

# Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

## Reinstalling Female Identity: An Investigation into the Selected Works of Kamala Das

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**Abstract:** Kamala Das (1934-2009) is a pioneering figure in the post-colonial women's struggle for reinstalling female identity and individuality. She is a role model for the helpless women who want to raise voice against patriarchy, but can not, owing to lack of courage. Through her works Das has shown how to reclaim the fundamental rights they are deprived of for long. Her confessional mode of writing has inspired women how to create and write their own history that is free from masculine autonomy. Her works switch on a red signal to the age-old roles assigned to women. In short, Kamala Das's works are a collective call to women to create a world characterized by equality and liberty. This bold assertion of Kamala Das has found wide space in multiple feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Bell Hooks and many others.

**Keywords:** Female identity, Kamla Das, Feminist, patriarchy, liberty

### Introduction

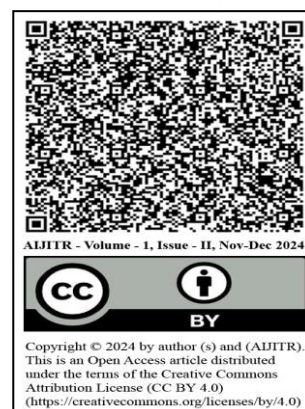
Kamala Das (1934–2009) remains one of the leading inspiring Indian English poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her works, distinguished for their frank and bold study of female individuality, identity, physicality, and the subtleties of womanhood, interrogate the conventional patriarchal attitude towards women. At the same time her works are collectively a voice to the unvoiced personal and emotional experiences of women in a male-dominated society. Kamala Das has underlined the necessity for the women to coming out with full voice and vitality, spirit and spontaneity to reclaim their identity by challenging the male autonomy.

Though her works are deeply rooted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they carry the requirements with them that are essential to embellish the Indian English literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 21<sup>st</sup> century which is notable for its increasing gender consciousness, has re-examined Kamala Das's poetry as an inseparable and unavoidable endowment to feminist discourse and a weapon to recuperate female identity in postcolonial India.

This paper explores how poetry of Kamala Das stands out as a strong platform for the reclamation of female identity, unmasking her presentation of gender roles, sexual autonomy, and capturing individual identity defeating the limitations of societal expectations.

### Theoretical Framework

To explore how Kamala Das has tried to reestablish female identity through her works, several feminist theories of multiple theorists from different contexts and regions, have been investigated. The theories of the 'second sex', the 'other', the 'self', 'sexuality' 'motherhood' of Simone de Beauvoir; 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' of Adrienne Rich;



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DOI (Crossref) Prefix: <https://dx.doi.org/10.63431/AIJITR/1.II.2024.5-9>

AIJITR, Volume-1, Issue-II, November - December 2024, PP. 5-9.

Revised and accepted on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024, Published: 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024



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'performativity', 'fluidity' and 'heteronormativity' of Judith Butler, 'écriture féminine' of Helene Cixous, 'subaltern' and of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and 'intersectionality' of Bell Hooks, have been drawn upon.

### A. Simone de Beauvoir and Kamala Das

The *Second Sex* (1949) is a trail-blazing seminal work in feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir. This work has influenced to a large extent the works of many female writers in their method of addressing the 'stereotype' labelled against women. Kamala Das's poetry, in this regard, is a powerful poetic reflection of de Beauvoir's ideas. Like de Beauvoir's writing, Kamla Das's poetry blurs the traditional image of women and unveils the social bars that clog them. Both have questioned the gender gap and inspired women to give voice to their desires, frustrations, and aspirations. If we study the intersection of these two thinkers, we can discover relevant matches between de Beauvoir's feminist ideas and Das's poetic presentation of female identity.

#### A.1 The idea of "The Other", "The Second"

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir opines that traditionally woman has been defined in relation to man, as "the other" or the "second." Men have been looked upon as a level or standard to judge the standard or acceptability of women. This idea of Simone de Beauvoir is evident in her insightful assertion: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

Similarly, Kamala Das's poetry echoes de Beauvoir's notion of women as "the other." In her poems, such as "An Introduction" and "The Looking Glass," Kamala Das exposes the way society has doctored certain molded roles for the women as wife, mother, or daughter. So, Kamla Das puts it in her "An Introduction":

"I am sinner, I am saint. I am the beloved and the betrayed."

