

**Poetry**  
**Professor S.P. Dhanavel**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 69**  
**Kamala Das**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:14)

**Kamala Das (1934-2009)**



- Historical and Literary Context
- Kamala Das
- Three Poems
- "An Introduction"
- "My Grandmother House"
- "The Looking Glass"
- Analysis



Madhavi Kutty ✦



Hello friends. In this lecture we are going to deal with Kamala Das and her poetry. First, we will see the Historical and Literary Context, see her life briefly then look at three poems. First one 'An Introduction,' we will read, just to give an introduction to Kamala Das, the kind of poet the person she was 'My Grandmother's House,' and then we will discuss two poems we have selected for this particular course: My Grandmother's House and The Looking Glass. Analyze them linguistically, rhetorically, poetically and then conclude our presentation.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:56)

## Historical and Literary Context



- Growth of metropolitan cities in post-independent India
- Movement of people from one state to another for work
- Women's attachment to their father, husband, and son
- Self-education of wo/men in some households
- Unquestioned infidelity of married men
- Traditional Poetry of Sarojini Naidu and Lokita Ghosh
- Independent women in Independent India
- The popularity of American poets like Plath and Sexton
- Rise of the feminist voice
- Kamala Das, Eugene de Souza, Gauri Deshpande, Charmayne D'Souza, Tilotama Rajan, Mamta Kalia



First, Historical and Literary Context. We have to understand that after the independence of India, many metropolitan cities were growing in post independent India. That means, migration of people from smaller towns to larger towns we have and also people move from one state to another for different kinds of work. And as a result of this movement, wherever men moved, women also moved along with them. So, we have said women's attachment to their father, husband and son it happened in the life of Kamala Das.

And also, we have another phenomenon in our country, self-education of women and men in some households, particularly in upper classes, where they could not send their children to schools and colleges for various reasons, they educated themselves at home. And also, we have a huge problem in our country about this unquestioned infidelity of married men. Men may marry women and they would expect their women to be chaste, to be loyal to them, whereas they themselves would not be, so this is the kind of situation we also notice.

At this time, we have this traditional poetry of Sarojini Naidu and also another poet we have Lokita Gosh, and in the Independent India, independent women were coming up, and it took a long time for us to see the new women after this post liberalized economy in our country. We also had at this time the popularity of American poets, especially women poets like Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton.

This led to the rise of the feminist voice in our country as well. We have many women writers like Kamala Das, Eugene de Sousa, Gauri Deshpande, Charmayne D'Souza, Tilotama

Rajan, and Mamta Kalia. These are some samples we have a lot number of women poets in our country today.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:54)

- Kamala Das (1934-2009)**
- A self-educated bilingual poet and fiction writer
  - Distinguished herself by her frank and open treatment of self in Indian writing after Independence
  - Driven by a desire of and longing for true love
  - Often nostalgic about her childhood roots in Kerala
  - Considered a pioneer in confessional poetry in India
  - **Volumes:** *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973)
  - Recognized with several awards, including a Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 and a Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985.
  - **Poems:** "An Introduction," "My Grandmother's House," "The Looking Glass," "The Old Playhouse"



Now, let us see the life of Kamala Das briefly. She was born in 1934 and died in 2009. She was a self-educated bilingual poet and fiction writer. We have to remember that she also wrote short stories and also novels in Malayalam and some of them were translated into English later on in her own lifetime.

She distinguished herself by her frank and open treatment of self in Indian writing after independence. She was driven by a desire of and longing for true love, that is the crux of her entire poetry. Often, she was nostalgic about her childhood roots in Kerala. She lived as a child in Calcutta, she then lived as a wife in Bombay, and in Delhi and many other places like this. She was moving with her father or with her husband or with her son and later on she also lived along with her son in Pune.

She is considered a pioneer in confessional poetry in India. She has a number of volumes. We have listed some of them here: *Summer in Calcutta* 1965, *The Descendants* 1967, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* published in 1973. Such a great poet has been recognized with awards several awards, including a Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1969, and a Central Sahitya Academy Award in 1985. She was also nominated for the Nobel Prize. We have many well-known poems we have listed some of them here, *An Introduction*, *My Grandmother's House*, *The Looking Glass* and *The Old Play House*.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:36)

## The Rise of a Writer



"A woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother, before she could become anything else. And that meant years and years of waiting. That meant waiting till the greying years. I didn't have the time to wait. I was impatient. So I started writing quite early in my life. And perhaps I was lucky. My husband appreciated the fact that I was trying to supplement the family income. So, he allowed me to write at night. After all the chores were done, after I had fed the children, fed him, cleaned up the kitchen, I was allowed to sit awake and write till morning. And that affected my health".



