



## Exploring the Interplay of Faith and Experience: Religious Sensibility in Kamala Das's Poetry

Rajib Majumder

Research Scholar

**Corresponding Author:** Rajib Majumder [rajibmajumder20081997@gmail.com](mailto:rajibmajumder20081997@gmail.com)

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:* Religious, Sensibility, Faith, Experience, Kamala Das

*Received :* 13, November

*Revised :* 16, December

*Accepted:* 20, January

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### ABSTRACT

The key elements in the discussed text revolve around religious sensibility, faith, and experience, particularly within the context of Kamala Das's writings. The exploration into Das's works highlights the intricate interrelationship between faith and experience, portraying a dynamic journey where faith both emerges from and shapes the self. The nuanced depiction of religious sensibility underscores the complexity of this relationship. Kamala Das's narratives, spanning childhood encounters with deities to introspective moments of ecstasy, provide a multifaceted examination of these themes. The convergence of religious awareness, personal experiences, and transformative faith contributes to the richness of Das's literary legacy, offering readers profound insights into the complexities of spirituality and self-awareness.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Kamala Das stands as a prominent figure in modern Indian English Poetry, drawing intense critical scrutiny from various perspectives. Despite this, the spiritual essence embedded in her poetry has often been overlooked or relegated to the background in previous studies. Mohan Lal Sharma, in his essay, challenges this oversight, asserting that the religious dimension in Kamala Das's work is not a product of a meticulously formulated philosophy but rather emerges from casual moods and experiences. Sharma highlights the poems' inclination to perceive the body in tandem with the soul, emphasizing their interconnectedness rather than isolation. According to him, the body serves as the conduit through which the soul's exaltations find expression. Simultaneously, Kamala Das maintains a keen awareness of the body's limitations. She vehemently condemns physical unions devoid of love and raises her voice against the grave injustices perpetrated against women by a male-dominated society.

Sharma's exploration delves into the intricacies of Kamala Das's poetic landscape, where the spiritual and the corporeal intersect. Unlike previous studies that may have disregarded or downplayed this aspect, Sharma contends that Das's spiritual exploration is not rooted in a systematic philosophy. Instead, it emerges organically from the tapestry of her emotions and experiences, revealing a profound connection between the soul and the body in her poetic expressions.

The body, as Sharma elucidates, assumes a pivotal role in Das's poetry, serving as the vessel through which the soul's transcendence is conveyed. This perspective challenges the conventional separation of the physical and spiritual realms, emphasizing their inseparability in Das's poetic vision. While celebrating the body as a means of spiritual expression, Kamala Das is not oblivious to its constraints. Her critique extends to the disdain for physical union devoid of genuine love, an act she repudiates with fervor.

Furthermore, Das's poetry, as illuminated by Sharma, becomes a platform for her impassioned outcry against the systemic injustices endured by women at the hands of a patriarchal society. This socio-religious critique adds another layer to her work, showcasing a poet who not only delves into the intricacies of the individual soul but also engages with the broader societal issues that shape and constrain human experiences. Sharma's perspective on Kamala Das's poetry centers around the pervasive influence of the Krishna myth, a force that, according to him, propelled her into diverse relationships with men. This, in turn, immersed her in a realm of dichotomous physical experiences. Poems such as "Advice to Fellow Swimmers," "Ghanshyam," and "An Introduction" vividly illustrate Kamala Das's trajectory, transitioning from a heightened awareness of the body to a cosmic consciousness, culminating in an understanding of the universal 'I.' In the eyes of Mohan Lal Sharma, Kamala Das views poetry not merely as a literary expression but as a conduit for self-realization. However, he contends that her journey along this path may inversely impact her expressive enthusiasm.

