



## KAMALA DAS: UNDERSTANDING HERSELF AS FEMINIST

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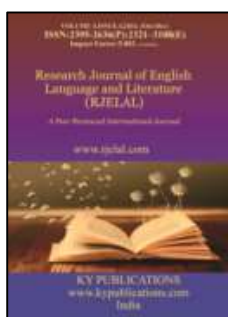
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### ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to disseminate Indian English-language literature through the work of Kamala Das, one of the most renowned representatives of English-language poetry in India. Born in 1939, she published her first book in 1965 and died in 2009. Local author inserted in Modernism, her work caused a rupture in relation to the writing that women had been doing in their country by daring to speak about themselves with intensity and passion, dealing with themes as their own sexual experiences outside of marriage, marked by a game of domination between male and female. Before her, names like Monika Varma, considered the main Indian poet, did not express their internal conflicts with such sincerity and subjectivity. In addition, Das invests Indian poetry in expressions of the so-called Indian English, a practice that earned him criticism from purists. Kamala Das influenced a new generation of Indian poetry that also focused on self-preferentiality.

**Keywords:** Kamala Das, Indian poetry, women's writing, sexuality, Indian English

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The tragedy of life / is not death but growth,  
/ the child growing into adult. In my free translation:  
The tragedy of life is not death, it is growing up, the  
child becoming an adult. These verses from the  
poem "Composition" ("Composition"), by Kamala  
Das illustrate the existential tension that marks the  
work of this who is one of the great names in Indian  
literature. Kamala Das - from now on KD

- wrote novels, short stories, essays and  
embarked on other arts such as painting. But its  
notability was achieved through innovative and, at  
times, transgressive poetic work, starting with the  
option, not common then, to produce in English and  
Malayalam simultaneously.

Through this article, I intend to demonstrate  
how Kamala Das innovated not only aesthetically,  
but mainly thematically by giving a confessional tone  
to his poetic work. To develop this proposal, I  
initially bring a brief overview of the Indian literary

scene of the 20th century, with the intention of  
contextualizing the production in English.

Next, I present the artist and her work  
through fragments of her poems. The option for  
KD's poetic production is due to the objective of  
emphasizing his transgressive bias in the face of a  
scenario centered on political and social issues. A  
few poems of his own were translated into  
Portuguese from Portugal, which led me to carry out  
the translations I present here, choosing to keep in  
the body of the text the original version in English -  
or the translation into English of texts originally  
written in Malayalam, by the author herself, who, as  
I said, produced in both languages. To speed up the  
reading, I decide to present the translations of both  
the cited theoretical texts and the poems.

The linguistic question, moreover, is  
discussed in the context of post-colonial criticism,  
understanding that in the context of contemporary

India it is imperative to consider what Meedeb calls “subtle politics of the poetic” (Meedeb apud Deângelil, 2015, p.3), in to the extent that producing literary English in a former colony of the British Empire raises tensions in different social spheres, as will be explained later.

I am careful, in my research, to bring into the dialogue theorists who have a closer relationship with the Indian, or Eastern cultural context, in order to enrich the discussions and, also, avoid singular views regarding themes so specific to that cultural context from which artistic production emerges. Thus, Homi Bhaba on hybridity articulates with Bruce King a scholar of Indian English-speaking literature. As for the discussion within the scope of feminist criticism, I choose the thinkers who have been developing research and debates around the writing of women in India, with emphasis on Gayatri C. Spivak, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, the latter responsible for one of the most rich in this theme, formalized in two volumes entitled “Women Writing in India”.

The importance of the linguistic scenario for the delineation of the corpus of contemporary Indian literature is indisputable. Although some languages have already become extinct, it is possible to recognize about 14 official languages and approximately 144 dialects in use. Some of them are better known in the West, such as the country's official language, Hindi, and Bengali, the language used by Rabindranath Tagore - in addition to English -, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1933. Not all have records of literary production. However, there are enough of them that the best designation is Indian Literature instead of the singular correspondent. Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya (or Odia), Telugu, Urdu, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati, Hindi and Bengali are some of the most literary.

It is worth mentioning that the literature that was produced in Sanskrit continues to circulate in the country, mainly through hymns and religious rituals. Therefore, it has an importance attached to Hindu traditions especially. As it is not part of the excerpt of this text, I will not expand on this literature, but I think it is important to emphasize its importance and presence in the current scenario.

Because they are of different linguistic trunks, these languages and dialects can even have very different characters from one another, making oral communication between people distant, sometimes only 20 kilometers apart. It is common for Indians to use 2 to 5 different languages according to their demand and internal circulation. The situation becomes dramatic in the editorial context: how to publish texts in those languages that have no national reach? Consider that even Hindi itself has no national reach. Therefore, the practice of translation is understood as a form of editorial inclusion, and, for this study, the only way to rescue writers who do not use / used English. Still, a very complex experience, which can be glimpsed in the account of Tharu and Lalita, publishers already mentioned above:

We have been very aware that in India when we translate a regional language - Tamil or Oriya, for instance - into English, we are representing a regional culture for a more powerful national or “Indian” one, and when this translation is made available to a readership outside India, we are also representing a national culture for a still more powerful international culture - which is today, in effect, a Western one. (THARU & LALITA, 1993, p.xx) 2

These implicit and inherent power relations in the act of translating demonstrate the complexity of publishing a work in India and the dynamics involved when it is intended to expand its scope from a global perspective. This discussion crosses the objective of this article and, for this reason, it will not be developed even if it proves pertinent. I believe I have made it clear that I focus on the local perspective, while pointing out the importance of the global scenario. Especially because many women produce literature in India, but few reach us here in Brazil. In addition, the local context is, of course, less known to the Brazilian reading public.

