



## Kamala Das and the Element of Death in her Select Writings

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### Abstract

*There are many people who believe death is a starting place to obtain everlasting freedom from this chaotic world and wait for their time and a chance to leave this temporary world. Writing is a channel to communicate our inner feelings and the writers describe fictional, non-fictional, real-life incidents through their writings. A few writers have projected apprehensions and inhibitions of people about the ever-ending sleep in a piece of writing. A few writers who have experienced these feelings by themselves naturally described through the characters in their stories. Among the few women writers felt death as an only source to overcome their problems, agony, existing isolation and parting from their cherished once. Kamala Das is one writer who has experienced all these feelings in her life. Hence, the article decodes Kamala Das' use of Death in her Select writings.*

**Keywords:** Kamala Das, Death, Poems.

Death is inevitable in everyone's life but people are reluctant to accept this truth, generally human beings keep death far away from their lives. The idea of death itself brings fear in once life. Death doesn't affect the dead people it affects their family and the near ones. The term death is perceived in various concepts by different religions some feel that reaching death is nothing but getting birth again, and some others believe that it takes people near to the almighty and others deem it as an unending rest which leads into the never-ending world. Though the concepts of different religions on death vary but ultimately it separates us from our loved ones.

Kamala Das (1934-2009) is an Indian English poet who also writes in Malayalam was born in Nalapatt Kerala is popularly known as Madhavikutty and Kamala Surayya. Kamala Surayya describes about the docile sensitive inner feelings, disgruntled desires of women which lies in their heart and mind. Due to her serious illness, major part of her life was related to the medicines, hospitals, doctors and she describes all these experiences in her writings. Kamala Das in her own words about death:

“I have always regarded the hospital as a planet situated like a sandwich filling between the familiar earth and the strange domain of death. Each time I have been admitted into a hospital room I have been seized with an acute desire to be left alone.”  
(*My Story*, p. 212)



Kamala Das and the term death are closely associated with each other, from her childhood she is deprived of love and affection got neglected from her family members, she was married to a much elderly person, she tried to get love from her husband and there also she has become a silent sufferer. Kamala Das has seen death very close to her life.

Das has witnessed many deaths in Nalapatt family, her Muthassi (great grandmother) Amamma (grandmother) and her own bad health. Her serious heart problem and hospitalization. Her suicide attempts in her unsuccessful married life made her to project death very realistic in her stories. Her grandmother's unexpected death and her own bad health condition brought Kamala Das to portray death element in many writings.

Kamala Das describes the death of her beloved grandmother in her poem *My Grandmother's House*:

There is a house now far away where once  
I received love. That woman died,  
The house withdrew into silence,  
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?"(SIC, p. 13)

Kamala Das writes about her unforgettable experiences which she shared with her grandmother during her childhood, she used to visit her grandmother's house for vacation who is the only source of love in her life. In one such visits Kamala Das asks her grandmother about death and grandmother tells that everyone should die one day or the other day. Das asks her never to die and takes oath from her which she describes in the story 'Summer Vacation'.

The story 'Summer Vacation' is about a small girl Ammu, her grandmother and her father. After her mother's death Ammu is sent to her mother's house to spend her vacation in her home town Tharavad. In the story the girl doesn't understand the death. Ammu in a general conversation talks about nyaval (black plum) tree and its fruit to her Muthassi and she tells about her childhood friend Devu who compares Muthassi's eyes with the seeds of nyaval fruit. Ammu asks her,

Where is that Devu you talked about now?"  
Oh, Devu," Muthassi reflected with a wistful smile.  
She died a long time ago  
my companions, dead and gone."  
Are they all dead?"  
Hmm." (*The Kept Women*, p, 32)

Muthassi tells Ammu that God has left her still alive at the age of sixty-nine taking all her family members. When Ammu asks her about Muthassi's death



“No one from this Tarawad has lived up to this age. My mother died when she was forty; my uncle at forty –five. And Grandmother, if I remember correctly didn’t quite reach fifty. As for Kamalam... I am sinner that is why I stay alive. I often wonder what further sufferings are in store for me before I die”.

But Muthassi, are you going to die soon?

I persisted...I won’t die. Muthassi, promise me”.

Muthassi’s eyes filled with tears once again.

But she smiled and said,

“All right, Ammu.

I promise I won’t die. Is that enough?” (TKW, pp, 34- 35).

Thus the little girl understands that death takes away the most lovable people in her life first her mother, may be her grandmother next, and she asks her grandmother never to die. Kamala Das’ fear of her grandmother’s death in her childhood was brilliantly depicted in the story through characters Ammu and Muthassi (grandmother).

Kamala Das describes her apprehensions on death in her growing up stage that is from her childhood to womanhood, for the first time her worries about her grandmothers death is shown in her story ‘Summer Vacation’ and after marriage when she fell sick with severe illness, her worries about children, husband and family are clearly exhibited through her stories like ‘Sweet Milk’, ‘The Scent of the Bird’ and a few other stories.

