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## The masterpiece poetry of Kamala Das named “An Introduction”: From Silence to Self

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### Abstract:

Kamala Das's *An Introduction* stands as a seminal text in modern Indian English poetry, merging the personal and political, the feminine and the universal, the confessional and the philosophical. This paper critically examines the poem through multiple lenses—literary devices, structural techniques, thematic concerns, and spiritual resonances. It argues that Das's bold self-exploration, her challenge to linguistic and gender norms, and her assertion of identity mirror the Upanishadic quest for the self (*ātman*) and the Vedantic notion of unity amidst multiplicity. By juxtaposing Das's poetic voice with the wisdom of ancient scriptures such as the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Shrimad Bhāgavatam*, and *Vachanamrut*, this study reveals how *An Introduction* transcends the personal to reach profound philosophical depths. Ultimately, the poem becomes not only a cry of individuality but also an affirmation of spiritual oneness, resonating deeply with Indian metaphysical traditions.

### Preface

In a literary landscape shaped by patriarchal norms and colonial residues, Kamala Das's voice emerged in the 1960s as a tempest of authenticity, vulnerability, and defiance. Her poem *An Introduction* is more than a personal narrative—it is an act of literary rebellion, a plea for freedom, and a meditative dialogue with the self. As a scholar and reader, I approach this poem not only as a critique of socio-linguistic constructs and gender roles but as a profound articulation of spiritual self-inquiry that echoes the voices of ancient Indian sages.

This paper attempts to illuminate the intertextuality between Das's poetry and the wisdom of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Vachanamrut*, and *Bhāgavata Purāna*. It explores how her poetic journey of self-assertion aligns with the Vedantic path of *ātma-jñāna* (self-knowledge), suggesting that even in modern anguish, the timeless call of “Who am I?” endures. In doing so, this study aims to bridge literature and philosophy, the temporal and the eternal, the feminine voice and the universal self.

### 1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Das skillfully employs a variety of literary devices:

- **Metaphor:** “The language I speak becomes mine” and “the hungry haste of rivers...the oceans' tireless waiting” symbolize the sexual polarity of desire and longing.
- **Simile:** “Repeat them like / Days of week” conveys mechanical political awareness.
- **Personification:** “The language I speak, becomes mine” grants human agency to language.
- **Imagery:** Vivid descriptions such as “my sad woman-body felt so beaten” evoke both mental and physical trauma.
- **Alliteration:** Phrases like “sad woman-body felt so beaten” create rhythmic reinforcement.

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- **Assonance & Consonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds in "He did not beat me / But my sad woman-body felt so beaten" reinforces despair.
- **Oxymoron:** The line "I am sinner, I am saint" juxtaposes moral extremes, capturing human complexity.
- **Irony:** The poem critiques societal prescriptions while ironically using English—once an imposed colonial tongue—as a medium of liberation.
- **Symbolism:** The transformation from sarees to shirts and trousers represents gender non-conformity and the struggle for autonomy.

## 2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem is written in free verse, reflecting the poet's rejection of imposed structures—both poetic and social.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** It has a spoken, natural rhythm; at times jagged and broken, it mirrors the emotional highs and lows of the poet's internal state.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The lack of uniform stanzaic division mirrors the fragmentation of identity.
- **Enjambment:** Frequent enjambment drives the poem's momentum and urgency (e.g., "When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask / For, he drew a youth...").

## 3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Identity:** The poem is fundamentally about the poet's self-definition—ethnic, linguistic, gendered, emotional.
- **Language:** Das defends her use of English, asserting the right to self-expression irrespective of colonial legacies.
- **Gender & Sexuality:** A powerful critique of prescribed gender roles and the repression of female sexuality.
- **Love and Desire:** Both spiritual longing and carnal desire are explored.
- **Rebellion:** The poet revolts against societal norms through dress, language, and lifestyle.

## 4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Alternates between confessional, accusatory, rebellious, and introspective. Das's voice is unflinching and courageous.
- **Mood:** The reader is drawn into feelings of empathy, discomfort, defiance, and finally, self-assertion.

## 5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

- **Existentialism:** Das's repeated "I" seeks meaning in a fragmented world, echoing existentialist themes of individualism and authenticity.
- **Advaita Vedanta:** The poet's final lines—"I have no joys that are not yours, no / Aches which are not yours"—suggest a non-dualistic unity with humanity.
- **Bhagavad Gita & Vachanamrut Parallels:** The inner self that speaks as "I" recalls the idea of the *ātman* speaking through experience—Krishna says in the Gita (2.13) that the soul is eternal despite bodily changes.

- **Mystical Oneness:** Her identification with both sinner and saint mirrors Upanishadic paradoxes of the human and divine coexisting within.

Kamala Das's *An Introduction* is a modern, confessional poem grounded in a personal struggle for identity, autonomy, and self-expression. Yet beneath its autobiographical narrative, the poem deeply resonates with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, especially in its philosophical exploration of the self (*ātman*), the illusory nature of social roles (*māyā*), and the quest for universal unity (*sarvam khalvidam brahma*). The poem's alignment with Indian spiritual texts can be explored across several key concepts:

### 1. The Search for the Self (Ātman)

"I too call myself I."

