

Indian Poetry in English
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Lecture - 14

Kamala Das

Good morning friends and welcome back to NPTEL online certification course on Indian Poetry in English. You are listening to these lectures by Binod Mishra. If you remember well, in the previous lecture we talked about Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. In the present lecture we are going to talk about a woman poet who is Kamala Das. Friends, Indian English poetry till now--- as we have discussed two major voices especially two major women's voices--- one was that of Toru Datt and the other was of Sarojini Naidu.

Now, these two women's voices were somehow the other soothing, imitating, pleasant musical. And today the poet that we are going to talk about Kamala Das her voice is a bit different. And today you will find that women's voice can also be as assertive as that of a man's. Kamala Das is a very familiar name in Indian English poetry and many of you might have read, heard, understood and enjoyed Kamala Das's poetry.

There are different views about Kamala Das. Many people have actually criticized her. They have got a very sort of reserved impression about Kamala Das, they also have looked at her poems in a very narrow manner. Because her poems are very free, frank bold, but today we shall see Kamala Das both as a poet and also as a person. How the poet and her own voice at times override each other and finally the voice that emerges is that voice of a poet or is that voice of actually woman.

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The slide is titled "Existentialism" in blue text. Below the title is a list of bullet points, each preceded by a square checkbox. The bullet points are: "Western understanding of Existence of man, (his place and function in the worlds, his relationship with God.", "Soren Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre", "Existence precedes essence", "Sartre- *Being and Nothingness* (1943)", "A sense of meaning", and "Indian sense of existentialism". Below the bullet points, the word "Poets:" is followed by a list of four names: "Kamala Das (1934)", "Adil Jussawalla (1940)", "Gieve Patel (1940)", and "Pritish Nandy (1947)". The slide has a dark blue header and footer. The footer contains the Swajati logo on the left and the number "2" on the right.

And hence we shall be calling this phase, I mean, the phase that we are going to discuss as an existentialist phase. Because till now we have been listening to or learning modern poetry. Postmodern voice today is a voice that we can consider as an existential voice. Most of you are aware of this term existential or existentialism which is actually a western ideology, western ideology of existence of man---- his place and function in the world, his relationship with god, many of you who are not acquainted with this term might be very curious to know what actually existentialism does. My dear friends, the main focus of existentialism is to search for meaning, to search for authenticity, to search for a sort of choice. Because the existential lives----- existentialists believe that all of us can create our own world with the sort of choices that we have.

It is not that something is permanent, man can create himself through his consciousness, man can create himself through his action and that is what existentialists aim at. There have been many major existentialist philosophers, namely Soren Kierkegaard, then Heidegger, Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and all. And the basic you know, the principle or one catch word that goes is--- existence precedes essence, meaning thereby nature is not permanent, nature is not everything rather it is man's existence in this world which is very important.

And you will find that Kamala Das also, if we have to categorize Kamala Das as an Indian English poet, she can be considered to be among the first rank of existentialist


poets in Indian English poetry. Indian sense of existentialism can be found in many poets and today we are going to discuss Kamala Das as I have said. There are other names also that we shall also discuss namely Adil Jussawalla, then Gieve Patel and then Pritish Nandy.


But before we go into the works of Kamala Das, let us try to understand who Kamala Das was, what was actually her life and what were the events that took place in her life how she became an existentialist. Because every poet is actually in some way or the other the imprint of age, the imprint of the surroundings and in that regard Kamala Das also was not an exception rather Kamala Das became an example for the future women poets especially writing in Indian English poetry.

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Introduction

- Born in Malabar, Kerala on March 31, 1934
- Born as Hindu but converted to Islam (1999)-Kamala Surayya
- Malayalam writing – ‘Madhavikutty’
- Mother: Balamani Amma (royal Nalapat clan)
- Her father felt that she should stop studying and turn to marriage and domesticity. She got married to a bank Officer – Madhav Das, at the age of 15.
- Wrote in English and Malayalam
- Died in 2009



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Kamala Das was born in Malabar, Kerala in the year 1934, fine she was actually she was born a Hindu and in a traditional Kerala family, but later on she converted herself to Islam and her name also got changed and she became Kamala Surayya. Kamala Das had found writing as a legacy because her mother was also a writer and she came from the family of for the royal Nalpat clan, her mother Balamani Amma also used to write, but in Malayalam and it is from here that Kamala Das also took up this idea of writing though she got her early education in some schools especially in convent schools first in Kolkata and then she had also been at Mumbai and in some other metros. She did not have the formal education like other poets whom we have discussed.

What actually brought a sort of change in Kamala Das's life was her early marriage. Because she got married quite earlier to a bank officer named Madhav Das and after this Kamala became Kamala Das. Only at the age of 15 she was married. Kamala Das wrote both in English as well as in Malayalam and Kamala Das left us in 2009. Now, as regards a life in achievements we can find that Kamala Das because of us her writing she became very popular only at an early age.

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Life and Achievements

- ❑ Das lived her life in
 - ❖ Kerala,
 - ❖ The metro cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi
- ❑ 1963: Won the PEN'S Asian Poetry Prize
- ❑ Short-listed for Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984
- ❑ Won Sahitya Akademi award in 1985 for her Collected Poems
- ❑ 'The eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity'- Naik

nymphomaniac

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She was shortlisted for Nobel Prize in literature in 1984 and then she also was awarded Sahitya Akademi award in 1985 for her collected poems. It is often said that Kamala Das was excessively interested in the pleasures of the body. Many of her poems have also been rated as *carpe diem* meaning thereby eat, drink and be merry meaning thereby a very practical approach to life.

And because of her obsession with body and because of her obsession with the frank assertion of sexual matters and all she has also been considered to be nymphomaniac. I meaning thereby she was actually excessively in love with the nuances of the body with the chemistry of the body and for which she has also been criticized too much. The eternal eve which actually stands for lust. So, we can find the celebration of eve in her essential femininity as Naik; M K Naik the celebrated historian of Indian English literature says:

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The slide is titled "Confessional Poet" in blue text. It features a list of six bullet points on the left and a circular blue graphic on the right containing a quote. At the bottom left, there are logos for "swjain" and a small circular icon. At the bottom right, the number "5" is displayed.

- ✓ Emerged in early 1960's
- ✓ Private experiences in autobiographical style
- ✓ Often focusing on traumatic experiences
- ✓ American Poetry: Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell
- ✓ Poetry of 'I'- Capturing and remaking the 'self'
- ✓ Autobiographical – Her ethnic identity and Culture

..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?
("My Grandmother's
House")

Now, Kamala Das came in an age when all around the world I mean in US and other countries there was actually an air of confessional poetry going on and Kamala Das also could not become unaffected with that fine. So, initial poems that she wrote they actually were written in her grandmother's house.

And then she was actually it appears that Kamala Das had a natural flair for writing a natural flair for writing. So, and Kamala Das is also a confessional poet because like a confessional poet she actually makes all her private experiences public by writing a poetry that is why these private experiences they have been written in a very autobiographical style.