Kamala Das’ story ‘Sweet Milk’ describes sudden demise of a married woman leaving her husband and three small children alone. In the story an young wife suddenly dies due to heart attack the same day morning she prepares food for children, she cooks children favorite Neipayasam( Sweet milk) , she gives coffee to husband , bath to children and on the same day she dies due to heart attack . The husband unable to tell children that their mother is no more with them and children without knowing about their mother’s death they feel happy that their mother made so many dishes for them, though father doesn’t want children to eat those as the person who prepared them is dead but still he allows children to eat them as they can never get the food made by their mother.

The story begins with a man namely Achhan returning home at night after a simple cremation. In the bus he thought about a voice

“Unniye, don’t go on sleeping, covered up like that. It’s Monday.” She was calling the eldest son. She then moved to the kitchen, her white saree crumpled. Brought me a big glass of coffee. Then? What happened then? “(TKW, p. 49)

The husband who returns from office finds his young wife dead in the kitchen. Though the couple is not rich they have plans for their three small children. Unni , Balan and the young boy Rajan five years old. The husband never imagines that his wife would suddenly fall down and die. He thinks of what would happen to children if he falls ill and about the future plans they both had for their family. At home the youngest child asks father about his mother. He says she will come. He takes them to kitchen .The children sees the dishes made by mother especially the neipayasam. He says to children they have become cold



and tells he makes some hot uppumavu. “Achha, neipayasam,” Rajan exclaimed happily. He dipped a finger in it..Let them eat.”(TKW, p. 53).

Kamala Das’ story ‘The Scent of the Bird’ is also portrayed through an young house wife and a mother of school going children is troubled by death and she tries to escape but at last she becomes the victim. A young house wife sees an advertisement of textile colours and new designs .She applies for the post. The young lady reaches the address which is a seven storied building. The building is crowded with men. She did not find any single woman there. “She did not see a single woman anywhere around. Her courage was sagging by that time. She further felt that she ought not have gone there ignoring her husband’s words”.( TKW, p.23). The lady finds a sign board with the description, ‘Dying’. She thinks it is misspelt for dyeing and enters the room. “She cried out, is there nobody in?” (TKW,p.25). There comes a young man she tries to find the information of dyeing textile office and he doesn’t give any reply she becomes impatient. She moves towards the door. He says:

“Didn’t you read the sign? It says ‘ Dying”.

“So ....?”

“Yes, that’s it. Don’t you know dying? We undertake to arrange fine deaths.” (p.26)

He tells very softly to her that, during one winter season in the past a yellow colour bird has come into his room. It tried hard to escape through the window in the process it break the glass and fell down. He informs her that he killed bird with his shoes and says the death smelled like a scent of the bird.

You’re lying. How many times had you wanted to come here!.... “Who are you?” She sat up. ....Haven’t you seen me before?” No “ I’d come to you several times. Once when you are only a kid of seven. you are laid up with Jaundice,... you said, ‘ Mother, I see yellow flowers, yellow oleanders. Yellow flowers everywhere.’ Do you remember that?” She nodded... You were not aware of my love. You didn’t know that I was your guide and also that of everybody else”. “Love? Is this love?” she asked. (TKW, pp, 28-29)

She understands the man as death himself but once again she rejects his approach towards her and runs away from him, in the hurry of escaping from him she runs into an elevator which was not in condition and tries to escape from there, after getting into elevator. She finds out that elevator is not in condition.

Thus the woman gives her last breath in the lift thinking about her children and husband. Death is the most invited one in Kamala Das’ life. The loneliness, the neglected childhood and unsatisfied married life and her worst health conditions made her to invite death happily in to her life. Das says

...Another illness, she became very weak and lost energy in her- I was physically destroyed beyond resurrection... No, I will not dream of going back to a hospital’. I said to the doctor... It’s not that I am afraid of the injections and the drips and all the rest,’ I said. It is just that I have stopped fearing death...’I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have to believe that life is a mere dream and that



death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been, despite all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water. We have been mere participants in someone else's dream." (*My Story*, p.213)

Das feels that from her birth she had restricted life and says that now she wants to go away from this temporary world and wish to go the permanent world of death. This thought of Kamala Das' death is particularly described in her autobiography 'My Story'.

Out of my pyre my grieving sons shall pick  
up little souvenirs of bones and some ash.  
And yet the world shall go on. Tears  
shall dry on my sons' cheeks. Their wives  
shall bring forth brilliant children. My  
descendants shall populate this earth. It  
is enough for me. It is more than enough... (*My Story*, p, 214)

Hence, Das describes death from the children's perspective, as a psychological trauma and its effect on the people who live and how the characters react to the loss of their near ones and to themselves. Kamala Das' ill health, painful experiences, impels her nearly to death bed which made her to describe death naturally through her characters in her stories.

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