

KAMLA DAS CONVERSION TO ISLAM: INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACY

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INTRODUCTION

Kamla Das, one of the outstanding poets of India, writing in English and Malayalam, was born on March 31, 1934, in Malabar in Kerala. Influenced by her uncle Nalapatta Narayan Menon, a prominent writer, she began writing poetry at an early age. A trailblazer in the Indian English poetry, she is the first Indian woman writing in English who openly talks about the sexual desires and experiences of Indian women. She left the safe sphere of writing about adolescent, sacrificial, unrequited love. She claims that poetry is "the April sun squeezed like an orange juice," the reader's mind is heated by the heat. Her poetry's strength is its sensitivity.

She is a renowned Malayalam short story writer who writes under the pen name "Madhavikutty." Along with authors like Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing, she was a nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature. Pakshiyude Maranam, Neypayasam, Thanuppu, and Chandana Marangal are a few of her highly regarded stories.

Her first English poetry was 'The Sirens', published in 1964, followed by *Summer in Calcutta*. She won numerous honours and awards, including the Asian Poetry Prize, the Kent Award for Asian-language English literature, the Asan World Prize, the Sahitya Academy Award, and the Vayalar Award. She has ventured into the restricted and unclaimed territory and set a point of reference for her colleagues.

Born into a conservative Hindu family, Kamala Das converted to Islam at the age of 65. She is now working as a syndicated columnist.

WRITING

English

Summer In Calcutta, Das' debut novel, got off to a strong start. She primarily wrote about love, its betrayal, and the agony that followed. At a period when Indian women poets were still supposed to write about visions of endless, bloodless, unrequited love, Ms. Das renounced the certainties provided by an antiquated, somewhat sterile aestheticism in favour of an independence of mind and body.

At the age of 42, she published her autobiography, *My Story*, which was later translated into many foreign languages.

English

- 1964: *The Sirens* (Asian Poetry Prize winner)
- 1965: *Summer in Calcutta* (poetry; Kent's Award winner)
- 1967: *The Descendants* (poetry)
- 1973: *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (poetry)
- 1976: *My Story* (autobiography)
- 1977: *Alphabet of Lust* (novel)
- 1985: *The Anamalai Poems* (poetry)
- 1992: *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (collection of short stories)
- 1996: *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (poetry)
- 2001: *Yaa Allah* (collection of poems)

Malayalam

Kamala Das wrote on a variety of issues, many of which were diametrically opposed, such as the sexual preferences of upper middle-class women who lived in ghettos or close to major cities (*Punnayoorkulam*), as well as a wide range of other subjects. *Pakshiyude Manam*, *Neypayasam*, *Thanuppu*, and *Chandana Marangal* are a few of her better-known tales. She published a few novels, but *Neermathalam Pootha Kalam* stands out since it was well-liked by both readers and critics.

She travelled widely, giving poetry readings at institutions such as the Universities of Essen, Bonn, and Duisburg in Germany, the Adelaide Writers Festival in Australia, the Frankfurt Book Fair, the University of Kingston in Jamaica, Singapore, the South Bank Festival in London, Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, Columbia University in New York, Qatar, Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi, among others. French, Spanish, Russian, German, and Japanese translations of her books are available.

As vice chair of the Kerala Sahitya Academy, head of the Kerala Forest Board, president of the Kerala Children's Film Society, editor of the magazine *Poet*, and poetry editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, she has also held several other posts.

Malayalam

- 1964: *Pakshiyude Maranam* (short stories)
- 1966: *Naricheerukal Parakkumbol* (short stories)
- 1968: *Thanuppu* (short story, Sahitya Academi award)
- 1987: *Balyakala Smaranakal* (Childhood Memories)

- 1989: *Varshangalkku Mumbu* (Years Before)
- 1990: *Palayan* (novel)
- 1991: *Neypayasam* (short story)
- 1992: *Dayarikkurippukal* (novel)
- 1994: *Neermathalam Pootha Kalam* (novel, Vayalar Award)
- 1996: *Chekkerunna Pakshikal* (short stories)
- 1998: *Nashtapetta Neelambari* (short stories)
- 2005: *Chandana Marangal* (Novel)
- 2005: *Madhavikkuttiyude Unmakkadhakal* (short stories)
- 2005: *Vandikkalakal* (novel)

CONVERSION TO ISLAM

She was born in a conservative Hindu Nair (Nallappattu) family having Royal ancestry, she embraced Islam in 1999 at the age of 65 and assumed the name Kamala Suraiyya. Her conversion was somewhat controversial, in among other social and literary circles. Later she stated in an interview that she felt it was not "worth to change one's religion"

FROM KAMALA DAS TO *DASHI*: DOING THE RIGHT THING FOR WRONG REASONS?