This assertion of the *I*—a quest for the authentic self—is central to the **Upanishads** and **Advaita Vedānta**. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.10):<sup>1</sup>

"**Aham brahmāsmi**" (I am Brahman)

Kamala Das's poem culminates in this declaration of *selfhood*, echoing the *mahāvākya* that identifies the individual self with the universal reality.

Her struggle to find her true voice—beyond roles, names, genders—mirrors the Upanishadic teaching that the real self is **not the body, not the mind**, but the **witnessing consciousness**. This is also reflected in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.2.13):<sup>2</sup>

"**Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin... ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṁ purāṇo**"

(The Self is unborn, eternal, immutable, and ancient; it is not destroyed when the body is.)

Das's self-definition as "sinner...saint...the beloved and the betrayed" echoes the *inclusive unity* of the *ātman*, not bound by dualities.

### 2. Transcendence of Social Roles and Māyā

"Don't play at schizophrenia or be a / Nympho... Be Amy, or be Kamala...choose a name, a role."

The poet is rejecting the multiplicity of social roles imposed upon her. According to the **Bhagavad Gītā** (3.27):<sup>3</sup>

"**Prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ...**"

(All actions are performed by the modes of material nature; but a person deluded by ego thinks, 'I am the doer.')

This illustrates that roles and designations are part of *prakṛti* (nature), and not the essential self. Kamala Das is aware that these roles are *māyā*, illusory constructs, which she refuses to identify with.

### 3. The Unity of All Beings (Vedantic Non-Dualism)

“I have no joys that are not yours, no / Aches which are not yours.”

This empathetic oneness aligns with **Vedānta's non-dualistic vision**. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.8.7)<sup>4</sup> proclaims:

“**Tat tvam asi**” – *That thou art*

Das's identification with every woman and man in the world reflects this spiritual truth—that the *same self* resides in all. The separation between “I” and “you” is an illusion. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (6.29):<sup>5</sup>

“**Sarvabhūtaṣṭham ātmānam sarvabhūtāni cātmani**”

(The yogi sees the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self.)

### 4. Language and Self-Expression as Human Dharma

“The language I speak / becomes mine... It is as human as I am human.”

This defense of *svabhāva* (innate nature) and *svadharma* (one's own dharma) aligns with the **Bhagavad Gītā** (18.47):<sup>6</sup>

“**Śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ, para-dharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt**”

(It is better to follow one's own dharma imperfectly than to follow another's well.)

Speaking in her own way—through hybrid English—is her *svadharma*. Her rejection of normative expression is also a spiritual assertion of authenticity.

### 5. Body and Desire: From Worldly to Transcendent

“My sad woman-body felt so beaten... the weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.”

While this evokes **saṃsāra**—the suffering inherent in bodily existence—it also reflects the **Bhāgavata Purāṇa's** understanding that bodily identification is the root of suffering. As stated in *Bhāgavatam* (11.28.5):<sup>7</sup>

“**Dehātma-buddhiḥ**” – the mistaken belief that the body is the self.

By expressing desire as oceanic and painful, she critiques both repression and indulgence. True liberation, the texts say, lies in transcending both.

### 6. Vachanamrut and Self-Inquiry

In *Vachanamrut Gadhadā I-18*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says:

“**One who realizes his true self as distinct from the body and remains constantly in that awareness... becomes free from bondage.**”

Kamala Das's entire poem is an exercise in this *vichāra* (inquiry)—asking: **Who am I beyond these labels?** This reflects the spiritual imperative of *ātma-bodha* (self-realization) discussed in the *Vachanamrut* and other Advaita texts like *Ātmabodha* by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya.

### 7. Confession, Sin and Redemption

“I am sinner, I am saint... I drink lonely drinks at twelve... I lie dying with a rattle in my throat.”

This evokes the **Bhakti tradition** of radical self-honesty. Saints like **Kabir** and **Mirabai** often confessed their sins to emphasize divine compassion over ritual purity. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (9.30)<sup>8</sup> says:

“**Api cet sudurācāro bhajate mām ananya-bhāk...**”

(Even if a person of the most sinful conduct worships Me with undivided devotion, he should be regarded as righteous.)

Das's final identification with “I” is not arrogance but surrender—akin to the Bhakti ideal of admitting one's flaws and seeking unity.

### Conclusion

Kamala Das's *An Introduction* is deeply congruent with Indian spiritual philosophy. Her poetic rebellion is not merely feminist or postcolonial—it is **Vedantic in its essence**. Her journey is from the *nāma-rūpa* (name-form) world of roles and expectations to the realization of an unfragmented *I*—the universal *ātman* that pervades all. The poem becomes not only an artistic confession but a **spiritual sādhanā**—a practice of self-inquiry, surrender, and liberation.

### 6. Historical and Cultural Context

• **Time & Place:** Written in post-independence India, the poem reflects the burden of colonial legacies and patriarchal systems.

