

KAMALA DAS

KAMALA DAS (Madhavikutty) was born in Malabar in 1934. Both her mother and grandfather were poets in Malayalam. She started writing poetry while in school, but before contributing to Indian poetry in English, she had won fame as a Malayalam writer. In 1963, she won the PEN's Asian Poetry Prize. Her first volume, *Summer in Calcutta*, appeared in 1965, and *The Descendants* in 1967. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, published in 1973, brought her wide popularity and recognition.

Albert Mordel says that "works of the imagination open up to the reader hidden vistas in man's inner life just as dreams do." In Kamala Das this opening of the hidden vistas forms the matrix of her entire poetry. She writes in the confessional mode which is walking on the razor's edge. The poets in this cast may be lured towards callow hysterics or terrifying mysticism. Kamala Das is free from either. Her poetry has often been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over-exposer of body or 'snippets of trivia.' But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poet is the poetry fully obliterating Eliot's distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating. "A poet's raw material," she says, "is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment." Her poetry has been compared to that of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Judith Wright. Her poetic corpus configures an inner voyage, an awareness beyond skin's lazy hungers to the hidden soul. It enacts her quest, an exploration into her self and seeking of her identity

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 queerness
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 muttering 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 saris, 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 Kamla, 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
If in the 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 die 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.

THE FREAKS

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right

without arms and legs, may be excellent in form, in dynamics of movement and muscles but it is incomplete and lacking in life. The poet longs for fullness of the whole human figure.

The poem is characteristically lucid and speaks of Nissim Ezekiel's competence in phrasing, in using common words for eloquent expression. The last sentence is ironic in tone.

An Introduction

The poem begins with the dilemma of language and ends with an assertion of identity. It explores the crust of the poet's self, who is an individual woman and also, in many ways, an everywoman. It is frankly confessional, terrifyingly authentic, and exclusively an articulate voice of the feminine sensibility.

The poem is turbulently human, quite unconcerned with the objective world of Nature. The poet attempts to nativise English language.

My sad woman-body . . . crushed me shows the agony of a woman craving for the joy of the soul rather than the bliss of body.

The hungry haste of rivers, and the ocean's tireless waiting are evocative, tender and suggestive images, objective correlates to psychic states.

The last five lines show complexity and completeness of experience combining the saint and the sinner, the beloved and the betrayed. Her unique individuality is revealed here.

The Freaks

A confessional poem where the speaking female voice unburdens the torture of her heart. It is a poem on lack of human communication, the failure of man-woman relationship. They have lived together for long but like islands unto themselves. While they intend or pretend to make love, their minds wander. What she grudges most is the man's shallowness, his physical hunger, his lip-love. He could never cross skin's surface; the hearts never met. Her heart remained an empty cistern. Her