There is a quotation from Kamala Das, it gives us an insight into how she became a writer, a writer of standing as we see today. Let us read this extract.

"A woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother before she could become anything else. And that meant years and years of waiting, that meant waiting till the greying years. I didn't have the time to wait, I was impatient, so I started writing quite early in my life and perhaps I was lucky. My husband appreciated the fact that I was trying to supplement the family income. So, he allowed me to write at night, after all the chores are done, after I had fed the children, fed him, cleaned up the kitchen, I was allowed to sit awake and write till morning and that affected my health."

This is a story of not only Kamala Das, I think it is a story of many women who become writers devoting their time during the nighttime after taking care of everything else, everybody else at home. Naturally, it would affect their physical and mental health as well. In the case of Kamala Das, we have to notice that she was impatient, she could not wait and that kind of urgency we can see in her poems, so always longing to express herself that is the kind of poet we have in Kamala Das.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:07)

## Three Poems



- "An Introduction"
  - Published in the volume, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965)
  - A confessional self-portrait
- "My Grandmother House"
  - Published in *Summer in Calcutta* (1965)
  - A nostalgic poem about the poet's grandmother's house which gave her love once in plenty.
- "The Looking Glass"
  - Published in *The Descendants* (1967)
  - An exhortative poem on a woman loving a man affectionately and then struggling alone in the absence of love.



We said we would look at three poems, first “An Introduction,” this was published in the volume “Summer in Calcutta” in 1965. This is a confessional self-portrayed; we would understand about her much better through her own words, we would just read this poem. Then we will see “My Grandmother's House” published in Summer in Calcutta in 1965. This is a nostalgic poem about the poet's grandmother's house, which gave her love and security once in plenty. Then we will see “The Looking Glass” Published in “The Descendants” in 1967. This poem is an exhortative poem on a woman loving a man affectionately, and then struggling alone in the absence of love, particularly true love.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:51)

## “An Introduction”

I don't know politics but I know the names  
Of those in power, and can repeat them like  
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,

I speak three languages, write in

5

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**

10

**Any language I like?**



Here is “An introduction.”

“I don't know politics but I know the names

Of those in power, and can repeat them like

Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar.

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?**

(Refer Slide Time: 07:25)

## “An Introduction”

The language I speak,  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses  
All mine, mine alone.  
It is half English, half-Indian, funny perhaps, but it is  
[honest,  
It is as human as I am human, don't 15  
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my  
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing  
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it  
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is  
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and 20  
Is aware.



The language I speak,

Becomes mine, it's distortions, it's queernesses

All mine, mine alone.

It's half English, half Indian. funny perhaps, but it is

[honest.

It is as human as I am human, don't

You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my

Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing

Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it


Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is

Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and

is aware.”



(Refer Slide Time: 07:57)



**“My Grandmother’s House”**

There is a house now far away where once  
I received love.... That woman died,  
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved  
Among books, I was then too young  
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon      5  
**How often I think of going**  
**There**, to peer through blind eyes of windows or  
Just listen to the frozen air,  
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of  
Darkness to bring it here to lie      10



You had a good introduction to Kamala Das through her own words, particularly about using different languages or expressing her own thoughts about her joys and pains and that kind of freedom that she took in her hands, she was able to express in English language fearlessly, courageously till the last minute of her life. Now let us see the poem that we have for discussion “My Grandmother's House.” First, we will read it and then discuss it.

“There is a house now far away where once  
I received love... That woman died,  
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved  
Among books, I was then too young  
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon,  
**How often I think of going**  
**There**, to peer through blind eyes of windows or  
Just listen to the frozen air,  
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of  
Darkness to bring it here to lie.



(Refer Slide Time: 08:55)

## “My Grandmother’s House”



Behind my bedroom door like a brooding  
Dog...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      15  
Receive **love**, at least **in small change**?

□ **Ellipsis** is a frequent in Kamala Das's poetry. It is a strategy to imply several meanings.



Behind my bedroom door like a brooding

Dog... 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**?

