.

Sheath: any covering that fits closely over the blade of a knife/sword.



Rattle: make short sharp sounds quickly.

Betray: to hurt somebody who trusts you, especially by not being loyal or faithful to them.

Aches: pains.

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, 55
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 58

13.4 EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

It is important to note that the poem "An Introduction" is one of the best remembered poems of Kamala Das. You will note that this poem presents two very significant themes of her poetry—the theme of isolation of the self and the attempt of the self to express itself in human terms. The poem begins with a statement that shows her frank distaste for politics, especially in the post-independence India. The irony is that in such a 'free' India, women have little importance and are not allowed to play any significant role in family, as well as, in society.

From the very beginning, the poet speaks for her 'Indian' self by asserting that she is an Indian by birth and in heart, as she says:

"I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one." (Lines: 4-6)

You will also be interested to note that the poem "An Introduction" is cited as a powerful argument of an Indian writer who wants to write in the English language. This is because, when the Indian poets began to write in English, there were questions raised against their use of English as a medium of expression. Self-made critics felt that poets born and brought up in India are not in a position to express themselves clearly in the English language because English is not their native language. She writes:

"Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue" (Lines: 6-8)

Kamala Das does not listen to them and she instead argues:

“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

India, funny perhaps, but is honest,

It is as human as I am human” (Lines: 9-14).

In these lines the poet not only asserts her right to speak any of the three languages but also defends her choice to write in English. She does not like to be advised in this matter by any guardians, friends, relatives or anybody. This shows that Kamala Das is a bold writer and she is not afraid of anything. She further tells that she seeks freedom while using English because just like her mother tongue Malayalam, English is just another language. She further writes that English—

“Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is

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

Is aware.” (Lines: 18-20)

Many of Kamala Das’ poems are famous for autobiographical elements. It is because she borrows her materials from her own life. ‘‘An Introduction’’ is also a poem where the autobiographical strain draws attention of the serious readers. The poem throws light on the growth and development of the poet in her family. As she gradually became older, her experiences led her to write poetry. As a child she lived a happy life with all her family members but the paradise of childhood was lost when she became a grown up girl and had to face the problems of life. As we find her saying:

“I was child, and later they

Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs

Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.” (Lines: 23-25)

Kamala Das is a poet well known for her individuality and self-

exploration. With honesty and candour she asserts her right to live like a true individual with a distinctive identity of her own. She does not want the traditional role of a housewife who is always busy with family matters. She raises her voice against the senseless traditions of **patriarchy** that would indict women as inferior and confined to domesticity. This idea is broadly indicated when she says:

"…Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook

Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, Oh

Belong, cried the categorizers." (Lines: 33-36).

But, Kamala Das is fed up with such traditional roles of a woman. She is not ready to resign herself to such traditional roles that will disregard her individuality. Instead she chooses the role of an 'army' and also asks the same from the other fellow women. She therefore argues:

"Be Any, or be Kamala. Or, better

Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to

Chose a name, a role." (Lines: 38-40)



Patriarchy: system of society or country often controlled by the male head.

Taboos: prohibition on something that is regarded for religious or other reasons as not to be done, touched and used.

In this way, Das has always challenged the traditional ideas and notions of society. On the one hand she is asserting her own identity, and on the other, she is attacking the domination of the male both in family and society. Such a stand in her poetry adds to her uniqueness as a poet and to the richness of her poetry.

The idea of choosing a role leads us to another theme in her poetry—**the theme of womanhood**. For Kamala Das, womanhood involves certain collective experiences of both male and female. Indian women, however, do not discuss these experiences, as they are afraid of the **taboos** of their society. She is very out-spoken and straightforward. This is implied in these lines:

"I met a man, loved him. Call

Him not by any name, he is every man

Who wants a woman who seeks love. In him…the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me…the ocean’s tireless

Waiting.” (Lines: 43-47)

If you read the poems of some of the Indian English poets, you will notice that the idea of Romantic love is treated without any such depth, complexity and interest. Her poetry is filled with an unsurpassable openness about self expression that is evoked by her deeply personal poems. Her feelings of isolation and suffering are part of her larger-than-life personality. This is best reflected in these concluding lines of the poem:

“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” (Lines: 51-58).

In such lines, Kamala Das emerges as a deeply personal poet who is aware of her own life in the fullest possible sense.