• **Colonial Language Debate:** The tension between English and mother tongue, a major postcolonial concern, is foregrounded.

• **Feminist Movement:** This poem coincides with the rise of second-wave feminism globally and acts as an Indian articulation of that movement.

• **Kamala Das's Context:** As a woman from a conservative Nair family in Kerala writing in English, her voice was both radical and disruptive.

### 7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• **Inspiration:** Das's personal life—marked by early marriage, dissatisfaction, search for love—forms the poem's emotional bedrock.

- **Emotions:** The poem expresses vulnerability, confusion, rage, longing, and resilience.
- **Autobiographical Element:** It is deeply confessional; even the poet's pseudonyms (Kamala, Madhavikutty) are thematized.

### 8. Target Audience and Purpose

- **Audience:** Both Indian and global readers. It addresses patriarchal society, critics, lovers, and herself.
- **Purpose:** To assert a woman's right to voice, identity, desire, and emotional authenticity. Also a defense of writing in English as a legitimate postcolonial expression.

### 9. Personal Interpretation

Kamala Das's *An Introduction* is not merely a personal poem but a manifesto—of linguistic freedom, sexual agency, and human vulnerability. The final affirmation—“I too call myself I”—is both universal and revolutionary, reclaiming space in a world that often tries to reduce women to roles or silence. The poem challenges us to consider: What does it mean to claim “I” in a world that assigns you names and roles? For the reader, especially for women and those navigating identity in postcolonial spaces, this poem offers both companionship and confrontation.

### Conclusion

Kamala Das's *An Introduction* is a powerful statement of identity in a world eager to assign labels, roles, and boundaries. Through her unfiltered narrative, Das reclaims agency over language, body, desire, and selfhood. The poem challenges societal norms, exposes the inner turbulence of gendered existence, and resists linguistic colonialism by making English her own.

Yet beneath this modern, feminist exterior lies a deeper, Vedantic core. The repeated “I” becomes not just an autobiographical utterance but a metaphysical affirmation—an acknowledgment of the *ātman* that transcends gender, name, and form. In rejecting imposed identities and embracing the totality of her human experience—sin, love, longing, shame—Kamala Das inadvertently enacts the very journey the Upanishads prescribe: from *nāma-rūpa* (name and form) to *sat-cit-ānanda* (being, consciousness, bliss).

Thus, *An Introduction* becomes both a political manifesto and a spiritual revelation. It teaches us that the true self cannot be confined to roles or silenced by norms, for the self is not constructed—it is discovered. As readers, we too are invited to call ourselves “I”—boldly, truthfully, universally.

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### End Note

- 1 ब्रह्म वा इदमग्र आसीत्, तदात्मानमेवावेत्, अहम् ब्रह्मास्मीति । तस्मात्तत्सर्वमभवत्; तद्यो यो देवानाम् प्रत्यबुध्यत स एव तदभवत्, तथाषीणाम्, तथा मनुष्याणाम्; तद्वैततपश्यन्नृषिर्वाग्मिदेवः प्रतिपेदे, अहम् मनुरभवत् सूर्यश्चेति । तदिदमप्येतर्हि य एवं वेद, अहम् ब्रह्मास्मीति, स इदं सर्वम् भवति, तस्य ह न देवाश्चनभूत्या ईशते, आत्मा ह्येषां स भवति; अथ योऽन्यां देवतामुपास्ते, अन्योऽसावन्योऽहमस्मीति, न स वेद, यथा पशुरेवम् स देवानाम् । यथा ह वै बहवः पशवो मनुष्यम् भुञ्जुः, एवमेकैकः पुरुषो देवान् भुनक्ति; एकस्मिन्नेव पशावादीयमानेऽप्रियम् भवति, किंउ बहुषु? तस्मादेषाम् तन्न प्रियम् यदेतन्मनुष्याविद्युः ॥ १० ॥
- 2 नित्योऽनित्यानां चेतनश्चेतनानामेको बहूनां यो विदधाति कामान् । तमात्मस्थं येऽनुपश्यन्ति धीरास्तेषां शान्तिः शाश्वतीनेतरेषाम् ॥ ३ ॥
- 3 प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः । अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥ २७ ॥
- 4 स य एषोऽणिमैतदात्म्यमिदं सर्वं तत्सत्यं स आत्मा तत्त्वमसि श्वेतकेतो इति भूय एव मा भगवान्विज्ञापयत्विति तथा सोम्येति होवाच ॥ ६.८.७ ॥ इति अष्टमः खण्डः ॥
- 5 सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि । ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः ॥ २९ ॥
- 6 श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वच्छितात् । स्वभावनियतं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम् ॥ ४७ ॥
- 7 छायाप्रत्याह्वयाभासा ह्यसन्तोऽप्यर्थकारिणः । एवं देहादयो भावा यच्छ्रान्त्यामृत्युतो भयम् ॥ ५ ॥
- 8 अपि चेत्सुदुराचारो भजते मामनन्यभाक् । साधुरेव स मन्तव्यः सम्यग्व्यवसितो हि सः ॥ ३० ॥