And one can find that it appears as if Kamala Das is talking to us, Kamala Das is expressing her own private fears, angers, angst feelings and all and it is also said that she was very harsh against the patriarchal world order. Especially in American poetry Anne Sexton, Sylvia, Plath and Robert Lowell all these have been confessional poets and Kamala Das also started writing in a confessional tone.

In majority of her poems you can find the use of I, meaning thereby it is in very personal manners she captures the audience or her readers in a very personal manner and tries to remake herself. Now, the question is if Kamala Das or poetry if it talks only about the body or the pleasures of the body can Kamala Das be considered to be a poet or she would simply as many people have also called her a sort of Indian Monroe fine.

You might be reminded of the American actress know Marilyn Monroe who was actually very in famous for all these things and Kamala Das has also been given this term. Many people have also called her sex goddess, many people also try to put her works and circumscribe her works as being essentially bodily oriented.

But unless and until we delve deep into the world of Kamala Das, we cannot make a proper estimation of her. Her autobiographical works often are ethnic and talks about identity and culture. Let us take one line from one of her early poems which she wrote in her grandmother's house and the poem goes like this.

You cannot believe darling, can you that I lived in such a house

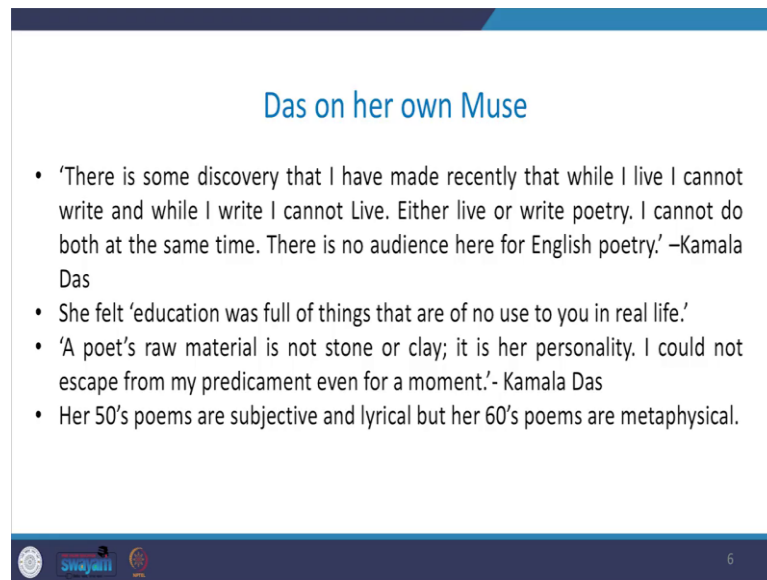
and was proud and loved who have lost my way

and beg now at a strangers doors.

You can find that most of the words used by Kamala Das they are quite you know harsh at times and they appear to be very much alleging and there is a sort of allegation against the man's world. Receive love at least in a small change look at the word at least in a small change Kamala Das actually believed that the men's world was completely biased and that a woman was always exploited.

And the woman had no role even in marital relationships or her choices she did not have any preferences. That is why most of Kamala Das poetry as Kamala Das also in her own you know admission and several interviews she has said that of course, she is excessively busy with her works which actually talk about body, but then through this she actually wants to make a sort of discovery. What she says is very significant here.

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The slide features a title 'Das on her own Muse' in blue text. Below the title is a list of four bullet points. The slide has a dark blue header and footer. The footer contains a logo on the left, the text 'swajati' in the center, and the number '6' on the right.

Das on her own Muse

- 'There is some discovery that I have made recently that while I live I cannot write and while I write I cannot Live. Either live or write poetry, I cannot do both at the same time. There is no audience here for English poetry.' –Kamala Das
- She felt 'education was full of things that are of no use to you in real life.'
- 'A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.'- Kamala Das
- Her 50's poems are subjective and lyrical but her 60's poems are metaphysical.

“There is some discovery that I have made recently that while I live I cannot write’ writing was a passion for her. And on the other hand she says and ‘while I write I cannot live either live or write poetry I cannot do both at the same time there is no audience here for English poetry.” So, Kamala Das believed that she should have a voice of her own later on we will find that even when people also talk about her use of English language and then she becomes very assertive.

And she actually says that the language that I speak in becomes mine. We will come to see. She actually felt that education was full of things that are of no use to you in real life. A poet’s raw material, according to Das, is not a stone or clay actually in this way she is also attacking many of her contemporary poets who are talking about stone and clay and nature and other things, but Kamala Das being a woman poet for the first time she realized that woman should have a voice of her own. And that is why she has been considered to be a rebellion it is her personality, “I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.”

And what was that predicament my dear friend? What were actually those struggles and the troubles that Kamala Das went through? Initially, her 50s poems are subjective and lyrical. Initially when she started she was lyrical also though you can find when we read her poems you can find that the poems go on very naturally as naturally as wind shares,

as naturally as the flow of sea and sea or water becomes a consistent image in the works of Kamala das.

But her 60s poems are metaphysical of course, when a poet starts his or her journey initially they are actually attracted towards meter towards rhyme, but as they grow up they start making certain questions certain interrogations these interrogations to the soul. And what happens Kamala Das has time in again said that her poems have only been judged on the basis of her early experiences and all.

She has written, but while so she wrote extensively in a frank manner in a very candid manner in a very in a manner of confession, but people actually misunderstood it and considered her and rather bracketed her as one who was simply concerned with sex, with body. Now, what actually are her works? My dear friends, Kamala Das was not only a writer of poems, but she has also written an autobiography, and her autobiography

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The slide is titled "Das' Poetry Collections" in blue text. It features a bulleted list of her poetry collections and a book cover. The list includes:

- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965)
- *The Descendants* (1967)
- *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973)
- *Collected Poems Vol. I* (1984)
- Regularly published in *The Century*

To the right of the list is the cover of the book "KAMALA DAS THE OLD PLAYHOUSE AND OTHER POEMS". The cover is dark with a collage of red and black images. Below the title, it says "With an introduction by V. C. Harris".

At the bottom left of the slide, there are logos for "Swayam" and "eGangotri". At the bottom right, the number "7" is displayed.

and her poetic collections bear a close connection in and between and that is why many of our own secrets have also been disclosed. So, the very first collection that she wrote was *Summer in Calcutta*. You should also look at the titles of the poem that will also give you a more you know meaningful impression of what sort of poetic you know desire and feelings Kamala Das was burning, or Kamala Das was suffering, Kamala Das was tolerating rather.

