

## **The Excellence of Kamala Das's Technical Skill in her Selected Poems**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Kamala Das has emerged as one of the leading female poets in Indian Writing in the English language. In other words, she has made a mark as a female Indo-Anglican poet; and she has made a substantial contribution to Indo-Anglican Literature. She has achieved greatness as a poet not only because of the contents of her poems but also because of her technique of writing poetry and her craftsmanship, in addition to her command of the English language. She has a vast range of vocabulary; she understands the precise meanings of words, and she can differentiate between the shades of meanings. A command of the English language is naturally the first requirement of an Indian poet writing in English. In this paper, eight poems by Kamala Das have been randomly chosen to find evidence of the technical aspects besides her command over the English language.

### **KEYWORDS**

Kamala Das; Technical Skill; Poem.

### **Introduction**

Kamala Das is a bilingual poet writing both in English and Malayalam. Once when asked why she chose to write in English, she replied that English being the tongue most familiar to her, she used it to express herself. Her choice of English was by no means a deliberate one. Like most Indian poets writing in English, Kamala Das is also bilingual. She writes both in Malayalam and English. Her choice of English was by no means a deliberate one. One of her better-known poems 'An Introduction', which has often been

regarded as her poetic manifesto, throws considerable light on her use of English:

Why not speak in

Any language I like? The language I  
speak

Becomes mine, its distortions, its  
queernesses

All mine, mine alone.

In other words, she recognises the immense possibilities of English to convey the various shade and nuances of feelings, its vast storehouse of emotional analogues and other equivalents. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes:

While giving the impression of writing in haste, she reveals a mastery of phrase and control over rhythm – the words often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly alive. Her characteristic trick is to split phrases and meanings – even the infinitive – between two lines and this is surely symbolic of the fissured or fractured, a sensibility she wishes to communicate.

### **Her Choice of Words**

Kamala Das exercises special care in her words and the combination of those words into a phrase, clauses, and sentences; she shows a rare understanding of the meanings, the appropriateness, and the subtleties of words. She is a poet in the confessional mode and her diction is, therefore, most often colloquial. Diction is not a tool in her hands but a poetic medium, pure and simple. The words come to her effortlessly and become one with her emotions. This is evident in “My Grandmother’s House” as ‘to peer’, “and my body turned cold like the moon”, ‘Just listen to the frozen air’, ‘or in wild despair’, ‘pick an armful of ’ and “A Hot Noon in Malabar” as ‘all stained with time’, ‘In light singsong voices’, ‘with old eyes’, ‘whining complaining, ‘clambered up’, ‘The window drapes, ‘Brimming with the sun’, ‘yearningly’, ‘like jungle voices’.

### **Her Conversational Tone and the Colloquial Manner:**

In connection with Kamala Das’s diction in her poems, the tone in many of the poems is conversational and the diction is colloquial. This conspicuously is the case in the poem entitled ‘An Introduction’ in which Kamala Das seems to be holding a dialogue with the sea. This poem begins colloquially with the poetess introducing herself as an innocent girl, entirely ignorant of the ways of the world.

I don’t know politics but if I know  
the names

Of those in power, and can repeat  
them like.

Days of the week, or names of  
months, beginning with

Nehru. I am an Indian, very brown,  
born in

Malabar, I speak three languages  
and write in

Two, dream in one.

### **Her Felicity of Words and Phrase-making**

Kamala Das’s craftsmanship as a poet is evidenced by her diction or choice of words, and her combining words into phrases, clauses, and full lines. Her diction is highly commendable because of the appropriateness of the words used and the felicitous manner in which she has arranged those words in her poems. Felicity in the use of words and felicity in phrase-making constitute, thus, one of the outstanding features of her poetry.

“An Introduction” is also noticeable for the brilliant use of language. Simplicity, ease, and grace characterise her style but when she expresses profound emotions, her language assumes felicity of expression as under:

In him .... The hungry hast

Of rivers, in me .... The ocean’s the  
tireless waiting.

Images are functional

Not the deaf, blind speech

Of trees in storm or if monsoon  
clouds, or of rain of the

Incoherent mutterings of the  
blazing

Funeral type.

And her freedom to choose her language and confidence in her creative talent is vividly brought out:

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.

Then follows a series of lines in which the words are very simple but produce the effect of eloquence:

Be Amy, or be Kamala or, better  
Still, be Madhavikutty.

Suresh Kohli observes, "An Introduction" is vitally communicative in as much as it is an indication of Mrs. Das' use of language which is not her mother-tongue"

### **Frequent Repetition of Words**

Kamala Das has cultivated a poetic style – conversational, colloquial, fluent, and graceful, which fits in the confessional nature of her poetry. Sometimes she uses repetitive vocabulary to emphasize her anguish and intensity of emotions. A stylistic device that reinforces the predominantly emotional quality of her poems is Kamala Das's frequent repetition of words and lines. This is a device that reminds us of D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, and the Bible. However, Kamala Das does not always use this device skilfully. One of the poems in which this device works effectively is 'Substitute' in which the repetition of the phrase 'it will be all right' conveys the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life.

