

Kamala Das: A Tribute

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Kamala Das, aka Madhavikutty, aka Kamala Suraiya, b. 31 March 1934, d. 31 May 2009. Multiple names; two faiths; two mediums of creative expression - painting and writing, the latter in two languages and several genres; many interests; many controversies. Her name will long resonate in our consciousness, thanks to her bold assertiveness, whether in confessional verse or self-revelatory prose.

Like most of her non-Malayali readers, I know Kamala Das from two books published in the mid-seventies: *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (Madras: Orient Longman, 1975), which incorporates two earlier collections, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *The Descendants* (1967), and the autobiography *My Story* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1976). Here, for the first time in print, we encounter the modern Indian woman talking unabashedly of her sexuality, and the thrills and anguish of illicit relationships.

Paradoxically enough, her early years seemed quite traditional, with marriage at the age of fifteen to a man fifteen years older. She had been born into the matrilineal Nayar clan of Kerala, but both her parents were influenced by Gandhi, whom she accuses of being "unashamedly patriarchal". She disliked Gandhian austerity and "yearned to wear coloured silks and jewellery". Her mother, Nalappatt Balamani Amma, was a popular Malayali poet who celebrated traditional values. Young Kamala noted with disquiet that her mother's verses about marital bliss were belied by the acrimonious exchanges she overheard coming from her parents bedroom. She knew what to avoid in her own writing. When she started writing fiction in Malayalam - on themes some might consider scandalous - she hid behind the pen-name of Madhavikutty, so that her puritanical grandmother would not know she was the author.



Modern Indian writers have generally followed Western trends, but Kamala Das was a trend-setter. Since her first poetry collection came out in 1965, the same year as Sylvia Plath's path-breaking *Ariel*, she is one of the pioneers of women's confessional poetry. She has also candidly described the trick behind confessional writing. In an interview with Eunice de Souza she confesses that in *My Story* she "exaggerated a bit"; "If it's red, make it redder. It's the artist's freedom to deepen the colour."

Unsurprisingly, Kamala Das has become something of a feminist icon, though she was indifferent to such labels: "Others see me as a feminist. I see myself as a feminine creature who loves the company of brilliant men and women. I am not very gender conscious." She had actually been very anti-feminist on the question of abortion. In 1999 she surprised everyone by converting to Islam, and received death threats from right-wing fanatics. Like A.R. Rahman's, her Islam is in the great, liberal tradition of the Sufi orders.

One aspect of Kamala Das's work that only her Malayali readers know intimately is her socially committed

journalism. Apparently, her syndicated columns touched upon every subject under the sun, and she always expressed herself with fearless forthrightness. Unlike most poets she was not averse to political engagement; in fact she floated a political party (the Lok Seva Party, which promoted secularism and aid to poor single mothers) and contested parliamentary elections in 1984, but lost.

In 2007 Kamala Das moved from Kerala to Pune; she died there last Sunday - 31 May 2009 - of complications arising from a diabetic condition. The Indian Prime Minister in a tribute described her as "one of the most noted of modern Indian poets" and also acknowledged her contributions as a painter, a fiction writer and a columnist. Her body was flown to Kerala where the state Chief Minister was one of the thousand-strong mourners, of diverse faiths, who gathered at the Palayam Juma Masjid on 2 June to pay their last respects.

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Extract from *My Story*

Often, from behind the house and from the dirty seashore, the smell of rotting fish would enter our back verandah, from which I watched a municipal school's children parade in the morning, singing a patriotic song and the huts of the bootleggers who buried their wares in tins at night and slept on charpoys in the day, while the sun climbing over them, burnt their skin black. The bootleggers were full of distrust for strangers and once or twice when I went strolling past their colony, they turned their hostile eyes towards me.

On the many huts, one was bigger and its occupants were better dressed. The man was short and handsome with a yellow skin. His dress was a white singlet and a pair of khaki shorts but they were washed every day by his wife who seemed to love working for him. She used to bring for him glasses of milk while he lay on a charpoy under a tree, dozing. She fed him well and although from my height, I could not hear what she was telling him, by the look on her face, I could make out they were love words. He was silent and sullen, as all men are when they are being loved too deeply by a woman. He used to gaze at her indifferently while she turned her back on him and walked back to their hut.