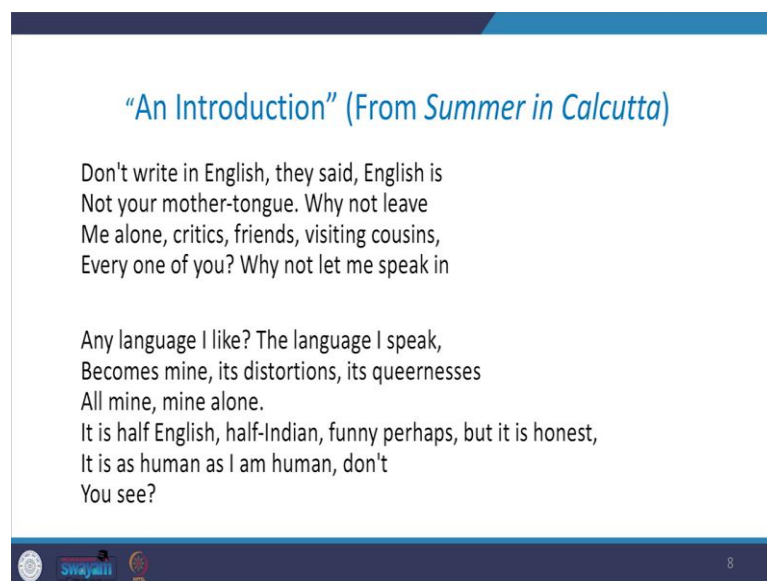
Summer in Calcutta which came in 1965 then the descendants which came in 1967 followed by the old playhouse and other poems which came out in 1973 and then came collected poems volume I and later on some other works as well. Here we must remember that Kamala Das also got Sahitya Academy award for her works collected poems.

Now, there are end number of poems written by Kamala Das, but I have taken some such poems which are prescribed in majority of the universities because Kamala Das is a very familiar name and Kamala Das is read, Kamala Das is enjoyed and Kamala Das is examined through different layers of interpretations, but my difference since Kamala Das works are very candid we cannot make more meaning rather we are more prone to knowing the feelings of the poet.

So, in this regard the very first poem is “An Introduction.” I will be reading the lines of the poem and the way I read, I think you must pay proper, you know listening to it so that we can understand how words convey meaning and there is, you know, you do not need any effort in order to unravel the meaning in order to get the meaning of Kamala Das’s poems.

Now, see the very first line that she writes it actually tells us how assertive Kamala Das could be and how she wanted to have her own presence and voice felt.

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*“An Introduction” (From *Summer in Calcutta*)*

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, 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
You see?

swajali 8

“Do not 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.”

I mean, this actually tells not only about Kamala Das but this in a way also tells in general the voice of the women. In general, the voice of the Indians also because till now we had been bearing the burden of writing in English and we were considered to be imitators.

And that is why Kamala Das also makes a sort of experimentation with the sort of musical constructions and whatsoever she makes and then she says, No?

“Every one of you why not let me speak/ in any language I like? The language I speak/ becomes mine, its distortions its queerness.”

So, this is actually a response to all those people who say that Kamala Das actually made many alterations with language, but in Kamala Das’s world feelings are more important than the constructions, body is more important, the nuances of the body are more important because body is some way or the other considered to be the storehouse of all feelings.

And it is not only the physical body rather the body of language, also the body of emotions as well. All mind alone it is half English half Indian funny perhaps, but it is honest it is as human as I am human do not you see and here also she takes a dig that it is as human as I am why not women be also considered to be human.

Why DO you always consider women to be the secondary sex, why do you consider to them are these second rate citizens. And all and in terms of language also what language we speak even if that may be funny, but then that is my language and it grows.

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Contd...

I was child, and later they Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank Pitifully. Then ... I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored	My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh, Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit On walls or peep in through our lace- draped windows. Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games. Don't play at schizophrenia or be a Nympho.
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Swajati 9

“I was child and later they/ told me I grew for all I became tall my limbs/ swelled and one or two places sprouted hair/”...

You know autobiographical rather.

“When I asked for love not knowing what else to ask/ for he drew a youth of sixteen into the/ bedroom and closed the door he did not beat me,/ but my sad woman body felt so beaten/ “

You know early marriage there is actually a dig at. “The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me/ I shrank pitifully.”

So, in a way she refused the early marriages that Indian women were fated to and even though here it is a personal in the case of Kamala Das, but it is in general that was there was actually a practice going on and it is here for the first time that Kamala Das revolted, she was considered to be a rebel rebellion.

And you see as he goes further she says---- “then... I wore a shirt and/ my brothers trousers, cut my hair short and ignored, my womanliness.” And you know what they would say, “dress in sarees, be girl,/ be wife they said. Be embroiderer be cook/. Here she is talking about the roles that women are destined to and she says that why they are destined only to these roles fit in, “belong cried the categorizers/ do not sit on walls or peep in through our lace draped windows,/ be Amy or be Kamala or better be

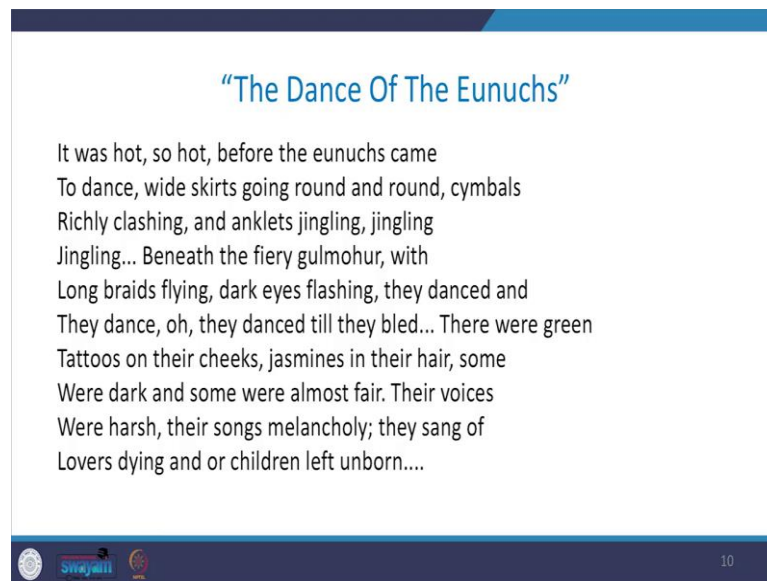
Madhavikutty./.....It is time to choose a name a role,/ do not play pretending games/ do not play at schizophrenia or be a Nympho./

Now, this is how the society actually treats a woman and in Kamala's case she was actually asked to have a name, she actually should be seen doing all the activities that a woman is expected of, but Kamala revolted fine and why Kamala revolted?

Because Kamala believed that it was not only the dominion or it was the world did not belong only to men rather the world also belonged to women and they must have a voice of their own. So, majority of the poems of Kamala Das, you will find, are drenched in deep despair they are they actually consist of all sorts of you know impediments that women often have to face in a male dominated society and that is why Kamala Das appears to be very harsh.

Now, we can also take some other poems. I am actually trying to make you familiar with some other poems as well though Kamala Das is a very familiar name.

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“The Dance Of The Eunuchs”

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... There were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some
Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and or children left unborn....

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And here in this poem also you will find the poem is titled “The Dance of the Eunuchs”. The Dance of the Eunuchs and here in this poem also you will find out how they are also treated and here at the background is a woman.