You must have seen in the above discussion that this poem, ‘‘An Introduction’’ reflects some of the most important ideas and themes of Kamala Das’ poetry. From the very beginning, the ‘I’ persona dominates the poem. This is another way to assert her identity in a male dominated society. You can feel the presence of an unusual candour on the part of the poet to talk about herself and bring the readers to share her experiences as a woman victimized by a male dominated society, as an individual who will lead her life in her own terms. The poem ‘‘An Introduction’’ thus brings to the limelight the private experiences of a woman and suggests that her feelings of longing and loss of self identity are part of the experience of an Indian woman anywhere in India. That is why perhaps, critics have defined Kamala Das as a ‘‘confessional’’ poet.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Chose the correct answer :

a. The Poem "An Introduction" is–

1. Autobiographical
2. Political
3. Religious

b. The Poem "An Introduction" talks about

1. The Isolation of the Self
2. The womanhood of the poet
3. The individuality of the poet
4. Identity of a female poet in a male dominated world

Q2: Briefly discuss Kamala Das' sense of identity and self exploration? (60 words)

13.5 POETIC TECHNIQUES

Kamala Das' great achievements are seen in her particular use of a poetic style filled with idioms and her choice of verbs and syntax. This is a great accomplishment. There is a realistic overtone in whatever Das writes and this becomes clear from the graphic descriptions of her feelings for different people at different stages of her life in her poetry. Kamala Das' poetic style is seen through her use of images and symbols. However, unlike Das' other poems, which are significant for the use of imagery and symbols, this poem "An Introduction" is quite descriptive and explanatory in nature. Written in the style of 'free verse' this poem tells a basic story. However, while telling the story, the poet uses words and phrases, which are very easy to understand in the context of India. From the very beginning, Das stresses the point that she is an Indian and she should be given freedom while using English as a language of self expression. But, it is interesting to note how she extends her concerns from

being a writer to being a woman and a wife in a male centric world. In order to express her exact feelings she has used images like "trees in storm", "monsoon clouds" or "blazing funeral pyre." These are clearly symbolic of the helplessness and sufferings of a woman in her society. The atrocities and tortures done on the women are further intensified by the use of the image of a 'shrinking' woman who is unable to bear the weight of her own body. So, she decides not to remain submissive like other women. Nor does she like to be a "schizophrenic" or a "nympho" and is desperate to fulfill her physical and emotional needs.

Kamala Das is expert in using opposite ideas. She compares male "haste" with female "tirelessness" as she writes in the lines: "In him… the hungry haste/ Of rivers, in me… the ocean's tireless/Waiting." (Lines: 45-47). This is also a striking example of Das' use of contradictions in her poems. Her use of metaphors and similes becomes explicit when she terms her husband/lover as tightly packed like a "the Sword in its sheath."(Line: 51) This is a beautiful way to symbolize the stubborn and dominating nature of the males she has met in her life as reflected in her poem. Like the sword inside the sheath all the male in our society like to remain rigid and stubborn. They will never change their place in society. Such a style of writing or use of words is an attempt made by the Indian writers to free themselves from the influences of the English poets. Kamala Das, by using such expressions, has tried to create a literary trend based on local speech in India. This has been a great achievement on the part of Kamala Das as a poet. Her poetry has less variety but her poetry is filled with intensity and emotional honesty.



13.6 LET US SUM UP

You have just finished reading about the poem "An Introduction" by Kamala Das who has gained international fame by virtue of her bold expression of self identity and **feminine** urges. By this time, you find that Kamala Das has been a very significant Indian poet and her poem "An Introduction" is based on her own personal experiences as a woman, as a wife and as a writer. You have also gained necessary information regarding her life



Feminine: of or like women or having the qualities or appearance considered to be characteristic of women.

and works. Her early poems are primarily concerned with her marriage, love life and desire for intimacy. There has always been a basic story which Kamala Das wants to tell in all her poetry. This is what is very obvious in her poem "An Introduction". The poem focuses on her life history as an Indian woman, as a mother and as a writer. You must have gained enough ideas regarding the point that by writing such a poem, Kamala Das tried to liberate the women from the bondage of slavery in a male dominated society.



13.7 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



13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: a. Autobiographical.

b. All are correct.

Ans to Q2: Kamala Das is a poet well known for her individuality and self-exploration. Because she asserts her right to live like a true individual with a distinctive identity of her own. She does not like the traditional role of a house maker always busy with family matters. Instead she chooses to be a woman who should always challenge traditional ideas and notions of society.



13.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Give a summary of the poem "An Introduction".

Q 2: Discuss the theme of isolation and womanhood that Kamala Das expresses in the poem "An Introduction".

Q 3: Discuss the poetic style of Kamala Das as reflected in the poem "An Introduction"

Q 4: How does Kamala Das criticize the male in her society in the poem?

Q 5: Find out the autobiographical elements in the poem "An Introduction."

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