You would have noticed ellipses in this poem and many other poems also you will see that; This is a frequent strategy that she uses in her poetry. She uses this strategy to imply several meanings.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:29)

## Thematic Contrast



- Grandmother's House and Husband's House
- Malabar and Bombay
- Past and Present
- **Love and Death**
- Young and Old
- **Despair and Hope**
- Darkness and Light
- Silence and Sound/Speech
- Blind Eyes and Seeing Eyes



Let us see the Thematic Contrast as we have seen in many poems. This is a poem about Grandmother's House that implies in contrast, the Husband's House as well. We have Malabar on the one hand that is Kerala and childhood experience in Kerala and her life with husband in Bombay and other places. Past and present, love and death, young and old, despair and hope, darkness and light, silence, sound and speech, blind eyes and seeing eyes. All these pairs of ideas are built into this poem to convey the kind of despair, the poet experiences in her life.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:15)

## Poetic Devices



- **Metaphor:** The house withdrew into silence (3)
- **Simile:** my blood turned cold like the moon (5)
- **Metaphor:** to peer through blind eyes of windows or  
Just listen to the frozen air,  
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of  
Darkness to bring it here to lie (7-10)
- **Simile:** Behind my bedroom door like a brooding  
Dog (11-12)
- **Rhetorical Question:**  
Can you ... believe ... I who have lost  
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to  
Receive love, at least in small change? (14-16)



Now, we come to Poetic Devices. We have some of them. Metaphor, we find in ‘The house withdrew into silence.’ Simile in ‘my blood turned cold like the moon.’ This kind of unusual simile and metaphor, makes poets, good poets like Kamala Das. Then we have another metaphor

“to peer through blind eyes of windows or

Just listen to the frozen air,

Or in wild despair, pick an armful of

Darkness to bring it here to lie.” (7-10)

Simile in ‘Behind my bedroom door like a brooding Dog.’ Moon comes then darkness comes and we have dog. And finally, we have a rhetorical question, we have modified the line words a little to make it a real rhetorical question. If you look at the words very clearly you will find that syntactically there might be some problems may be referring to the desperate, emotional atmosphere that she creates in the poem.

“Can you... believe... I who have lost

My way and beg now at stranger’s doors to

Receive love, at least in small change?” (14-16)

That is the kind of an economic metaphor that she brings into the rhetorical question that she asks at the end of this poem.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:33)

## Rhyme, Rhythm and Meter



**Rhyme:** no specific rhyme in the poem

**Rhythm:** a conversational rhythm; iambic

**Meter:** Tetra and Penta; alternates between 5 and 4 feet

**End-stop:** One long sentence poem with a question mark

**Caesura and Enjambment:**

There is | a house | now far | away | where once ➤ (5 feet)

I re | ceived love | .... That wo | man died, (4 feet)

The house | withdrew | into | silence, | snakes moved ➤

Among | books, I | was then | too young ➤



When we come to rhyme, rhythm and meter, we see that there is no specific rhyme scheme in the poem. It is written in free verse, and we can see some kind of conversational rhythm, which has this iambic pattern in this poem. We also notice some kind of meter relating to Tetra and Penta because we have lines with 5 feet and also lines with 4 feet. Then we have one only one stop at the end that is, this poem is a long sentence with a question mark at the end.

We have Caesura and Enjambment in this poem. Let us read this extract we have given here.

“There is a house now far away where once

I received love, that woman died,

The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved

Among books, I was then too young.”

We have iambic pentameter and also iambic tetrameter in this poem.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:33)

## Overall Impression

- It is a single sentence poem with a question mark at the end about remembering the grandmother's house in a small town while living in her husband's house in a city.
- The major focus is the love received in the past and the love refused in the present.
- Hence, the nostalgic past holds sway over the chaotic and meaningless present. If there is no real love, there is no real life, only a mechanical life, a **death-in-life**.
- The rhetorical question about begging love from strangers is heart rending.
- The poem uses more of similes and metaphors to draw a visual connect with the reader and fill the vacuum in the speaker's life and perhaps in the reader's life too.



To give an overall impression of this poem, let us see the points that we have listed here. It is a single sentence poem with a question mark at the end about remembering the grandmother's house in a small town while living in the speaker's own husband's house in a city. The major focus is on the love received in the past and the love refused in the present. Hence, we have this comparison between the past and the present.