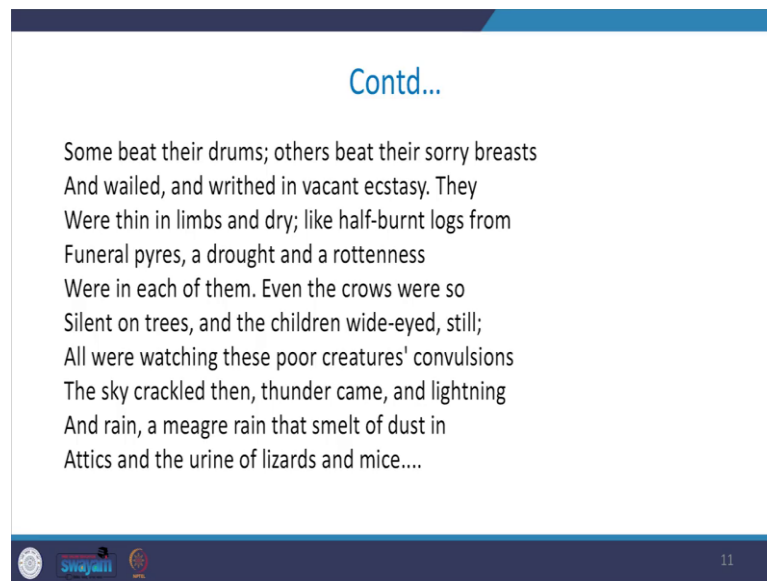
“ It was hot so hot before the eunuchs came/ to dance wide skirts going round and round cymbals/...

You will find there is no meter, but there is actually a musicality of thoughts.

“...Richly clashing anklets jingling,” see the repetition, “jingling beneath the fiery gulmohur with/ long braid flying dark eyes flashing they danced and/ they danced they danced till they bled.../ They were green tattoos on their cheeks jasmines in their hair, some/ were dark and some were almost fair./ Their voices/ were harsh their songs melancholy they sang of /lovers dying and or children left unborn.../

Even though she is talking about the eunuchs, but she is actually talking about the misery, she is actually talking about the sorrows, she is actually talking about the exploitation, she is actually talking about the male diktat, what the male diktat thinks of women to be.

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Contd...

Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children wide-eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....

Swayam 11

And what the male diktat also thinks of the eunuchs to be: “Some beat their drums others beat their sorry breasts/ and wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They/ were thin limbs and dry like half burnt logs from/ funeral pyres a drought and rottenness/ were in each of them even the crows were so/ silent on trees and the children wide eyed still./

So, the sort of misery, the sort of oppression that were being operated upon them.

I think perhaps even the birds still were silent they are also an eyewitness what sort of society we are living in: “All were watching these poor creatures convulsions/ the sky crackled then....”

Even you know the heavenly bodies can crash, but not the man's world. "Thunder came in lightning/ and rain and a meagre rain that smelt of dust in/ attics and the urine of lizards and mice.../

So, through this poem you can find this sort of oppression that is often women are victimized to and not only women, but those people who are considered, you know those people who are considered unapproved of in decent social circles, the same treatment they get. If we have a look at in a general way, the characteristics of Kamala Das's poem, we can find that she is a confessional poet because she follows the pattern of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell.

Of course, the lines that Kamala Das enumerates and transcribes are full of the confession; confession of dissatisfaction. And that is why Kamala Das can be considered not only a usual singer of women's problems, but she is considered to be an iconoclast; iconoclast is a person who breaks the commonly held beliefs and ideas and in that regard Kamala Das is the one who cannot be ignored. In majority of her poems especially in "An Introduction" and all you can find childhood memories are in plenty.

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Characteristics of Her Poems

- ❖ Confessional mode such as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell
- ❖ Frank confession of dissatisfaction, Iconoclasm
- ❖ Childhood memories triggered
- ❖ Intense sexual desire followed by guilt,
- ❖ Characteristically Psychological with tendencies towards 'depression, self-consciousness and flamboyance'.
- ❖ Full of fantasies, startling images and a sense of self
- ❖ Traumatic frustration in love and marriage.

'-woman as sweetheart, flirt, wife, woman of the world, mother, middle-aged inatron-and above all, woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of the psychological processes behind both femininity and masculinity.' - Naik

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And then behind besides all that, the desire for intense sexual you know, intense sexual craving is followed by guilt. Many people have often gone to the extent of saying that Kamala Das talks about sex. Kamala Das also feels at times guilty of but she had one

purpose and the purpose was to tell the outside world what underwent a woman's heart, what were the hidden feelings in a woman's throat, in a woman's psyche.

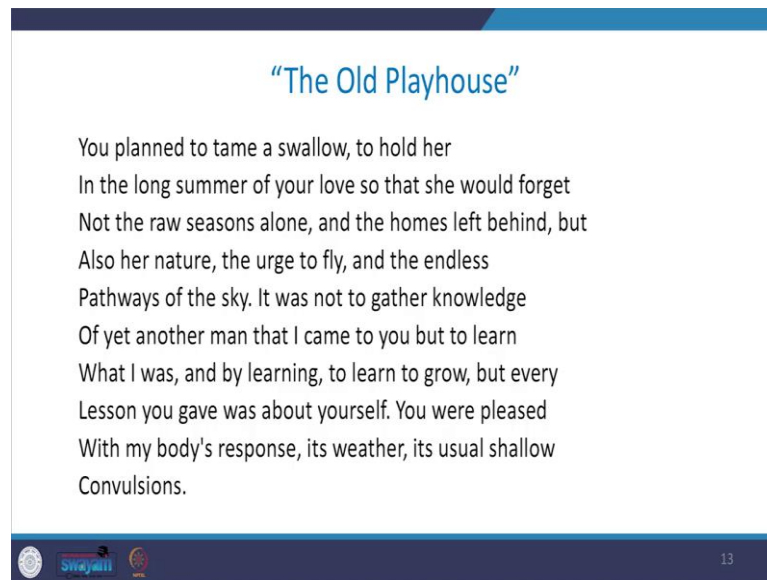
So, majority of her poems are psychological and then we can hear the depressive voices fine and Kamala Das takes recourse to fantasies, flamboyance. The images that see you just are quite startling but then there is actually a search for the soul, a search for the sense of the soul.

It is often said that Kamala Das was not happy with her own marriage and she always looked for substitutes and for alternatives. She also developed some relations with other people. And even at times with some people of different types as well and that is why Kamala Das has been criticized a lot. But then in the views of Kamala Das she actually wanted to experiment her own life and she had in several interviews said that she has got only one life and that life has to be enjoyed.

Here, it is quite pertinent to mention a comment by M K Naik who says, "Kamala Das actually describes women as sweetheart, flirt, wife, woman of the world, mother, middle aged inatron and above all woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of psychological processes behind both femininity and masculinity." So, there is actually a charge on the masculine order, the masculine order that does not allow a woman to be woman because she sings of her womanism and that is why Kamala Das has been derided.

There is another poem by Kamala Das entitled "The Old Playhouse". Here also you will find how she actually tries to think of the freedom, how she tries to find a sort of authentic voice, a sort of freedom of choice but as a woman she cannot and that is why she says.

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“The Old Playhouse”

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
Lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions.