Everybody in that colony showed him respect, even the police constables who used to come in trucks off and on to poke the ground with long iron rods to see if anything had been buried there. He would laugh aloud, seeing them at it. On some days when he was not very sleepy, he would play with his little sons throwing them in the air and catching them while they chortled with joy. He liked to watch his wife wash their rounded bodies near the hydrant, soaping them and rubbing them hard until they turned a burnished copper. He was obviously proud of his progeny.

One day while I stood leaning over the railings of my verandah watching him sleep, he opened his eyes all of a sudden and looked at me. They were eyes reddened with sleep and desire. I felt uneasy while they grazed my limbs and withdrew to my room in a hurry. One morning we woke up hearing a commotion in the backyard and saw the police take him away in their truck. They had at last found the liquor which he made at night in his hut and stored in two wooden barrels. His wife ran behind the truck with the end of her pink sari flying for a few yards, but he did not once look at her. He sat on one of the barrels looking like a king, his handsome face impassive and cold...



An Introduction

I don't know politics but I know the names of those in power and can repeat them like days of week or names of months, beginning with Nehru. I am Indian, brown, born in Malabar. I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they cried, English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, everyone of you? Let me speak in any language I like. The language I speak becomes mine, its distortions, its queeresses all mine, mine alone. It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps but it's honest, it is human as I am human, you know...

It voices my longings, my hopes and is useful to me as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions, it is human speech, the speech of the mind that is here, not a mind that sees and hears and is aware. Not the deaf blind speech of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the incoherent mutterings of the blazing funeral pyre. I was child and later they said, 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 his bedroom and shut 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 a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or wife, they cried. Be embroiderer, a cook or a quarreller with servants. Fit in, belong, said the categorizers. Be Amy or be Kamala. Or, better still, be just Madhavikutty. It is time to choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games. Don't play at schizophrenia or be a nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when jilted in love... Later, I met a man. Loved him. Call him not by any name, he is every man who wants his woman, just as I am every woman who seeks love. In him the hungry haste of rivers, in me the ocean's tireless waiting. Who are you, I ask each and all. The answer - is, it's I.

Anywhere and everywhere I see him who calls himself I. In this world he is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath. It is I who drink a lonely drink near midnight at hotels of strange towns, it is I who make love and then feel shame, it is I who lie dying with a rattle in my throat, I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am both the lover and the beloved. I have no joys which are not yours no aches which are not yours we share the same name, the same fate, the same crumpled - dreams...

An Afternoon at the Asia House: Part I

S I AHMED

It was built up as an afternoon of literary Davids from Pakistan, writers who had emerged relatively new on the horizon of South Asian English fiction and were fast beginning to catch up with the entrenched Goliaths of India. Pakistan appears often in the global media for issues ranging from its institutionalised support of violence to its undisputed talent in terms of both cricket and corruption, and yet, here they were veiling the violence with an artistic cover. So, what were the new Pakistani literati really like, I thought, as I navigated the swell of the great unwashed over the Bank Holiday at Regent's Street.

The event was at the Asia House on a surprisingly warm London day. The institution's entrance was as well-maintained as a Harley Street physician's, with an immaculate reception room. Located on New Cavendish Street, between Portland Street and Baker Street, it is an unexpected oasis of cultural activity a few hundred feet away from Oxford Street's hustle. I climbed the blue-carpeted stairs, and seated myself among the two-roomed audience of over a hundred attendees. The room had classical proportions, delightfully high ceilings and as ironically colonial as one could get for 'Asia' House. Founded in 1996, it has steadily built itself up as a non-profit, non-political, pan-Asian organisation in Britain. It runs business, politics, current affairs, literary, visual-and-performing arts get-togethers in separate jamborees, hosting roughly 125 events annually covering 30 Asian countries. Buoyed by corporate donors (such as Standard Chartered Private) it benefitted from the fine hand of author William Dalrymple for a time at the tiller. This year's third Asian Writers Week was held in the Adams-style 'Fine Rooms', where colonialism came full circle on the ceiling, the delicate filigree pink-and-green plasterwork borders at the top intertwining its past with the evolving present beneath.