The Krishna myth, as interpreted by Sharma, serves as a driving force behind Kamala Das's intricate exploration of relationships with men. These relationships, he suggests, expose her to a spectrum of contrasting physical

experiences, providing the fertile ground from which her poetic expressions emerge. Within this context, poems like "Advice to Fellow Swimmers," "Ghanshyam," and "An Introduction" become poignant markers of Das's evolving consciousness, showcasing a transition from a focus on the corporeal to an expansive cosmic awareness.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The main elements in the discussed passage revolve around religious sensitivity, faith, and personal experience, especially in the context of Kamala Das's writings. The analysis of Das's works brings attention to the intricate connection between faith and personal experience, illustrating a dynamic journey where faith both arises from and influences one's identity. The detailed portrayal of religious sensitivity highlights the intricate nature of this connection. Kamala Das's narratives, ranging from childhood encounters with deities to introspective moments of bliss, present a multifaceted exploration of these themes. The intersection of religious consciousness, individual experiences, and transformative faith enhances the depth of Das's literary legacy, providing readers with profound insights into the intricacies of spirituality and self-awareness.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Sharma delves into the idea that, for Kamala Das, poetry serves as more than a creative outlet; it becomes a transformative tool for self-realization. The journey mapped by her poetic expressions, according to Sharma, mirrors her progress along the path of self-discovery. However, he introduces an intriguing perspective by suggesting that this very journey may have a counterintuitive effect on the fervor and enthusiasm embedded in her expressions.

The poems highlighted by Sharma illustrate Kamala Das's progression from an acute awareness of the physical body to a profound cosmic consciousness, a shift from the personal to the universal. "Advice to Fellow Swimmers," for instance, encapsulates the transformative journey as Das navigates through experiences, transcending the confines of individuality. "Ghanshyam" and "An Introduction" further contribute to this narrative, portraying a poet grappling with identity, love, and the profound implications of the Krishna myth.

Kamala Das's love poetry manifests itself in two distinct dimensions. Firstly, there is the poet's ardent quest for an ideal lover, symbolized by Krishna, challenging societal norms in the process. Secondly, her poetry delves into the intense relationships she shares with men. The latter dimension becomes a compelling call from Kamala Das for women to break free from their stereotypical roles. The love poetry, born out of the female protagonist's conflicted mind, reflects her perpetual denial of the fulfillment she desires. The relentless pursuit of an ideal love, wherein the spiritual is sought through the physical, leads her into various relationships, most of which offer either mere physical satisfaction or are devoid of the spiritual element. The poet elevates

this search to a mythic dimension, imparting a profound and timeless quality to her exploration of love.

Kamala Das's exploration of love in her poetry unfolds with a dual focus. Firstly, she embarks on a dedicated search for an ideal lover, with Krishna serving as a symbolic representation of this quest. This endeavor is not merely a pursuit of romantic love but a defiance of societal conventions that seek to confine and restrict the expression of such desires. The poet's courageous challenge to prevailing norms sets the stage for a unique exploration of love that goes beyond the conventional boundaries.

In the second dimension of her love poetry, Kamala Das grapples with the complexities of her relationships with men. This facet of her work extends beyond personal expression to become a fervent call for women to break free from the constraints of their stereotyped roles. The poet, through her verses, advocates for a liberated existence, urging women to step out of societal molds that confine them to predefined spaces.

At the core of Kamala Das's love poetry lies the tension experienced by the female protagonist, who finds herself persistently denied the fulfillment of her deepest desires. The pursuit of an ideal love, a spiritual connection experienced through the physical realm, becomes an obsessive quest. However, this relentless search leads her into various relationships, many of which offer only the physical aspect of love, devoid of the spiritual depth she craves.

The poet, cognizant of this dichotomy, elevates her exploration of love to a mythic dimension. By infusing mythic elements into her verses, Kamala Das imparts a timeless quality to her portrayal of love and its complexities. The mythic dimension transcends the personal and situates the poet's quest within a universal and enduring framework, making her reflections on love resonate across diverse contexts and epochs.

"The Poetry of Kamala Das" introduces a fresh perspective on religiousness, emphasizing the quest for a personal value system that can regulate and imbue one's existence with meaning. Rather than blindly adhering to tradition and convention, Kamala Das's poetry advocates for a thoughtful exploration of individual beliefs. This exploration involves a profound realization of the perpetual significance of the interaction between the individual and the universe. Kamala Das's verses resonate with religious undertones, stemming from the fervent critique she levels against a decaying, squalid, and hypocritical societal system. Her religious inclinations emerge not from conformity but from the passionate rejection of an existing system, coupled with the identification of a personal value system.