Once more, a high profile and controversial individual - this time from Indian-Hindu background - has embraced Islam. I saw several gleeful postings on the internet circulating this news. She, apparently because of her search, has consciously and conscientiously turned toward what she now believes to be the truth. Kamala Das was my sister-in-humanity (as I believe Adam and Eve to be our parents, and if anyone doesn't believe in that, that's alright too). Kamala Das is now my sister-in-faith too. However, I can't help but also take notice of some of my wandering thought as I slowly absorbed the news. At least for some time, I would struggle with those thoughts, while some Muslims might celebrate. Reading her interview given to the Times of India, honestly speaking, I am NOT sure that her reasons to join the fold of Islam as well as the way she has expressed those reasons makes me at all comfortable.

First, in response to a question as to why she decided to embrace Islam, she commented: "I liked the purdah which Muslim women wore. I liked the orthodox lifestyle of Muslim women." I am not sure what does she mean by the "orthodox lifestyle of Muslim women". I am also not sure what she meant by "purdah", though it seems to suggest some kind of attire like "Burqa". If she meant the Islamic guidelines for dress for women (and there is also for men), then I find it somewhat awkward that a learned person like herself would describe it in this way. In Islam there is guidance for dress for women (and men), but there is no specific style such as Burqa of our subcontinent, Chador of Iran (and a good part of Iraq), or any special full-length dress on top of dress that already covers a woman's body. Incidentally, there is NO restriction in Islam that a woman can/should only wear dresses that are black or mono color. Also, one does not need to

become a Muslim for this as the primary reason as there is no Islamic law that non-Muslims cannot wear dresses that are outwardly commonly worn by Muslims.

Secondly, she said: "A woman in purdah is respected. No one touches you or teases you if you wear one. You get total protection." It may be generally true that women with dignified attire (or attires that do not naturally attract attention or entice or provoke indecent thoughts and feelings) are often better treated. [Digression: Does this mean that even bad people have discriminating taste?] However, her statement "You get total protection" may be simply overstretched or misinformed and can create false sense of protection as our own people in the streets of our countries are cherishing an environment of dignity and security.

Thirdly, the part of her interview that made me most uncomfortable was (all emphasis mine): "I don't want freedom. ... Freedom had become a burden for me. I want guidelines to regulate and discipline my life. I want a master to protect me. I wanted protection and not freedom. I want to be subservient to Allah." If she meant the trend of the broken foundation of family as the central social unit, which is under an unprecedented onslaught in our contemporary time, and our temptation and quest for absolute and unbridled freedom are partly responsible for it, then I can understand what she is trying to say, but that message could/should have been delivered differently.

Several aspects of the above statement deserve further elaboration. Even though Muslims are commonly used to identify Islam with the five pillars of Islam based on a prophetic narration, apparently there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the true nature of these pillars. The very first pillar of Islam is Shahadah: a person affirming that there is no Ilah (worthy of worship, obedience, and service) except Allah and Muhammad is His messenger. However, "freedom to choose" is the first and foremost underlying precondition of that Shahadah. Neither Muslims can take away others' "freedom to choose" in regard to their faith, nor would they themselves be held accountable for not proclaiming or practicing Islam under duress or coercion. This should not be difficult to understand Islam does not make common sense "obligatory", rather it assumes that as human beings we have, and we use it. Misunderstanding this aspect by Muslims themselves has caused so much of our misery and deviation from the essence and spirit of Islam.

In some respect I can understand her reaction as a reaction to the extremities in our life and experience. I recall the statement made by the editor of one of the leading Muslim monthly magazines in the U.S. not too long ago. He found the Taliban extremism in Afghanistan reaching all the way to the requirement of males keeping their beards so horrendous and repulsive that he wanted to make a new type of editorial statement: besides writing about it, he shaved off his long-nourished and nurtured beard in protest. Many traditional Muslims misunderstood him, but in his view sometimes extremism needs extreme statement. I don't know whether my respected sister's statement should be understood in such perspective or not, but at this crucial juncture of human history when appreciation of human freedom is so fundamentally recognized and we the Muslims are trying to understand and appreciate it again - for us and for others, the choice of expressions

by her definitely does not represent the ethos of Islam, and can be misunderstood by so many others.