These lines clearly exemplify de Beauvoir's "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." In another poem of this kind, "The Looking Glass", Das complains about how women are desired and compelled to play the roles assigned to them by the society. Thus, both the works of Kamala Das touch the ideas of Simon de Beauvoir quite clearly.

#### A.2 Idea of "Self"

Another very important idea that Simon de Beauvoir has touched upon in *The Second Sex* is the fact that women must free themselves from being the "other" of men and instead establish themselves as autonomous. In order to attain this state women must come up with their individuality and spontaneity, dreams and desires, subjective thoughts and feelings. They should maneuver their own ways. This spirit of assertion and freedom is graphically presented in Kamala Das's poems like "The Old Playhouse" and "The Invitation,". The poems divulge how the speaker is dissatisfied with the restrictions imposed on women. In these poems, the speaker questions the long-established roles and airs a yearning for self. In "The Old Playhouse," Das writes:

"I was not meant to be / Your servant and your slave, / To run your house and cook your meals."

The lines poignantly express the refusal of the speaker to follow the defined roles of wife and homemaker. This frank and bold confession testifies de Beauvoir's call for women to shape and structure their own world. In another poem "The Invitation," the speaker strongly nays the expectations ascribed to her as a mother and wife. The speaker keenly desires to fly away into a world where they will not be chained with the fetters of familial and societal expectations. This again echoes the idea of Beauvoir.

#### A.3 The Question of Sexuality



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Apart from the question of “other” and “self”, the idea of sexuality and body finds an important space in *The Second Sex*. According to Simon de Beauvoir women are tools of reproduction. They are the objects to satisfy the carnal desires of men. They are the sexual commodities. This idea of commodification and objectification has prevented women from looking upon themselves as autonomous individuals. In poems such as “The Looking Glass” and “An Introduction” Das charges how women’s bodies have been commodified and objectified. At the same time Das emphasizes women’s right to physical autonomy. In “An Introduction,” Kamala Das strongly reveals:

"I met a man; I called him mine. / He was my soul's delight."

These lines echo Simon de Beauvoir’s idea of women’s sexuality.

### A.4 Conflict of motherhood

Motherhood constitutes another vital force in Simon de Beauvoir’s discourse of feminism. In *The Second Sex*, she observes that the maternal role often prevents women from announcing complete autonomy. In a patriarchal society, it appears that women are born with twin responsibilities of reproduction and caregiving. Like de Beauvoir Kamala Das talks about the hindrances that the maternal role imposes on a woman’s self. In poems such as “The Invitation” and “The Old Playhouse,” Das examines the inner and intense hiatus many women undergo. In “The Invitation,” the speaker knows fully her duties as a mother but at the same time, she pines for something beyond maternal role. This evidently underscores Das’s concern over the negative impact maternal role has played upon women.

### B. Adrienne Rich and Kamla Das

Adrienne Rich’s concept of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality refers to the romantic or physical attachment between individuals, male and female. It is the most powerful and traditionally cultured form of sexuality. It would be wrong to consider it as a natural relationship, rather it is a dominant force that pushes women to go into relationship with men. According to Adrienne Rich, this heterosexual relationship curbs the potential of female autonomy. In her essay “*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*” (1980), Rich has shown how heterosexuality has been categorically systematized as a social institution to make women embrace it. In short, heterosexuality is not at all a positive sign for women.

Many of Kamala Das’s poems explore Rich’s concern of heterosexuality. In her poem “The Freaks”, Das presents sexual intimacy not as an outcome of natural and spontaneous passion, but as an act, forceful and oppressive. Like sexual relationship, love has also been presented as without any passion. It has been pictured as something temporary and something without passion. This is evident in the poems like “*Substitute*” and “*Love*”. This idea of heterosexuality considers women as commodities and objects of gratifying sexual pleasures. In this context this idea can be compared with Simon de Beauvoir’s idea of sexuality where women have been commodified.