Swajati 13

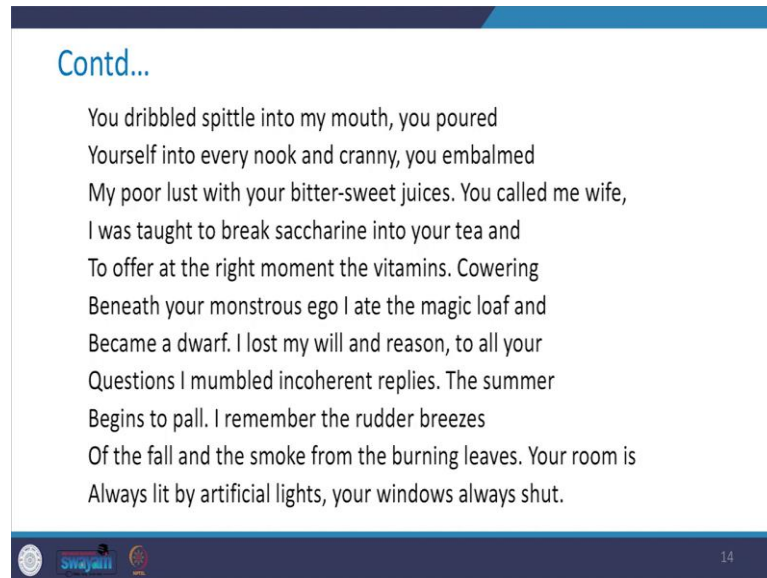
“You planned to tame a swallow to hold her/ in the long summer of your love so that she would forget/ not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind, but/ also her nature the urge to fly the urge to fly.”

You cannot keep a woman caged. my dear friend for long and the endless pathways of the sky. Every woman has got the right also to look at the beauty of the sky, the stars, the moon and the sun.

It was not to gather knowledge of yet another man that I came to you, but to learn what I was. So, a woman should be considered also as an individual and not as a secondary being. That is why Kamala Das actually rues: “ I came to learn what I was/ and by learning to learn to grow but every/ lesson you gave was about yourself. /

I mean you always try to silence my voice “you were pleased/ with my body’s response./ For you I was only a body, a toy, a slave fine. I was only a prisoner in my own cell, I also should have a soul of my own and that the men’s world has often ignored.

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You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer
Begins to pall. I remember the rudder breezes
Of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves. Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always shut.

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It's whether its usual swallow convulsion/ you dribbled the spittle into my mouth./

So, very autobiographical here the tone is autobiographical, but confessional. "You poured yourself into every nook and cranny you embalmed/ my poor lust with your bitter sweet juices./ You called me wife/

Look at the lines--- "you called me wife/ I was taught to break saccharine into your tea/...

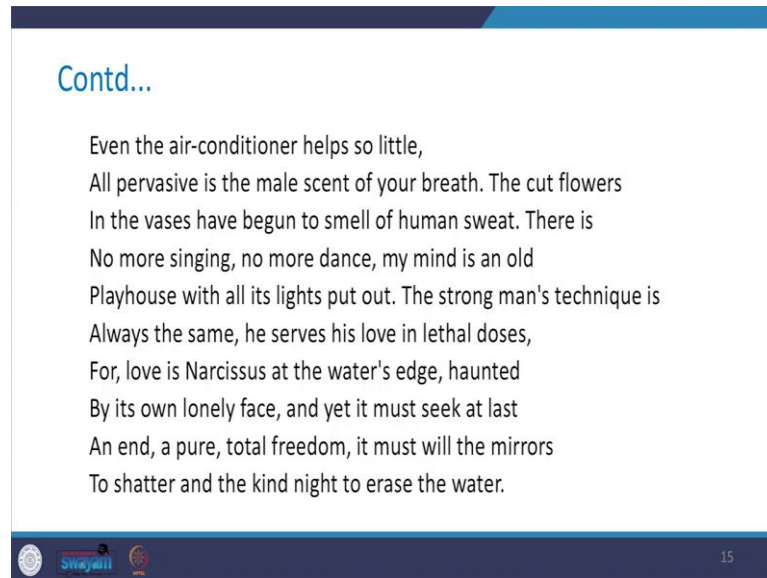
The traditional modes, the traditional customs, the daily duties that a woman is often expected of-- " and to offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering/ beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and became a dwarf./

Where was my own entity? I was simply insignificant, "I lost my will and reason to all your/ questions, I mumbled incoherent replies./

I was not; I was not expected of saying anything adding anything or converting anything replying anything. "The summer/ begins to pall I remember the rudder breezes/ of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves your room is/ always lit by artificial lights, your windows always shut./"

So, there is an image. Your windows always shut you simply believe me or a woman as a piece of entertainment.

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Contd...

Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,
For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

“Even the air conditioner helps so little./ All pervasive is the male scent of your breath/
what I can smell is only the scent of a male. There has to be a proper union between a
male and a female a man and a woman, but then what the women have suffered all
through the ages is that women are only the secondary sources.

They are the sources of delight. “The cut flowers/ in the vases have begun to smell of
human sweat. There is/ no more singing no more dance my mind is an old/ playhouse
with all its lights put out so there we find a sort of depressive note. The strong man’s
technique is/ always the same.”

So, as a man you have always considered yourself the stronger one---“ he serves his love
in lethal doses/ for love is Narcissus at the water’s edge haunted/ by its own lonely face
and yet it must seek at last/ at end a pure total freedom it must, will the mirrors/ to shatter
and the kind night to erase the water.”

And towards the end she asked the question:

By its own lonely face and yet it must seek at least I must seek I must search for my own
soul an end exterminate appear total freedom it must will the mirrors to shatter and the
kind night to erase the water. So, there is a melody a melody of thoughts even though the
lines may at times appear to be very free abrupt yet they are suffused soaked in feelings

of desire, feelings of belonging, feelings of anxiety, feelings of a new wish that they also stand they also exist.

(Refer Slide Time: 33:24)

The slide features a title 'Analysis of "The Old Playhouse"' in blue text at the top center. Below the title is a list of seven themes, each preceded by a blue square icon with a white checkmark. To the right of the list is a large blue circle containing a quote in white text. At the bottom of the slide, there is a dark blue footer bar with logos on the left and the number '16' on the right.

Analysis of "The Old Playhouse"

- ❑ Disenchantment with married life
- ❑ Emotional Vacuum
- ❑ Protest against egoistical husband
- ❑ Figurative Language
- ❑ Male dominated society –Power Politics
- ❑ Use of Mythical allusions – Narcissus
- ❑ Feminist element

"She seems to have shed almost all her inhibitions both as a Woman and as an Indian Woman." - Naik

So, if you analyze this poem "The Old Playhouse", you may find that even though it is autobiographical in nature, it talks about the disenchantment with a sort of married life. It was actually in the case of Kamala Das. It was Kamala Das's, but it is actually a general trend that was prevalent.

Of course, we have come to a world where there are lots of changes taking place, but these poems were written in the 1960s, my dear friends. So, the poet also talks about a sort of emotional vacuum fine, there is a protest against egoistic husband, and you know it is not surprising to note that Madhav Das had allowed Kamala Das to have her own freedom and to have her own ways.

And that was also, you know, that was also full of shame for Kamala Das. She felt that this man could not believe that there should be a proper union. So, when a woman seeks love outside the bonds of marriage, I think of course, that is some way or the other some problem.