Even more disturbing to me was her statement (I presume the interview was in English, and thus the words are her own choice): "I want a master to protect me. I wanted protection and not freedom." If she made this statement verbatim, then this does represent a serious misunderstanding of Islam. Islam's first and foremost message is freedom. Islam, when properly practiced and institutionalized, also brings protection not just to women, but also to men. However, that does not have to be, and must not be, at the expense of freedom. Furthermore, if the master is meant to be the husband, then I am afraid in Islam there is no such concept. Here are some sample statements from the Qur'an and the Sunnah for us to ponder.

"... They (wives) are your garments (cover), and you are their garments (cover) ..." [Qur'an/2/al-Baqarah/187]

"The believers, men and women, are protectors (Awliya: meaning protector, guardian, caretaker, friend; not masters) one of another. ..." [Qur'an/9/at-Taubah/71]

The Prophet (s) said: "... Surely women are the twins of men." [Sunan Abu Dawood, Vol. 1, #236]

The way my respected sister has expressed herself, I would not be surprised if many think that a Das (servant) has become Dashi (maidservant), merely to make her last name gender-correct (that is, a female can never be a Das). If her expressions also reflect her understanding, then at least to me, this is a case of "doing the right thing for wrong reasons." As a fellow brother, I urge her not to think about her entry into the fold of Islam as a Dashi, but as a queen in the hearts of her brothers and sisters like me, and in another heart, if any, where she would be enthroned as a genuine and one and only queen. Let the kings kiss her feet, and be her Das; please, my sister, don't seek any master. As Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Rebel poet, said:

"While king rules the kingdom
And queen rules the king,
The misery and sadness go away
Joy and happiness her grace does bring."

I also urge reading my crude translation of Tagore's short story "The story of Musalmani" - a definitive tribute to both Islam and Muslim women. Indeed, people turn to (or away from) Islam, or stays with (or departs from) Islam for many reasons: most often, of course, the reason is cultural inheritance through parental background. Thus, some might take issue with my bringing up the issue of right or wrong reason. However,

Muslims and non-Muslims need to know that the foundation of Makkah (Mecca), a city considered by Muslims as the center of Tawhidi (monotheistic) heritage, was founded by a lone woman without human protection.

As I believe in Islam and a good portion of humanity also does, my biased stance on this event of her change of fold is my feeling of gratification for our conjoining under the same fold. However, I can't help but grapple with the fact that parallel to the entry of this well-known Kamala Das - seeking master for protection and presenting herself as Dashi, we have to remember how many Kamala from our own fold we are losing day-by-day who do not make news or our internet discussions, nor do we really care to study and understand why there might be even an exodus of them due to "lack" of freedom. Furthermore, all those other Kamalas who might have been inspired by her would misunderstand her, and say, well thank God, that I am not a Muslim, or that Islam is not for me.

If this message somehow reaches my respected sister - in humanity and in faith - would she please share her thought on the aspects discussed here?

THE REDIFF INTERVIEW/KAMALA DAS

'Manipulation is not a bad word all the time'

Kamala Das has always had a bold and outspoken nature.

She has criticised the traditional, orthodox society that has always been critical of her unconventional manner of living. She was a lot more original in her thinking than most other Indian writers, and she didn't give a damn what people thought of her.

excerpts from a one-hour conversation with Shobha Warriar. Ladies and gentlemen, the incomparable Kamala Das!

You expressed your feelings through different media -- poetry, short stories, painting. Can we categorise these as different faces of a woman, or the different roles that she has to don, like that of a wife, mother, lover etc.?

I think it is very difficult to separate any person. A person is the sum total of her experiences. I went on experimenting with painting, poetry, fiction, drama. I am also a columnist. I think I have become a professional writer as it is difficult remaining a poet because poetry doesn't sell in this country.

I have to become a columnist to survive. It has been quite a hard life for me. That must have helped me survive and to keep myself afloat. I don't have any regrets. Some people felt I should have concentrated upon one single medium.

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