

Semester III

Analysis of Kamala Das's *The Introduction*

Easily the most candid of her self-confessional poems, *An Introduction* by Kamala Das, while seemingly simplistic, is an attempt to review her life in verse. This poem might well be said to have started a trend among Indian women poets in English to reveal little-known aspects of their lives in tones that are bold, courageous, and almost defiant.

Breaking away from the Indian trend toward keeping oneself anonymous, even hidden, in one's creative work, Das's reputation as a firebrand feminist rests at least in part on this poem, in which she speaks frankly about her early marriage, her unsatisfactory sexual relationships, her lack of joy in becoming a mother until her third child was born, and her defiance of a traditional Indian mindset that wished to impose customary roles upon her.

The poem starts with an apparent self-portrait ("I am Indian, very brown"), followed by an attempt to localize herself in her regional and multilingual space ("... born in Malabar, / I speak three languages, / Write in / Two, dream in one"). The reference to her writing in two languages alludes to her facility in both English and Malayalam, her mother tongue and the regional language of Kerala.

Critics have noted the decided influence of her mother tongue on her English poetry, seen particularly in what some consider her rather disingenuous use of nonstandard grammar and broken sentence structure.

As the poem continues, however, the scenario depicted becomes far more vivid, the tone one of confiding in the reader about the most secret, even shameful, aspects of the speaker's love life. There are references, for instance, to the heartlessness with which her partner took his pleasure while oblivious to her feelings. There are also references to strange sexual liaisons in which her partner indulges (some of which are hinted as homosexual) and which she is expected to both tolerate and accept.

Her partner is portrayed as a callous, insensitive person unable to satisfy her own "endless female hungers." Das portrays her speaker as naive and innocent, as someone who was forced to take up feminist cudgels as a result of the gender injustices to which she was subjected as a wife and mother.

To characterize this self-reflexive speaker as someone preyed upon by those closest to her and by the strictures of her society, Das depicts the speaker's partner as not caring that she "shrank pitifully" from his embraces and from the roles he forced her to assume. To defy these societal norms and conventions, Das's speaker "wore a shirt and my / Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored / My womanliness" (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 10). Still, it seems this woman did not find the self-fulfillment she so desperately sought.

It is possible to see in this poem not just the anguished cry of a female child forced to grow up in a hurry, squeezed into positions from which there was no easy way out, and aching for the enlightenment that would enable her to find her path to self-possession, but also the cries of a generation of Indian women who, despite their education and the comforts of upper-middle-class life, were unable to find the strength to rebel against rules imposed by their oppressive patriarchal environment.

In that sense, *An Introduction* speaks for a vast number of earlier Indian women who struggled toward the assumption of choices of which the modern Indian sorority can currently boast.