Kamala Das's poetic expressions reveal a deep-seated skepticism and distrust towards institutionalized programs that breed suspicion, violence, and animosity. Her poem "The Inheritance" vividly illustrates this sentiment:

"Our only inheritance, this ancient virus that we nurtured in the soul, So that when at sundown, the Muezzin's high wail sounded from The mosque, the chapel bells announced the angelus, and From the temple rose the Brahmin's assonant chant, we Walked with hearts grown scabrous with hate" (Das 1986, 20).

This poignant verse encapsulates Kamala Das's critical stance, portraying the inherited legacy as a detrimental virus ingrained in the soul. The simultaneous calls to prayer from the mosque, chapel bells announcing the angelus, and the Brahmin's chant from the temple serve as reminders of a coexisting but divisive religious landscape. The poet's choice of words, such as "scabrous with hate," underscores the corrosive impact of institutionalized religious practices on the human heart.

Kamala Das's religiousness, as depicted in her poetry, is not a passive acceptance of inherited traditions but a dynamic engagement with spirituality. Her rejection of a system mired in decay and hypocrisy reflects a yearning for a more genuine and personal connection with the divine. The poem becomes a testament to her defiance against an institutionalized program that has, over time, cultivated suspicion and animosity among different religious communities. When referring to the term 'spiritual,' it denotes an illuminated experience of the transcendental at a specific point in time. This experience is often prompted by events of the past but is not necessarily expressed through relativistic features such as space, time, and language, even though these elements may serve as sources of expression. On the other hand, the term 'mystical' is employed to encompass any awareness or perception beyond the realms of normal day-to-day sensory perception.

The breadth of the term 'mystical' is extensive, covering a spectrum that ranges from an embodied awareness of God through heightened sensory activity, as seen in the context of Kamala Das and the Krishna factor, to an impersonal or disembodied awareness of God attained through introspective spiritual exploration.

In essence, 'spiritual' encapsulates an enlightened encounter with the transcendental, often influenced by past events but not limited to the constraints of space, time, or language in its expression. Meanwhile, 'mystical' serves as a broader term encompassing any form of awareness or perception that goes beyond the ordinary sensory experiences of day-to-day life. This expansive term spans from a tangible, embodied connection with God, as exemplified by the Krishna factor in Kamala Das's context, to a more abstract, impersonal awareness achieved through an inward and contemplative spiritual journey.

Denis de Rouge Mont, adopting a reader-oriented perspective, contends that poetic expression, rather than embodying realities, tends to obscure them when an individual is in an illuminated state. In the reader's everyday state of completeness, there is a belief that poetry provides access to experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible. However, when the reader enters an illuminated state of perception, a realization unfolds: the poetic medium has been concealing or veiling the true nature of reality all along.

In this illuminated state, it becomes evident that the reality exists in a dimension beyond linguistic expression. Consequently, it lacks alternative meanings, as its existence is not contingent on something other than itself; it merely is. Poetry, operating through language, fancy, and imagination,

introduces alternate meanings and, in doing so, obscures the authentic picture of reality.

According to de Rouge Mont's perspective, poetic expression serves as a mediator between the reader and a perceived reality. In the ordinary, day-to-day state, readers may believe that poetry grants them access to otherwise elusive experiences. However, when they attain an illuminated state of perception, they come to the profound understanding that the very medium they thought was revealing reality has, in fact, been masking it.

The essence of this perspective lies in the notion that reality, in its unadulterated form, transcends the limitations of language. It exists independently, without the need for alternative meanings. Poetry, by its nature, introduces a layer of interpretation through linguistic constructs, imaginative embellishments, and the play of fancy. In doing so, it not only represents but also veils the genuine essence of reality.

This discussion prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between poetic expression and the comprehension of reality. While poetry may serve as a conduit for accessing certain experiences in everyday states of perception, it is in the illuminated state that the true impact of language and imagination on reality becomes apparent. The recognition that poetry introduces alternative meanings and veils the authentic picture of reality underscores the complexity of the interplay between language, perception, and the elusive nature of the truths we seek to capture through artistic expression.

