

# Kamala Das : Pioneering Feminist Voice in Indian Literature

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Kamala Suraiya (Kamala Das) is no more. She passed away on May 31 at the age of 75. She was a pioneer who blazed a new path for women in Indian writing – both in Malayalam and in English. Not only lovers of literature and poetry, but also the women's movement will mourn the loss of this remarkable writer and feminist pioneer.

Born at Punnayurkulum in South Malabar, Kerala on March 31, 1934, Kamala was brought up in a literary ambience – her mother was a poet and her uncle a famous writer. Writing since her late teens, she began her literary career in Malayalam. At the age of 42, she wrote her autobiography 'My Story', and in later life wrote short stories, novels and also columns, and even created paintings. But it was for her poetry in English that she is best remembered.

Virginia Woolf wrote of a woman writer's need for a « room of one's own » and of her inevitable life-and-death struggle with the « Angel in the House » who seeks to prevent women from writing honestly about their bodies, their emotions, or about men. Kamala Das no doubt faced those same struggles : and what emerged, in her poetry, was an uncompromisingly honest voice that mapped the ground for a generation of women writers, writing of subjects that were considered taboo for women.

Speaking without self-pity of the circumstances in which she wrote, she once said, « There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing. That was my work area. My mother's uncle was a writer, quite well known too. Nalapat Narayana Menon. He had nothing else to do but write and I have watched him work from morning till night. I think that was a blissful life. »

Always a rebel who revelled in surprises, she chose to embrace Islam in 1999, not long after the Vajpayee Government had called for a « national debate » on conversion.

Kamala Das is gone, but her poetry, disconcertingly direct, will continue to connect with readers and will always be a treasure for the women's movement.

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**P.-S.**

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