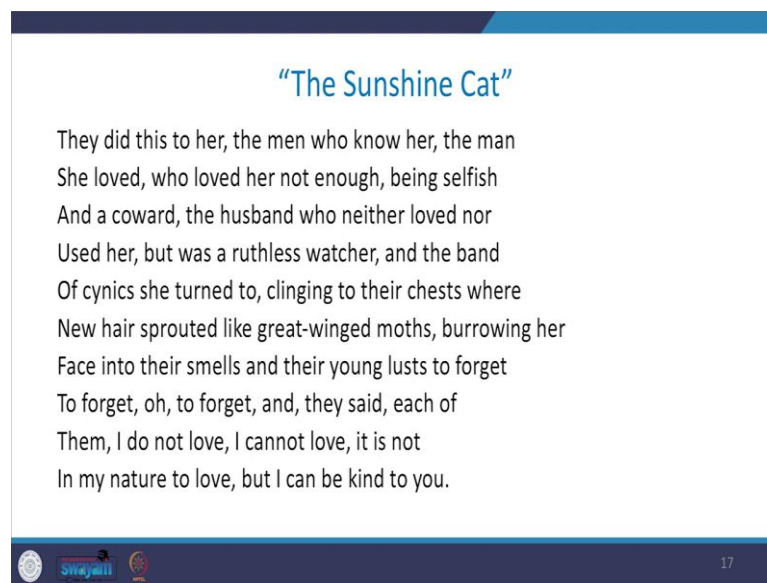
The language used in this poem "The Old Playhouse" is very figurative. You might have found the use of several literary devices, no repetitions, at times several similes,

metaphors there are mythical illusions in the form of Narcissus. And it also talks about the power politics; the power politics that exists between a man and a woman.

But apart from all these what is of utmost importance is that the poem has got a sort of feminine sensibility, a sort of feminine element is there. Naik already says that “she seems to have shed almost all her inhibitions both as a woman and as an Indian woman.” So, now here you can find that there is a tendency a tendency towards change I mean the old order actually requires a sort of change.

And especially we can also find a sort of consciousness on the part of a woman. There are other poems also namely the sunshine cat where you can also find the misery and the title itself is very symbolic “The Sunshine Cat.” So, the cat or the feline qualities you know I mean being submissive that is what a woman does not want. Especially, in the poetry of Kamala Das, she does not want a woman simply to have the feline qualities and we can take some of the lines.

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“The Sunshine Cat”

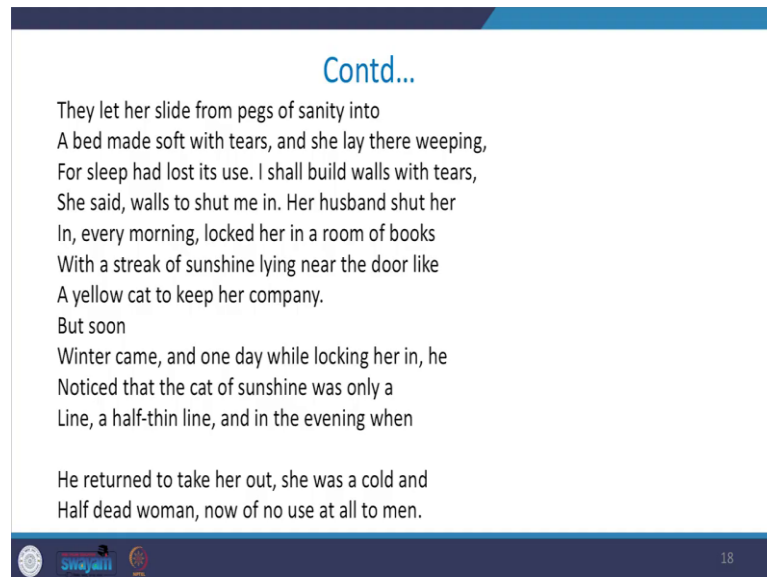
They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh, to forget, and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.

17

“They did this to her the men who know her the man/ She loved who loved her not enough being selfish/ and a coward the husband who neither loved nor// used her, but was ruthless watcher and the band/ of cynics she turned to clinging to the chests where/ new hair sprouted like great winged moths, burrowing her/ face into the smells and the young lusts to forget to forget/ to forget and they said each of/ Them I do not love I cannot love it is not/ in my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.”

So, now see here the way she actually reverses to forget. And they said each of them I do not love, I do not love, I can only be sympathetic. Meaning thereby a woman's life was deprived of love rather they were only considered to be the objects of sympathy and as the poem goes further.

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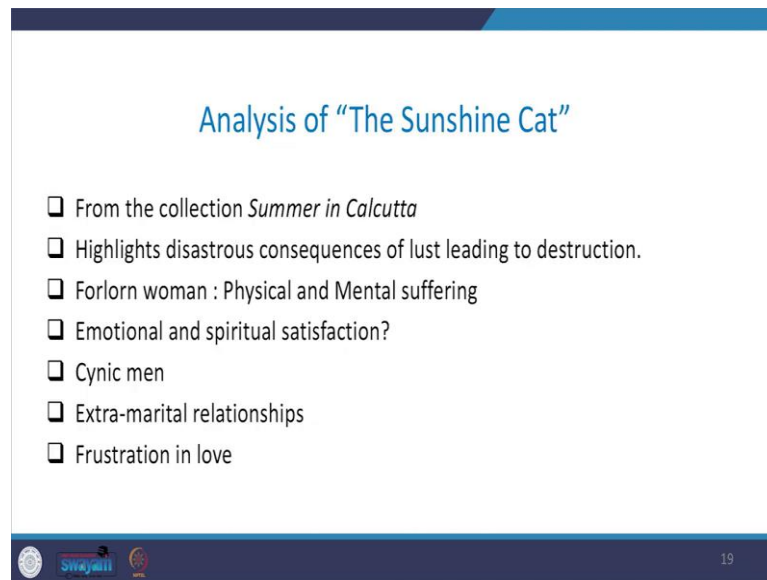
They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears,
She said, walls to shut me in. Her husband shut her
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like
A yellow cat to keep her company.
But soon
Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a half-thin line, and in the evening when

He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

“Winter came in one day while locking her in/ He noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a/ line and a half thin line and in the evening when/ he returned to take her out/ she was a cold and half dead woman,/ ...

So see the metaphor. ...” she was a cold and half dead woman now of no use at all to men./ The implication of the semblance is that a woman actually requires love. Love nourishes, love cherishes, love makes her flourish in her life and without love, a life of a woman is useless. So, in the lack of love a woman not only becomes cold that, but she actually becomes dead even before her time comes.

(Refer Slide Time: 37:47)



Analysis of "The Sunshine Cat"

- From the collection *Summer in Calcutta*
- Highlights disastrous consequences of lust leading to destruction.
- Forlorn woman : Physical and Mental suffering
- Emotional and spiritual satisfaction?
- Cynic men
- Extra-marital relationships
- Frustration in love

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Now, when we analyze this poem also, we can find it actually talks about a forlorn woman who actually is suffering not only physically but mentally at the treatment of the cynic men. Cynic men who actually seek extra- marital relations, but then they do not love. So, there is actually a sort of frustration in love that is what this poem talks about. We can take some more lines while there are poets and critics who have considered Kamala Das only to be a poet of the poet who is confined to herself, but then Kamala Das also was concerned about other women especially about her own grandmother, about her own maid who had committed suicide also and then one day she asked her grandmother why her maid servant committed suicide. And you know, everyone I mean, society has actually trained everyone to say you have to forget and we can take some of the lines.