Kamala Das's poetry has garnered extensive critical attention, prompting a need for distinguishing between modern and traditional interpretations of confessionalism. The contemporary understanding of confessionalism suggests an existential stance wherein the individual places their existence above all else, preceding even the awareness of that existence. In this context, poetry serves as a cathartic expression, though not necessarily purgatorial. It falls short of being merely an outlet for private thoughts, desires, and despairs. American confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell align with this modern understanding, emphasizing the individual's existential position. In contrast, the traditional understanding, steeped in religious connotations, views poetry not merely as a means of self-relief but as a foundational step in the quest for something higher. According to Underhill, purgation represents the second stage in the evolution of mystic consciousness. In this stage, the individual recognizes their limitations in relation to God and endeavors to diminish these inequalities. However, spiritual realization encompasses more than a disciplined effort to rid oneself of imperfections. Confession, prescribed as one of the ways to initiate the purgation process, serves as a stepping stone toward a broader spiritual awakening.

The confessions of historical figures like St. Augustine and Rousseau need to be contextualized within this traditional framework. They extend beyond a mere release of personal burdens; instead, they form an integral part of a larger spiritual journey. Confession becomes a catalyst for purgation, a transformative process aimed at reducing the inequalities between the

individual and the divine. The recognition of one's limitations marks the beginning of a disciplined effort to attain a higher spiritual plane.

Kamala Das's confessional poetry, when viewed through this lens, takes on a dual significance. It aligns with the modern understanding by providing a cathartic outlet for personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Simultaneously, it resonates with the traditional perspective, wherein confession serves as a means of purgation, contributing to a more profound spiritual awakening. Das's poems become a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in the interplay between the personal and the divine, embodying both modern existential concerns and traditional spiritual aspirations.

Chronologically, Kamala Das aligns closely with the first category of confessional poets. Her poems exhibit a discernible narcissistic strain, positioning her as a parallel figure to the American confessional poets. Therefore, critics who categorize Kamala Das within this confessional framework are not entirely inaccurate. However, it's essential to note that within this critical space, two distinct conclusions emerge—one characterized by an unfavorable comparison between the Indian English poet and her American counterparts, and another marked by an impartial assessment devoid of a definitive judgment.

Kamala Das's journey towards self-discovery is intricately linked to physical, particularly bodily, suffering. Poems such as "Ischemia in August," "Death is so Mediocre," and "Old Cattle," along with passages from her autobiographical work, *My Story*, underscore the impact of physical ailments on her quest for self-realization. In contrast, the American confessional poets were often propelled by psychic derangement, stemming from the clash between their individual existence and the Christian religious context, where sex was often deemed a sin.

A critical distinction arises in Kamala Das's case, where her existence is projected against the backdrop of Hindu religious discourse, particularly the Bhakti tradition, which venerates the role of sex in mystical union. Unlike the American confessional poets burdened by the oppressive weight of guilt and sin, Kamala Das's mindset is liberated from such constraints. Her perspective on death transcends the desperation and eventual suicide observed in her American counterparts. For Kamala Das, death signifies the extinction of subjectivity, leading to divine bliss. Eroticism and transcendental experiences, devoid of guilt or sin, offer her a pathway to a profound and spiritual form of demise. In Kamala Das's poetry, a notable transformation occurs wherein the subjective 'I' undergoes a shift towards the universal 'I.' This transformation is vividly exemplified in the poem "Someone Else's Song."

The verses articulate a profound sense of multiplicity, where the singular 'I' expands into a multitude— "I am a million, million people." This multitude engages in a cacophonous dialogue, akin to the clamor of village maids at wells, each voice distinct yet contributing to a collective symphony of expression. The imagery takes a poignant turn as the poet contemplates the transient nature of life. The metaphor of "a million million deaths" reflects the inevitable cycles

of life and death, with each death representing a pox-clustered seed destined to be shed. These seeds, in turn, hold the potential to germinate and grow, becoming memories for someone else. This intricate interplay of life and memory underlines the interconnectedness of individual experiences within the broader tapestry of existence.

The poem further delves into the theme of silence, portraying it as a vast landscape of a million million silences. These silences are likened to crystal beads, intricately strung onto "someone else's Song." This imagery suggests a transcendent connection where the individual, now transformed into a multitude, contributes to a collective narrative – a Song that extends beyond the boundaries of personal existence.