She uses repetitive vocabulary to emphasise her anguish and intensity of emotions in her poems "The Dance of Eunuchs" and "The Testing of Sirens".

... wide skirts going round and  
round cymbals  
Richly clashing, and anklets  
jingling, jingling,  
Jingling..." (The Dance of Eunuchs)

"No more night, no more love, or  
peace, only  
The white, white sun burning,  
burning, burning. (The  
Testing of Sirens)

### **The Realistic Imagery**

The imagery of the tasks which a housewife has to carry out is given by Kamala Das in the poem entitled 'The Old Playhouse'. As a housewife, Kamala Das

had to put saccharine tablets into her husband's morning tea and give him the vitamins at a fixed time. She has felt like a prisoner in her husband's house, the windows of which were always shut and which were lit by artificial lights with even the sounds of the air-conditioner being of no use to relieve her distress. And very vivid and very effective imagery is employed by Kamala Das in her to her husband:

All pervasive is the male scent of  
your breath. The cut flowers  
The vases have begun to smell of  
human sweat.

### **The Imagery of the Sights**

The imagery of sights that the poet had witnessed in her grandmother's house and in Malabar where she was born and where she had spent her childhood is vividly portrayed in some of her poems. After her grandmother's death, the house had become a silent place, where snakes moved among the books which she was then too young to read, and where her blood turned cold like the moon. In her poem "A Hot Noon in Malabar" one gets a whole catalogue of the sights which she had witnessed when she lived there. Almost every line here is a picture- men coming from the hill with parrots in a cage and fortune cards; brown 'Kurava' girls with old eyes reading palms; bangle-sellers spreading their red and green and blue bangles on the floor, and so on.

Regarding images, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks, "The images are icy, stony, steely, dark- "settle time like a paperweight" or "dies with metallic sighs" or "the night, dark-cloaked like a procuress" and are meant perhaps to insulate the true self from the surface life."

### **The Excellence of her Diction**

The poem entitled "The Freaks" contains several words, phrases, and lines that illustrate her excellence in the usage of diction. Kamala Das describes her husband's mouth as a "dark cavern" inside which his uneven teeth can be seen

gleaming. Her diction is not only appropriate but extremely satisfactory and even felicitous. And the closing line of this poem is an excellent specimen of the kind of impressive vocabulary that she is capable of commanding.

### **The Exceptional Artistry or Craftsmanship**

Kamala Das's choice of words and her skills in combining words into phrases, clauses, and sentences also distinguished her from other women poets writing in the English language. Even when writing in a hurry, she reveals a mastery of phrases and control over rhythm. She often employs words in such a way as to express the vehemence of her emotion and the intensity of her resentment. Here are a couple of examples of the forceful use of words and phrases:

Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego, I ate  
a magic loaf and"

(The Old Playhouse)

"The heart

An empty cistern, waiting

Through long hours, fills itself

With coiling snakes of silence.

(The Freaks)

At the same time, much of her poetry is indeed marred by her omission of punctuation marks, especially commas, thus making her poetry difficult for the average reader. The omission of inverted commas in some of her poems like 'The Invitation' to indicate which words are being spoken by persona, which by the sea, and which by the absent lover makes this poem somewhat bewildering. Her poetry is also marred by the varying

length of her lines – some long, some too short, some hardly consisting of a word or a two, and it is further marred by the deliberate, perverse omission of a capital letter at the beginning of lines. This unconventionality of modernity is taken far, but every Indo-Anglian and many British poets too do the same thing without bothering to enlighten the reader on this innovation.

### **Conclusion:**

Kamala Das is a great and original poet with a distinctive poetic personality of her own. When at her best, she remains unequalled and matchless. She shows remarkable command and ease over the use of English and has cultivated a style that is characterised by colloquial simplicity and clarity. Words effortlessly come to her. Since English is most dear to her, she naturally and skillfully uses it to express her emotions, her feelings, her reminiscences, her love, and sexual experiences, her frustrations and disillusionments most effectively. Kamala Das remarks, "The language one employs is not important. What is important is the thought contained by words."

Commenting on Kamala Das's use of language David McCutcheon writes, "...her effortless casual style shows nothing remarkably Indian in structure, rhythm or choice of words. It is possible, however, that future, scholars going over this material by computer methods, will discover especially Indian turns of phrases, rhythms, and sentence structure, and even associate them with predominantly Indian emotions in certain situations."

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