The pan-Asian literary festival featured writers from India, China, Malaysia, Iran, Afghanistan and the UK. Amit Chaudhuri, editor and author, did the opening night act with Mark Tully of ex-BBC fame. Tully, a virtuoso of balanced reporting during Bangladesh's Liberation War, had also made waves among us immigrants by famously claiming England to be a "generally, a very miserable place" and thereafter dividing his time between India (where he lives half the year with his girlfriend) and Britain (where he lives the other half with his ex-wife), thus proving that an admirable balance in personal life and professional outlook is not beyond the reach of mortals. The week ended unfortunately, with the BBC's John Simpson, a bombastic carpetbagger who had been 'embedded' with the US infantry's march into a bombed-out Baghdad. But there were also the likes of Hardeep Singh Kohli, a self-made property tycoon and self-styled come-



dian, who will be closing this month-long event by reading from his travelogue *Indian Takeaway*. I looked over the audience: dedicated lit groupies, satchels over shoulders, furiously reading their dissertations without lifting a glance towards new entrants. Others were friends of the House, sociable and chatty, acquainted with the writers and their extended community. It promised unfortunately to be genteel and well-behaved - English table manners threatening to contain the Indian spirit within the living rooms of the long-departed fourth Count of Cavendish.

This particular event featured Daniyal Muiinuddeen, Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam being interviewed throughout the session by Tahmima Anam. The writers being interviewed were all from Pakistan and the interviewee was from Bangladesh, though it quickly became apparent that none of them could be classified so easily into nationalities, as there was the persistent conundrums of birth, education, parentage and multiple residences, layered over by self-defined declarations of cultural, religious and literary affinities.

Daniyal Muiinuddeen was born in Lahore, from an Italian mother and a Pakistani father. Educated in Dartmouth and Yale, he lived in New York and was running a remote farm in Khanpur, southern Punjab while also living in Cairo. He had published his first book *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, a series of interconnected short stories that range across the landscape of today's Pakistan. Each story highlights the contrast between the huge cities of Lahore and Karachi to its lonely, hard villages, the rich and powerful landlords and the powerless labour in their pitiless grasp, and doing it with stunning characterisation and narrative power.

Kamila Shamsie was born in Karachi. Her first novel, *In the City by the Sea*, was shortlisted for the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and her second, *Salt and Saffron*, won her a place on Orange's list of '21 Writers for the 21st Century'. In 1999 Kamila received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature in Pakistan. She writes for The Guardian,

The New Statesman, Index on Censorship and Prospect magazine, and broadcasts on radio. *Kartography* (2004) explores the strained relationship between soulmates Karim and Raheen, set against a backdrop of ethnic violence. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is her latest book.

It is Nadeem Aslam who slowly won the attention of the audience - but more of that later. Born in Gujranwala, he came to Britain at the age of 14 when his father, a Communist, fled President Zia's regime and settled in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. He went to Manchester University to read biochemistry but left in his third year to become a writer. He is self-taught in English and published his first short story in Urdu in a Pakistani newspaper. In England, with a Communist father who worked as a bin man, Nadeem migrated between Asian neighborhoods around Britain, going wherever free accommodation was on offer. He did receive financial assistance from the Royal Literary Fund, but handed back a third because he thought it was too much. His debut novel, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), set in rural Pakistan, won a Betty Trask Award and the Authors' Club First Novel Award, and was shortlisted for the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the Whitbread First Novel Award. His second novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, took 11 years to write, won the 2005 Encore Award and the 2005 Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize. His latest novel is *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), its title derived from a painting of the same name by a Pakistani artist.

And there was Tahmima Anam, a poised and articulate interviewer who also writes occasionally for the Guardian. As the author of *A Golden Age* she doesn't need an introduction to readers of an English-language newspaper in Bangladesh. Seated there, I had a dim memory of reading somewhere that the book was a part of a proposed trilogy, that she, salmon-like, was swimming upstream for inspiration to the source of conflict and separation by tracing back to Calcutta and the Partition.