In "Someone Else's Song," Kamala Das masterfully navigates the complex terrain of identity, interconnectedness, and transcendence. The shift from the singular to the plural 'I' signifies a relinquishing of individual boundaries, allowing the poet to become part of a universal chorus. The metaphorical elements of life, death, and memory weave together to form a rich tapestry of shared experiences, emphasizing the continuity of existence beyond the individual lifespan. The poet has absorbed the entire external world within herself, erasing the sense of distinction that typically separates the individual from the external reality. The only remaining point of distinction lies in the reference to God, indicated by the phrase 'Someone else' within the poem. In essence, the 'I' undergoes a transformative shift, transcending its status as an existing subject to embody the very essence of the subject. The self, through intuitive realization, identifies its essence as synonymous with the external world, thereby endowing the 'I' with symbolic significance, representing the entirety of the cosmic process. This conceptualization mirrors the romantic 'I' present in the works of English romantics like Wordsworth and Shelley. Similar perspectives are evident in the confessions of St. Augustine and Rousseau, who speak from a vantage point aligning with this universalized 'I.'

Kamala Das employs an ambivalent use of the 'I' in her poetry, especially when articulating her anticipation and experiences of love. At times, she adopts the persona of Radha, awaiting the presence of Krishna. This reinforces the aspect of the 'I' transcending individual subjectivity to embody a more universal and cosmic dimension. As highlighted in her interview appended to this thesis, Kamala Das underscores the universality and timeless nature of experiences such as love, birth, death, pain, and bliss – themes that constitute the crux of her poetry. These profound themes, she asserts, resist confinement to a specific individual or era, emphasizing their enduring and ubiquitous essence.

While Kamala Das has engaged with confessionalism in its modern context at certain points in her creative journey, she has demonstrated the ability to transcend and expand upon it, delving into the realms of the romantic 'I' or the confessional 'I' of antiquity. The distinctive feature of Kamala Das's poetry lies in the manifestation of libido attaching itself inwardly, a phenomenon that occurs when it fails to find external objects for attachment. This inward turn of the libido gives rise to the narcissistic quality inherent in her poetic expressions.

Kamala Das's exploration of confessionalism is not confined to the contemporary understanding of the genre. Instead, she ventures into the realms of the romantic 'I,' reminiscent of earlier poetic traditions. This nuanced approach distinguishes her work, showcasing a dynamic engagement with confessionalism that extends beyond its modern constraints.

The hallmark of Kamala Das's poetry lies in the intricate interplay of the libido, the psychic energy associated with desire, which, when thwarted in its external pursuits, redirects its focus inward. This inward-turning libido gives rise to a distinct narcissistic quality in her poetic compositions. The failure to establish external attachments prompts a profound self-reflection and self-absorption, as the poet grapples with the complexities of desire within the confines of her own psyche.

In essence, Kamala Das's poetic journey encompasses a fusion of modern confessionalism and a broader exploration of the romantic and ancient confessional 'I.' Her ability to navigate between these dimensions reveals a depth and complexity in her approach to self-expression. The interplay of libido, desire, and the introspective turn within her poetry portrays a rich tapestry of emotional and psychological landscapes, showcasing her unique contribution to the broader tradition of confessional and introspective poetry.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Kamala Das's poetry is a multifaceted work that explores themes of self-discovery, love, religion, spirituality, and the interplay of the personal and the universal. Her love poetry focuses on the pursuit of an ideal lover, challenging societal norms and complex relationships with men. Das's exploration of religion rejects institutionalized practices and critiques a decaying societal system. Her poetry transcends sensory experiences, capturing both embodied and abstract connections with the divine. Kamala Das's confessional poetry aligns with both modern existential concerns and traditional spiritual aspirations, serving as a cathartic outlet for personal experiences and contributing to a broader spiritual awakening. Her ambivalent use of the 'I' and her ability to transcend contemporary confessionalism make her a distinctive and influential figure in the landscape of confessional and introspective poetry.

## **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Kamala Das's writings provide a rich and nuanced examination of the interplay between faith and experience. Her narratives offer readers profound insights into the complexities of spirituality and self-awareness. Through her exploration of religious sensibility, personal experiences, and transformative faith, Das's literary legacy continues to resonate with readers, inviting them to reflect on their own journey of faith and self-discovery.

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