Hence, the nostalgic past holds sway over the chaotic and meaningless present. If there is no real love, there is no real life, only a mechanical life that means a death in life. This is a kind of experience that many poets have expressed in their poems. The rhetorical question about begging love from strangers is really heart rending. The poem uses more of similes and metaphors to draw a visual connect with the reader and fill the vacuum in the speaker's life and perhaps, in the readers life too.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:40)

## “The Looking Glass”

Getting a man to love you is easy

Only be honest about your wants as

Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him

So that he sees himself the stronger one

And believes it so, and you so much more 5

Softer, younger, lovelier. **Admit your**

**Admiration.** Notice the perfection

Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under

The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,

Dropping towels, and the jerky way he 10

Urinate. All the fond details that make

Him male and your only man. Gift him all,



Let us move on to the next poem, “The Looking Glass.”

“Getting a man to love you is easy

Only be honest about your wants as

Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him

So that he sees himself the stronger one

And believes it so, and you so much more

Softer, younger, lovelier, **Admit your**

**Admiration.** Notice the perfection

Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under

The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,

Dropping towels, and the jerky way he

Urinate. All the fond details that make

Him male and your only man. Gift him all,

(Refer Slide Time: 14:19)

### “The Looking Glass”

Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,  
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your 15  
Endless female hungers. **Oh yes, getting**  
**A man to love is easy, but living**  
**Without him afterwards may have to be**  
**Faced. A living without life** when you move 20  
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that  
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only  
His last voice calling out your name and your  
Body which once under his touch had gleamed  
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute. 24



Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
Long hair, the mask of sweat between the breasts,  
The warm stock of menstrual blood, and all your  
Endless female hungers. **Oh yes, getting**  
**A man to love is easy, but living**  
**Without him afterwards may have to be**  
**Faced. A living without life** when you move  
Around, meeting strangers with your eyes that  
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only  
His last voice calling out your name and your  
Body which ones under his touch had gleamed  
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.”



(Refer Slide Time: 14:59)

## Thematic Contrast



- Illusion and Reality
- Reflection and Refraction
- Integrity and Pretension
- Man and Woman
- **Love and Death**
- Strength and Weakness
- Body and Soul/Spirit
- **Togetherness and Loneliness**
- Strangers and Lovers
- Drab and Bright



Let us see the thematic contrast between illusion and reality, reflection and refraction, integrity and pretension, man and woman, love and death, strength and weakness, body and soul or spirit, togetherness and loneliness, strangers and lovers, drab and bright. The whole poem is full of contrast like this, between love and death, between body and soul, between strength and weakness of the man and the woman.

It is a kind of advice that the speaker gives to young women. If you want to have love for your husband express all your love to him in the way in which he wants, then only you can get his attention. But this is a poem with lot of undertones, ironic undertones.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:53)

## Poetic Devices



- **Repetition:** Getting a man to love is easy (1, 16)
- **Alliteration:** So that he sees himself the stronger one (4)
- **Assonance:** Softer, younger, lovelier. (6)
- **Assonance & Alliteration:** Admit your/ Admiration (6-7)
- **Alliteration:** The shower and the shy walk (9)
- **Metaphor & Repetition:** Gift him all (12) Gift him (13)
- **Metaphor:** Endless female hungers (16)
- **Simile:** Body which once under his touch had gleamed  
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute. (23-24)
- **Alliteration:** Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.




Let us see the poetic devices in this poem. The first line we have in this poem is repeated so we have repetition 'getting a man to love is easy.' This is a kind of statement that the poem goes on explaining to the young women, we have alliteration in 'so that he sees himself the stronger one,' assonance in 'softer, younger, lovelier,' and then assonance and also alliteration in 'this cute little line, admit your admiration.'

Then we have alliteration, 'The shower and the shy walk,' again metaphor and repetition in 'gift him all gift him,' metaphor in 'endless female hungers.' Simile in 'body, which once under his touch had gleamed like burnish grass now drab and destitute.' Alliteration in 'like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.' What was golden? What was beautiful once is now dull and drab and destitute, nobody to care for.