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Dhaka Club Book Launch: Adding intellectual flair and lustre

KHADEMUL ISLAM

On 30th May Dhaka Club played grand host to a book launch in its Hamidur Rahman Sinha Lounge. The book was the second installment of Hasnat Abdul Hye's autobiography *All Those Yesterdays 1954-1964: Youth in Pakistan, America and Europe* (Dhaka: Adorn Publication).

The farthest thing from my mind was a summons for a Dhaka Club event. So when the author called to request me to be a discussant at the launch I was more than surprised. I had heard of Mr. Hye, of course, and had read some of his short stories. I immediately assented. To me it was important that he had written the book in English. We Bangladeshis lag way behind other South Asians in English writing, and an outdated 'language' debate keeps ensuring that we are outperformed and out-hustled in a field that we should claim as our own. However, when I received the invitation card, I saw that I too, among a distinguished list of discussants - Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid, Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Syed Shamsul Haq, Dr Mizanur Rahman Shelley, Professor Ferdous Azim - was listed as 'Professor Khademul Islam'. Hmmm! So when Mr Hye called to confirm my presence, I protested that while I had indeed once taught at Dhaka University, it hardly merited the 'Professor' title. Hasnat Abdul Hye laughed it off; indeed, afterwards, when he called to thank me for my participation, he enquired whether he was speaking to 'Professor Emeritus...'

Book launches in Dhaka can be predictable affairs attended by the usual suspects. But here, by the time we discussants took our place on the dais, a sizable crowd had seated themselves in the chairs. Later, I was told that the club parking space cup had runneth over, testament to the drawing power of Hasnat Abdul Hye in combination with Dhaka Club.

With the proceedings emceed with enviable ease by Khan Ata of theatre fame, Professor Zillur R Siddiqui gave a sober analysis of the text, followed by speakers in the order given above. Excepting perhaps for I and Ferdous Azim, who is more accustomed to the lecture mode, all were old hands at public speaking - especially Dr Mizanur Shelley and Syed Shamsul Haq, adept at their practiced pirouettes. Ferdous's talk was one sifted through a serious academic temperament. By the time my turn came to speak, I felt like the peasant at the foot of a medieval lord's table, pondering a roast that had been picked clean. Everything worth saying had been said. So I upped the entertainment level by 'fessing up that I was no bigwig prof shrof, that I was very happy Mr Hye had chosen to write in English, mentioned Nirad C Chowdhury and Samar Sen's *Babu Britanno*, and the long-lost Dhaka of Mr Hye's book:

"The house at 47 Purana Paltan, where Buddhadev Bose spent his boyhood and early adult life for over five years from the later Thirties, still exists... The building and the garden are not entirely as they were in Buddhadev's days. But the main building remains intact with



the old design and the engineering devices used in the roof. The walls are made of brick and mortar and so is the roof. The latter rests on huge iron beams (like railway sleepers) and horizontal flat iron bars. Red mortar is still used to repair the old *jalchad* (rainproof roof). The front verandah was covered by wall with grilled pattern, giving glimpses of the interior from outside. The floor is red coloured, its oxidized mortar giving a cool effect. Khokan, the present owner and Shirin, his wife, take minute care to preserve the old ambience of the house..."

Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid delivered the concluding remarks, praising its wealth of information and language, and as a faithful record of a middle-class Bengali's contact with a wider world far removed from the placid backwaters of a 1950s East Pakistan. At the end, Hasnat Abdul Hye thanked us all, adding that friends had not hesitated in informing him that his photo in the club flier sent out to members was more appropriate for an obituary notice than the advertised event.

Supporting such book launches is part of an overall effort - along with extending membership to academic, artistic, cultural and journalistic circles - by club president Sadat Hossain Salim to make it more inclusive and extend its roots deeper within the community. It is a sensible insurance policy in a democratic age - the club has only 5 acres left from its 173 in 1941; it also gives the institution an intellectual flair and lustre that lifts it above the other 'pretenders' to the throne. No doubt the club's founders would approve of a return to such graces.

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