### C. Judith Butler and Kamala Das

#### C.1. Performativity

Judith Butler is one of the leading intellectuals in feminist theory. Her notable ideas like gender performativity, fluid identity and heteronormativity are very important to examine Kamala Das’s poetry. According to Butler’s idea of gender performativity, gender is not natural or inherent, rather it is structured through repeatedly practiced performances or social behaviors. Kamala Das, through her poetry, has endeavored to wipe out the forcefully imposed identities. Why should women continue to perform the same acts like a programmed machine does? This concern is what Kamala Das exposes through her pen. She can not accept the idea that women must act according to societal norms and obligations. This is very much evident in her poem “An Introduction” where she boldly proclaims her individuality





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*"I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in Two, dream in one."*

### C.2. Fluidity

Apart from gender performativity, Butler's idea of fluidity of identity and sexuality is also important in the analysis of Kamla Das's poetry. According to Butler, **gender and sexuality are not fixed, rather fluid. This idea of fluidity is very much** present in Das's strong negation to the distinctions between masculine and feminine roles. We find echo of this negation in her poem "The Freaks" where she interrogates:

*"Can this man with nimble fingers unleash nothing more alive than the skin's lazy hungers?"*

### C.3. Heteronormativity

Another equally relevant is Judith Butler's idea of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity looks upon heterosexual relationships as natural and inherent. Like Adrienne Rich, Butler also is strongly against this. Kamala Das too, through her poetry, has raised her concern about this patriarchal 'hegemony'. In this context the following lines from the poem "The Old Playhouse" deserve special mention:

*"You were pleased with my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow convulsions."*

### D. Hélène Cixous and Kamala Das

One of the leading French intellectuals, Helene Cixous is known for her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). In this essay she has introduced the term *écriture féminine*. It is a form of writing that is distinct from patriarchal models of communication. In patriarchal model women are presented in a negative manner. Through this term Helene Cixous has thrown a big challenge to the masculine autonomy in writing by signalling that women will write about their feelings and emotions themselves. The writing will no longer be a happy hunting ground for men. It will be of the women, for the women and by the women. In short Helene Cixous underlines the need of creating purely feminine writing by female.

This new form of writing has been discovered in Kamala Das' poetry. Through her poetry Kamala Das has tried to reject the traditional and patriarchal forms of communication. She has taken resort to confessional mode to communicate her feelings and thoughts. This confessional tone in her writing epitomizes Das's strong aversion to patriarchal forms.

In her essay Helene Cixous has urged women to shun all their coyness in the expression of their sexuality. Female body is no property of male. It is an agent, an entity that is purely female. It is a spirit that is full of feminine passion and sensibility. In the similar vein, Kamala Das wants all women to welcome all they have. In *The Looking Glass*, where she urges women to:

*"Gift him all, / Give him what makes you woman, the scent of / Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts."*

Apart from shunning shame of sexuality and desires, Cixous emphasizes that women's writing should be subjective; it should be free from rational style. This assertion of subjective impulses finds echo in Kamala Das's autobiography "My Story". It is an account of intensely personal feelings and desires.

### E. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Kamala Das

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a very prominent 21<sup>st</sup> century literary genius, has been contributing greatly to the feminist theory. She is basically renowned for her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). The essay puts Spivak among the ranks of feminists who take into consideration history, geography, and class while thinking about women.



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In the essay Spivak has objected how the marginalized women have been silenced, how their right to freedom of speech and expression has been snatched away from them. According to Spivak, the subaltern women are not allowed to fly beyond their confined world. To break the barriers of the age-old social structure, the subaltern women themselves have to write and speak for themselves. Otherwise, the blot imposed upon them will never be erased from the pages of history. Apart from this, Spivak further says that the patriarchal agents exploit language as a means of oppression. It is this language that women have to use to counter-fight the masculine autonomy. This thought of Spivak is well reflected in the following lines of the poem “An Introduction”:

“The language I speak becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses all mine, mine alone.”

### F. Bell Hooks and Kamala Das

Bell Hooks, another distinguished literary gem, is chiefly known for intersectionality of gender, race and class. According to her, gender, race and class are not separated, but connected. They are to be examined as parts of a whole. They are interconnected. This intersectionality was not given due attention in traditional feminist theory, but Bell Hooks invites us to examine the intersection of gender, race and class to bring to light the collective tale of sufferings of women in society. This idea of Bell Hooks has close connection with Kamala Das's sensibility.

### Conclusion

From the above discussion it becomes clear that Kamala Das has contributed immensely to the awakening of female consciousness through her works. She is a trail-blazer in her selection of subject and its communication. In communicating her ideas, she has set an example for the future female writers who want to ennoble the feminine discourse. Her works have provided the spark necessary to enkindle the dark domain of the women. She has proven that women have their own world of passion and feeling to experience. That she is right in her thoughts and expression is justified by the way several theorists have examined female consciousness and its multidimensional facets. The more the world progress the more pertinent will become the works of Kamala Das. Her ideas are a platform which the future feminine discourse will be based upon.

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