(Refer Slide Time: 17:01)

## Rhyme, Rhythm and Meter



**Rhyme:** unrhymed  
**Rhythm:** iambic; common speech pattern; address  
**Meter:** iambic pentameter; 10 syllables in each line  
**End-stop:** one at the end; seven full stops occur in the middle of lines.  
**Caesura and Enjambment:**

Getting | a man | to love | you is | easy > (5 feet)  
 Only | be ho | nest a | bout your | wants as >  
 Woman. | Stand nude | before | the glass | with him >  
 So that | he sees | himself | the stro | nger one >



We can see the aspects of rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. This is actually an unrhymed poem. With this iambic rhythmic pattern, which is full of common speech pattern, the whole poem is like an address speech to young women looks like a kind of motivation, but as we said, it has a lot of undertones, ironic undertones. Therefore, we can say the poem is in iambic pentameter. We have all 10 syllables in each line.

We have end stop in many places. Seven full stops are there in the middle of lines, that is something remarkable. That means the movement from the beginning to the end is full of stops, obstacles, the moment is full of problems. Then we have Caesura and Enjambment, let us see the extract that we have,

“Getting a man to love you is easy  
Only to be honest about your wants as  
Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him  
So that he sees himself the stronger one.”

We have 5 feet in every line.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:16)

### Overall Impression

- “The Looking Glass” is a mirror poem suggesting that the woman has to reflect whatever the husband wants to see in him as a strong man so that she can receive unconditional love/ lust from him.
- The speaker tells the young women, “Admit your admiration” even if it is fake, to keep up appearances of the man being strong.
- She also advises the young women to give their best of female charm to their men to make them happy, to satisfy their ego.
- But, ironically, the love once given and received and lost is a pain one has to learn to live with, leading to the status of a beggar of love approaching strangers for ‘love.’
- This poem uses alliteration, assonance, metaphor, and simile to capture the unrelenting despair of the speaker in search of love in ‘intimate’ relationships.



Let us see the overall impression now. “The Looking Glass” is a mirror poem, suggesting that the woman has to reflect whatever the husband wants to see in him as a strong man, so that she can receive unconditional love, lust from him. The speaker tells a young woman admit your admiration even if it is fake, to keep up appearances of the man being strong.

She also advises the young women to give their best female of charm to their men to make them happy to satisfy their ego but ironically, the love once given and received and lost is a pain one has to learn to live with, leading to the status of a beggar of love, approaching strangers for love. This poem uses alliteration, assonance metaphor, and simile to capture the unrelenting despair of the speaker in search of love in intimate relationships.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:19)

## Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Kamala Das
- Three Poems
- "An Introduction"
- "My Grandmother's House"
- "The Looking Glass"
- Analysis



Kamala Surayya



To give you a summary of the poems that we have discussed, let us see the historical and literary context. After independence many women were educated at home or elsewhere, and they started writing about their own feelings, and a new kind of women was coming up in our country. Kamala Das, as a woman with a lot of sufferings in her own mind and heart because of some kind of difficulties in her own intimate relationships, she started writing poems, frankly, freely spontaneously about herself and about her society.

We read this introduction to her in the poem 'An Introduction,' which tells us about her own free thoughts. She does not want anybody to interfere in her life, she took life in her own hands. Then when we come to 'My Grandmother's House,' we saw how she was loved, and she felt secure at home in her grandmother's house, whereas, it does not happen in the case of the man's house.

She feels lonely, she looks for love from strangers. And in the case of this 'Looking Glass,' again, we see how this woman looks at the man as a mirror, whatever the man wants to see, the woman has to reflect. More importantly, the woman has to sacrifice herself and make the man feel stronger, so that he will accept this woman as a person, otherwise she would not be accepted and that means more and more problems will be there at home, in interpersonal relationship within home.

And these kinds of problems in intimate relationships, she was able to capture in her poetry and become one of the women poets in our country to reach such status, international status

to be considered even for this Nobel Prize. She was richly recognized in our country, by readers and also various systems of her society. We can see the difference between the charming lady in the first picture and the kind of matured, mellowed lady in the second picture, Kamala Surayya.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:35)

## References

- Raj Rao, R. 2016. "Interpretative Testimony: Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza." In *A History of Indian Poetry in English*, ed. Rosinka Chaudhuri, pp. 235-250. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Raphael, R. 1979. "Kamala Das: The Pity of It," *Indian Literature*, 22 (3): 127-137.
- Satchidanandan, K. 2009. "Redefining the Genre: Kamala Das (1934-2009)," *Indian Literature*, 53 (3): 49-55.
- Srivastava, Narsingh. 1975. "Some Indian Women Writers," *Indian Literature*, 18 (4): 63-72.



We have some references for you. If possible, look at some of these references, read some more of her poems, you will be able to understand and appreciate her much better. Thank you.