(Refer Slide Time: 38:50)

**Das' Concern
for other Women**

A woman wearied
by compromise
Her legs quilted
with arthritis
And with only a
hard cough
For comfort.

I asked my grandmother
One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark
Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?
With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends thus with a query. It is this designated
Deafness that turns mortality into
Immortality, the definite into
The soft indefinite. They are lucky
Who ask questions and move on before
The answers come, those wise ones who reside
In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubts
For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
In life, like music in the Koel's egg,
Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree....
(From Nani)

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Here from the poem entitled “Nani,” where the poem says:

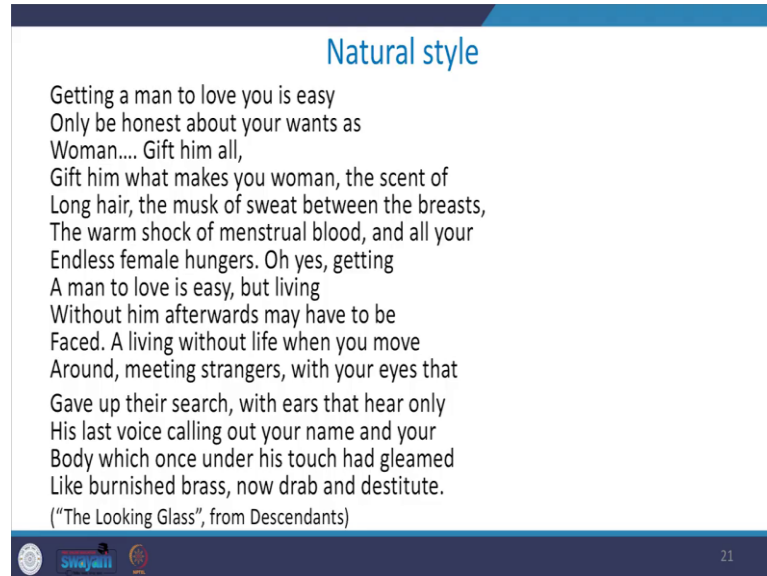
“I asked my grandmother/ one day do not you remember Nani the dark/ plump one who bathed me near the well grandmother./ Shifted the reading glasses on her nose/ and stared at me Nani she asked. Who is she? /With that question ended Nani each truth/ ends thus/ with a query each truth ends thus with a query./ Meaning thereby if you raise a question and you must go without an answer, you cannot raise a question. And you know, there is actually a custom that women should not ask questions and especially those women who are maid servants why are they talking about that. “They are lucky/ who ask questions and move on before the answers come./ Those wise ones who reside/ in a blue silent zone/ unscratched by doubts/ for theirs is the clotted peace embedded/ in life like music in the koel’s egg/ like lust in the blood or like the sap in a tree..../

So, grandmother did not answer what went wrong with Nani who had committed suicide. My dear friends, society has trained both men and women that women are secondary and that is what Kamala Das revolted against.

So, Kamala Das’ literary corpus as you know is excessive. One can go on and on but then we should also look at her style. Kamala Das had a very natural style, it appeared as if words in one poem she says words and words, words come to me fine. Because she wanted to write and as I mentioned earlier----- “that while I wanted to write I could not live and I could not live without writing.” Fine.?

So, there was a natural style and there was a natural flair for words and then in this poem the looking glass from descendants.

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Natural style

Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman.... Gift him all,
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
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 once under his touch had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.
(“The Looking Glass”, from Descendants)

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What she says: Getting a man to love you is easy/ only be honest about your wants as /woman gift him all.” Now, here let us look at this poem from the linguistic point of view-- Gift is not used in English as a verb but here Kamala Das actually breaks the canons and she says.

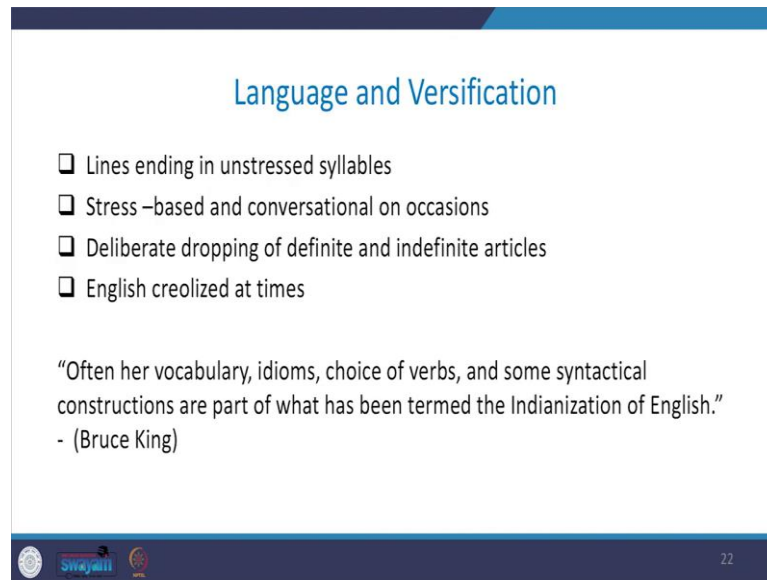
“Gift him all gift him what makes you woman,/ the scent of long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,/ the warm shock of menstrual blood and all your/ endless female hungers. Oh, yes getting a man to love is easy, but living/ without him afterwards may have to be/ faced. Meaning there by, she actually talks about the flexible you know ever changing nature of man is-- only after the lust man is not after love.

And finally, in the last stanza she says; “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.” So, it is very easy to get a man to love you, but can you live after his love because his love is not true, his love is not rational. He will simply leave you after he has exploited you of his own hungers.

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 search.” So, this is here we can find if you have a have a careful look at the way words have been used. And the symbols have been used, fine? you will find Kamala Das was a natural poet.

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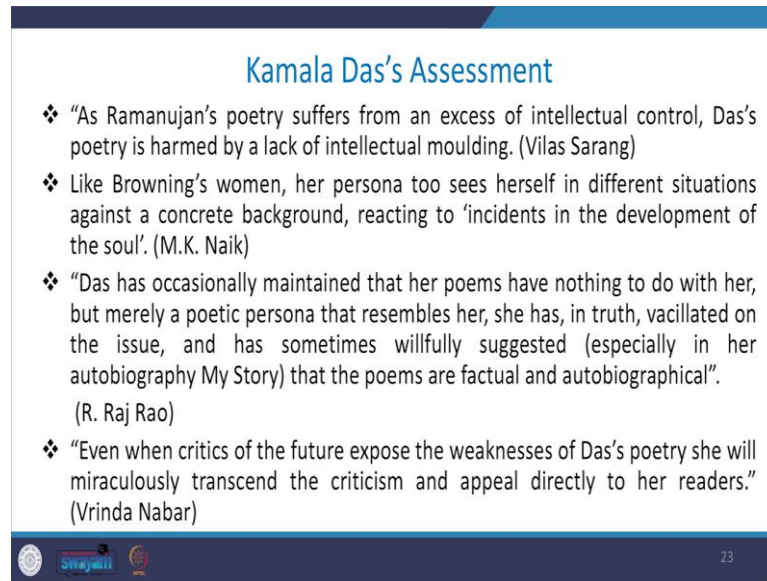


The slide is titled "Language and Versification" in blue text. Below the title is a bulleted list of four items, each preceded by a blue square icon. The items are: "Lines ending in unstressed syllables", "Stress-based and conversational on occasions", "Deliberate dropping of definite and indefinite articles", and "English creolized at times". Below the list is a quote in black text: "Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs, and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English." followed by "- (Bruce King)". At the bottom of the slide, there is a dark blue footer bar containing logos for "Swayam" and "22" on the right side.