In this local scenario, how is English-language literature inserted? There is no doubt that this literature is one of the youngest, if not the youngest in the country. The first records date from the end of 1700. However, it is the ambiguity of his condition

that attracts the attention of any scholar. On the one hand, it is the language that guarantees the circulation of works internally since English is still an institutionalized language. On the other hand, the language is still associated with English colonization and the complicit colonialism of Indian elites, responsible for the elitization of the language and those who dominate it. In other words, it is one of the unhealed wounds of the colonial experience that continues to be lived with a greater or lesser impact as each artist faces it individually or collectively. A recent example is the debate over anthologies of Indian literature. Some organizers consider local authors, others do not, justifying this option by the greater or lesser notability that obviously depends - as I said earlier - on the English translation.

I believe that a speech that enhances the discussion comes from the collaboration of an Indian writer to the newspaper The New York Time. It is worth checking the full text as it is available in electronic version, but the following excerpt gives an idea of the complexity of the issue:

But around the time of my parents' generation, a break began to occur. Middle-class parents started sending their children in ever greater numbers to convent and private schools, where they lost the deep bilingualism of their parents, and came away with English alone. The Indian languages never recovered. Growing up in Delhi in the 1980s, I spoke Hindi and Urdu, but had to self-consciously relearn them as an adult. Many of my background didn't bother.

This meant that it was not really possible for writers like myself to pursue a serious career in an Indian language. We were forced instead to make a roundabout journey back to India. We could write about our country, but we always had to keep an eye out for what worked in the West. It is a shameful experience; it produces feelings of irrelevance and inauthenticity. (TASEER, 2015)<sup>3</sup>

This reading, so current, can serve as a reference for us to better understand what it meant

to write in English in the 50s of the 20th century in India. Context in which KD built his career. Born in March 1934, she died in 2009, at the age of 75. He also signed as Madhavikutty. Although born into a traditional Hindu family, the Nair, she converted to Islam in 1999. She started writing at 15, the same age she married. Her first text was published in 1948. Her husband was an encourager of her and marriage was one of her great themes. Despite being married, KD was free to live whatever sexual experiences he wanted, with the acquiescence of his partner. Having lived a serene childhood, protected by a privileged family in every way - his mother and uncle were also writers - marriage at such a young age and with this format are recurrent elements in his extensive poetic work. There are dozens of books, mostly poems.

She was directly involved in the politics of her country, becoming a candidate for a position equivalent to that of deputy in our country. However, his most significant political action was to insert Indian English into poetry, suffering much criticism for that.

KD is an example that as it was possible for her, an Indian woman, who also wrote in the regional language, Malayalam, and who decided to adopt her own sexuality as one of her main themes, she built a successful literary career, being recognized through several awards, being nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984.

Her first book of poems *Summer in Calcutta* (*Summer in Calcutta*), published in 1965, brought her distinctive voice in a context in which Indian writers were beginning to migrate from nationalist themes and the rewriting of classic texts to a more intimate and personal experience. He immediately became one of the exponents of his generation, precisely because of his confessional character and the way he freed his writing from the conventionalism inherited from the influence of English literature.

A significant part of his work deals with this lost childhood, as was evident in the verses that open this article and in the verses that follow, a fragment of the poem "My Grandmother's house":

... 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?  
(DAS, apud KING, 1992,p.148)4

The verses allude not only to the happy past, but also to this present lacking in affection. In her texts she constantly refers to this loneliness felt after dating. One such example is the verse from the poem "The corridors" ("The corridors"):

... once awake, I

See the bed from which my love Has fled,  
the empty room, the Naked walls, count  
on fingers

My very few friends. (DAS, apud KING,  
1992, p.148) 5

This confessional tone with which she deals with her extramarital loves and sexuality itself, unashamedly approaching this experience for her so contradictory between pleasure and suffering is clear in poems such as "Substitute", from which I extracted the following verses :

End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free.

This freedom was our last strange toy. Like  
the hangman's rope, even while new It  
could give no prive. Nor even joy.

We kissed and we loved, all in a fury. For  
another short hour or two

We went all warm and wild and lovely.

After that love became a swivel-door,

When one went out, another came in.  
(DAS, apud KING, 1992,p.152) 6

Thus, it is possible to observe this contradiction inherent in the search for love and intimacy, but through fleeting relationships that brought frustration and loneliness. It is this contradiction that will sustain an uncontrolled search for oneself. That childhood lost by the early entry into a marriage without affection - which, incidentally, lasted all her life - is the place where the naive girl that the lyrical self tries to rescue without success lived.

In carrying out this brief study of KD's work, I aimed to provoke a discussion about the post-colonial poetic production carried out in India. This poet distinguished himself by daring to talk about himself when the moment was to rewrite the national identity. Despite writing in English, she is not characterized as a hybrid writer, unless we take Bhabha's hybridism as a reference, applying it to the phallogocentric discourse that silenced (and silences, in a way) Indian artists regarding sexuality . In this regard, KD destabilizes this norm and opens his intimacy when dealing with love without affection and without guilt, but with pleasure.

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