

19 July 1990



Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

invite you to

meet the author

Kamala Das



All round me are words, and words and words,
 They grow on me like leaves, they never
 Seem to stop their slow growing
 From within.... But I tell myself, words
 Are a nuisance, beware of them, they
 Can be so many things, a
 Chasm where running feet must pause, to
 Look, a sea with paralysing waves,
 A blast of burning air or,
 A knife most willing to cut your best
 Friend's throat.... Words are a nuisance, but
 They grow on me like leaves on a tree,
 They never seem to stop their coming
 From a silence, somewhere deep within....

(from *Summer in Calcutta*)



Educated privately, and in schools in Bengal and Kerala, she was married at the tender age of 15. She has since lived in Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi and Colombo at different times in her life. Home, however, for her has always been Nalapat House in Malabar, over four hundred years old and a repository of rare palm-leaf manuscripts like *Varahasamhita*, *Susrutha Samhita* and books of Mantras. It is here that she now lives with her family.

Kamala Das, pseudonym Madhavi Kutty, was born in Malabar in 1934 in an aristocratic Nair family known for its writers: Nalappattu Narayana Menon, author of the remarkable elegy *Kunnunirthulli*, was her grand-uncle; Padma Bhushan Nalapat Balamani Amma, outstanding Malayalam poet and winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1966, is her mother. The late Aubrey Menen is another famous literary relative.

She recalls that she was already writing poems at the age of six: '...about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity'. *P.E.N. India*, edited by Sophia Wadia published her first poem when she was no more than fourteen. Together with her graduation from traditional verse forms to a greatly individualised poetic voice, came recognition in 1963, when she was awarded the Asian Poetry Prize instituted by P.E.N.

Phillipines. From 1971 to 1972 and 1978 to 1979 she was the Poetry Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*.

Kamala Das is among the few women writers in the world who have not only handled so many literary genres with great success but have also done so in two such distinct languages as English and Malayalam. Her eloquent justification for why she uses English is well-known and often-quoted :



... 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 ... It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest. It is as human as I am human...

Fiction is her forte in her Malayalam writing though in addition to several novelettes and numerous short stories she has also published poems, essays, children's fiction and an autobiography. She has also written scripts for television films, and does a regular column for a Malayalam weekly.

Her writing in English is equally versatile and varied. She has published five volumes of poetry (one of them with Pritish Nandy), a novel (*The Alphabet of Lust*), a collection of shorter fiction (*A Doll for the Child Prostitute*) and the autobiography, *My Story*, celebrated for its uncompromising depiction of the experiences of a young girl thrust too early into womanhood.

Throughout her literary career of over four decades, Kamala Das has attracted a wide range of responses to her poetry; her inherent honesty and a curious detachment in being able

to speak of herself is combined with a style powerfully evocative and immediate. A poet under whose deceptively simple exposition lies a complexity that is only partially subdued, she defies categorizations that are not heavily qualified. She empathises with the rebel, but can also celebrate her rootedness in her tradition; outspoken about her womanhood she does not, however, type-cast genders. She is passionate without sentimentalizing, extremely personal and yet capable of intense detachment.

Her quest for truthfulness is perhaps at the source of this complexity: "You have to strip every trace of sentimentality, romantic inclination, silly symbols and all that from a poem for it to reflect its authenticity... A poem is a time capsule, it cannot bring forth any falsehood", she has said. Her commitment to poetry she expresses dramatically.

... I've stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I've put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech...



Towards Frankfurt Book Fair

The commitment to writing—making public declaration—is consanguine with the larger commitment to life. This larger commitment is manifest in a variety of ways: her staunch vegetarianism; her initiative in starting the Bodhiyatra Movement for environmental protection; her active role in the Forestry Board of Kerala, of which she is the Chairperson; her work as President of the Children's Film Society of Kerala; her attempt to enter politics in order to help the poor; the teaching she does in a school for the deaf and dumb....

Kamala Das, has travelled widely, throughout the world, and her poetry has been translated into several Indian and foreign languages; the German version of *My Story* appeared in 1982. Apart from the Asian Poetry Prize, she has

won the ASAN World Prize for poetry, the Kerala Sahitya Academi Award for her short stories in Malayalam, the Sahitya Akademi Award for her poetry in English, the Thirumalambal Award for her collection of poems/essays *Bhayam Ente Nisavastram*, the Chimanlal Award for Fearless Journalism, the Lakshmi Award for Social Service and The Indira Priyadarshini Vriksha Mitra Award on behalf of the Kerala Forestry Board. She is only too well-known to the Nobel Committee (Member Osten Sjostrand has translated her poems into Swedish) and she was considered for the prize in 1984.

Despite all these achievements behind her and undoubtedly with more to come in the future, what Kamala Das has said in one of her early poems continues to be true today :

I have come, yes, with hunger, with faith and
A secret language,
All ready to be used, I have come with
Just a picnic bag
To this new city, to seek a blind date.

A Select Bibliography

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- ALPHABET OF LUST, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1976

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- DRIKSHASHI PANNA, Madras: Orient Longman, 1973



With the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Asan World Prize



Election Campaign, 1984

A Chronology

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|------|---|--|
| 1934 | Birth | |
| 1948 | Poems first published in <i>Indian P.E.N.</i> | |
| 1950 | Married K. Madhava Das | |
| 1963 | Received Asian Poetry Prize, P.E.N. Manila | |
| 1965 | Publication of <i>Summer in Calcutta</i> | |
| 1969 | Received Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for Fiction | |
| 1971 | Received Chimanlal Award | |
| | | for Fearless Journalism |
| | | 1971-72 Poetry Editor, <i>The Illustrated Weekly of India</i> |
| | | 1978-79 & |
| | | 1984 D.Litt., from the World Academy of Art and Culture |
| | | 1985 Received Asan World Prize for Literature |
| | | Received Sahitya Akademi Award for <i>Collected Poems</i> Volume I |



With Mrs. Jayewardene and Ms Malini Budhinagoda at Colombo