As regards language and versification, you can find many lines actually end in unstressed lines, sometimes you can also find the lines are stress based. But then, one thing is very important--- this is quite conversational throughout and another is that she will actually make her end rhymes, you know, end rhymes at times musical at times unmusical.

But then she can also drop off you know syntactic orders sometimes definite and indefinite articles will be dropped off. English can appear to be creolized at times because Kamala Das had already said and you remember that 'the language I speak in becomes mine' is not it? So, and in this regard what Bruce King says is very important- "Often her vocabulary idioms choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English."

(Refer Slide Time: 43:44)



Kamala Das's Assessment

- ❖ "As Ramanujan's poetry suffers from an excess of intellectual control, Das's poetry is harmed by a lack of intellectual moulding. (Vilas Sarang)
- ❖ Like Browning's women, her persona too sees herself in different situations against a concrete background, reacting to 'incidents in the development of the soul'. (M.K. Naik)
- ❖ "Das has occasionally maintained that her poems have nothing to do with her, but merely a poetic persona that resembles her, she has, in truth, vacillated on the issue, and has sometimes willfully suggested (especially in her autobiography My Story) that the poems are factual and autobiographical". (R. Raj Rao)
- ❖ "Even when critics of the future expose the weaknesses of Das's poetry she will miraculously transcend the criticism and appeal directly to her readers." (Vrinda Nabar)

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Now, having a look at Kamala Das's poetic corpus, we can make an assessment and we can also look through the lenses of other contemporary poets and critics what they have said. One of them named Vilas Sarang says that because Kamala Das did not have any formal education so, Vilas Sarang says--- "As, Ramanujan's poetry suffers from an excess of intellectual control" but this you cannot find in Kamala Das.

"Das's poetry is harmed by a lack of intellectual molding". There were emotions and emotions only. There is a Browning's quality in her poems because her persona sees herself in different situations in different roles and you can find the abundance of words that she uses, they actually give you an inkling of depression, exploitation and of what man has done to a woman.

It is very pertinent here to note that because Kamala Das also had many critics some of them especially Vrinda Nabar" says that "Even when critics of the future expose the weakness of Das's poetry she will miraculously transcend the criticism and appeal directly to her readers."

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- ❖ “Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near-neurotic world. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love, the lazy animal hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliations are the warp and woof of her poetic fabric. She seldom ventures outside this personal world.” (K.N. Daruwalla)
- ❖ ... Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that she is obsessed with sex and marriage and social roles. What she is intent on is honesty of impulse and a sense of direction to the flow of her wants and feelings. (Mehrotra)

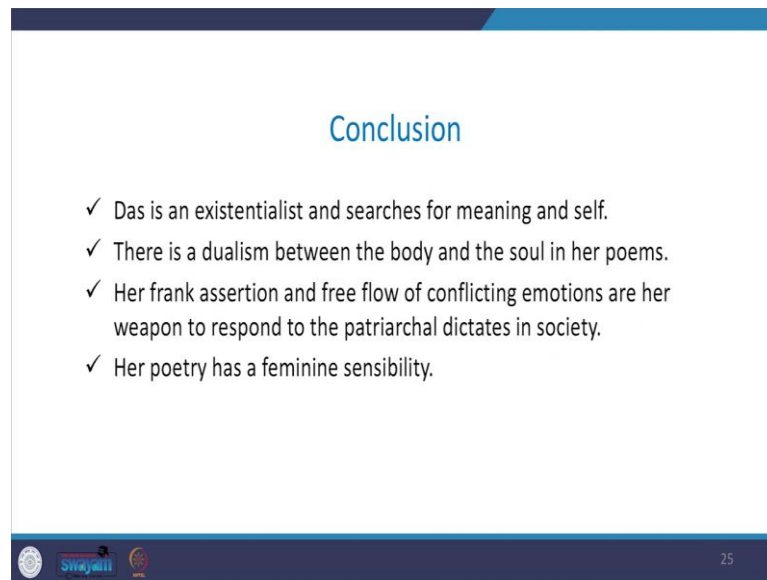
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So, to conclude we can say that Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain. It was only out of suffering that she wrote all these suffering in her own life. And Daruwalla, another poet that we have already discussed makes a very beautiful comment about Kamala Das’s work and he says;

“Kamala Das is pre- eminently a poet of love and pain, once talking the other through a near neurotic world. There is an all-pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love, the lazy animal which actually acts like “hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliations are the warp and woof her poetic fabric. She seldom ventures outside this personal world.”

So, she is alleged of being confined to her personal world, but these are only you know criticisms. With criticisms apart, we can always say and we can substantiate our point of view by saying that is, of course, she is obsessed with sex and marriage and social roles.

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Conclusion

- ✓ Das is an existentialist and searches for meaning and self.
- ✓ There is a dualism between the body and the soul in her poems.
- ✓ Her frank assertion and free flow of conflicting emotions are her weapon to respond to the patriarchal dictates in society.
- ✓ Her poetry has a feminine sensibility.

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But one cannot ignore the fact that what she says has got a sort of honesty, a frank admission. She is actually proceeding towards a search for her own self. There is a dualism between body and the soul in her poems. She has on many occasions said that ‘you cannot let your body remain hungry, unsatisfied and reach the pinnacles or the peregrination of the soul.

Her frank assertion and free flow of conflicting emotions are her weapon to respond to the patriarchal dictates in society. Hence, we can always say that Kamala Das’s poetry has got enough of feminine sensibility, consciousness and what more.

And before we conclude let me quote one line once again from Kamala Das’s poem “Composition” where we can find that despite talking about or singing about body and its elusive nature what Kamala Das meant was she has expressed in another poem named composition where she says that it is actually a process of growth.

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Summing up

The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth,
The child growing into an adult
And, growing out of needs,
Discovering
That the old have black-rimmed nails
And scalps from which emanates
A sweet, moldy smell.

("Composition")

Thank You

Swajati 26

And she says--- “The tragedy of life/ is not death, but growth,/ The child growing into an adult./ And growing out of needs/ discovering/ that the old have black rimmed nails/ and scalps from which emanates/ a sweet moldy smell.”

And my dear friends, all of us in some way or the other are making a discovery, discovery of our own self which is often in oblivion and we want to regain that self in order to have a supreme bliss, satisfaction and joy. With this we come to the end of this talk.

Thank you very much I wish you all a good night.