

# Assertion of Identity in the Works of Kamala Das

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**Abstract**—Kamala Das stands as a singular voice in modern Indian English literature, renowned for her fearless exploration of female subjectivity and personal identity. Her works—both in English and Malayalam—are often autobiographical, rassing with issues of gender, sexuality, cultural constraints, and personal liberation. This article investigates the affirmation of identity in Das's work, focusing on her poetry collections and her seminal autobiography *My Story*. Her self-articulation resists patriarchal and societal norms, presenting identity as both a site of struggle and self-actualization.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das (1934–2009), also known by her pen name Madhavikutty in Malayalam and later as Kamala Surayya after her conversion to Islam, emerges as a singular and revolutionist voice in modern Indian English and regional literature. Her oeuvre—marked by confessional candour, intense introspection, and stylistic innovation—has significantly contributed to redefining the contours of feminine expression in postcolonial Indian literature. Das's poetry and prose interrogate the layered experiences of womanhood, drawing from her own life marked by emotional isolation, unfulfilled marital bonds, spiritual longing, and existential anxiety.

Her work resists reductive readings: though often categorized as "confessional," her writings surpass mere personal testimony to become acts of cultural and gendered resistance. She speaks of forbidden desires, suppressed rage, and the female body—not as passive object but as an instrument of articulation and defiance. In a society where women were expected to conform to ideals of chastity, compliance, and silence, Das's fearless expression of her corporeality and emotional needs constituted a radical political act.

Writing both in English and her native Malayalam, Das draws from a rich complexity of personal, cultural, and linguistic influences. Her texts destabilize the binaries of tradition and modernity,

East and West, body and spirit, self and other. Central to her literary project is the declaration of a dynamic identity—one that is self-fashioned, evolving, and often contradictory. Through works such as *My Story* (1976), *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), and *The Descendants* (1967), Das constructs a deeply personal yet socially resonant voice that challenges patriarchal ideologies and asserts the validity of female experience.

This article examines how Das deploys confessional modes, linguistic agency, and cultural intertextuality to assert her identity across multiple axes—gendered, linguistic, regional, and spiritual. Her autobiographical impulses are not merely self-revelatory but are deeply political, underscoring the power of literature to negotiate and reshape identity. Das's work thus becomes a site of continuous contestation and self-reconstruction, where identity is at the same time a burden, a revelation, and a liberation.

The question of identity—particularly for women in patriarchal societies—is not merely a philosophical inquiry but a lived reality that is ceaselessly negotiated. Kamala Das (1934–2009), through her confessional style and deeply personal narratives, articulates a powerful resistance to the dominant narratives of femininity and cultural conformity. Her affirmation of identity is not static but a dynamic process marked by introspection, rebellion, and reinvention.

## II. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS IDENTITY PERFORMANCE

In her bold and much-discussed autobiography *My Story* (1976), Kamala Das openly shares the most personal parts of her life—her unhappy marriage, her emotional struggles, and her longing for love beyond the boundaries of traditional relationships. At a time when women were expected to stay silent about such matters, especially in India, Das broke those rules. Instead of showing herself as the ideal, obedient wife

or mother, she chose to reveal her weaknesses, desires, and disappointments. In doing so, she took control of her own life story.

One of her most powerful lines from the book is: *“Why not let me speak in any language I like? The language I speak, becomes mine.”* This is not just about choosing between English or Malayalam. It’s about something much deeper—the freedom to speak and live in a way that is true to herself. Through these words, Das claims her right to tell her story in her own voice, without having to fit into what society expects from a woman.

By writing candidly and dauntlessly, she challenges the idea that women must hide their feelings or live according to others’ rules. Her autobiography becomes an act of self-respect and courage, where she not only tells her truth but also creates space for other women to do the same. Through *My Story*, Kamala Das reclaims her identity—not as someone shaped by tradition or patriarchy, but as a woman who dares to be herself.

#### Gender and Sexual Identity in Her Poetry

Kamala Das’s poetry is a powerful space where she expresses and asserts her identity as a woman. In many of her poems—like *“An Introduction,” “The Looking Glass,”* and *“The Old Playhouse”*—she boldly questions the way women are treated in society. These poems talk about how women are often seen only as objects, expected to be silent, obedient, and dependent. But Das refuses to accept these roles.

In *“An Introduction,”* one of her most well-known poems, she writes:

*“I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one.”*

With these lines, she proudly tells us who she is. She talks about her skin colour, her place of birth, and the many languages she uses. This is her way of showing that she belongs to many worlds at once—Indian, regional, and global. She is not afraid to speak in her own voice, even if it doesn’t follow traditional rules.

Later in the same poem, she writes:

*“Then ... I wore a shirt and my Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness.”*

These lines show how she tried to break free from what society expected from a woman. She dressed like a boy, cut her hair short, and challenged the idea that she had to behave in a “feminine” way. This is a clear act of rebellion against strict gender roles.

In her poems, the women are not weak or silent. They are questioning, resisting, and redefining what it means to be a woman. Das gives them voices that are bold, emotional, and honest. Through her poetry, she opens up conversations about love, desire, anger, loneliness, and the need for freedom—things that many women feel but are often not allowed to express.

In short, Kamala Das uses poetry not just to share her personal feelings but also to speak up for all women who want to be heard, respected, and free to live life on their own terms.

### III. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LINGUISTIC AGENCY

Though Kamala Das wrote in English, her work is deeply rooted in Indian consciousness, especially those of Kerala. She often distorts cultural motifs, regional ethos, and personal memory to construct a hybrid identity that resists colonial and patriarchal impositions. In *“Summer in Calcutta,”* for instance, the sultry, sensuous imagery serves both as an expression of physical longing and a metaphor for postcolonial displacement.

Her multilingualism becomes a metaphor for the fragmented self, negotiating between the native and the alien, tradition and modernity. The hybridity in her works is reflective of a postcolonial assertion of identity—refusing both total Westernization and conservative nativism.

### IV. SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

Later in her life, Kamala Das made a deeply personal and much-discussed decision—she converted to Islam and took the name Kamala Surayya. This change surprised many people and led to widespread public debate and criticism. Some saw it as a betrayal of her roots, while others questioned her reasons. However, when we look closely at her life and writings, we can understand this conversion as part of her lifelong search for meaning, freedom, and personal truth.

Kamala Das had always been someone who refused to live by the expectations set by society. Whether in her poetry, her autobiography, or her interviews, she showed a strong desire to shape her own identity. Her decision to convert to Islam was not just a matter of

changing religion—it was a deeply spiritual and personal choice, one that reflected her constant effort to delineate herself on her own terms.

Throughout her life, she had struggled with feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and the need to belong—to her body, her language, her culture, and her soul. In interviews, she said that she found peace and comfort in the teachings of Islam, especially in the idea of surrendering to a higher power. In that sense, her conversion can be seen as a spiritual journey, not a political or public statement.

Moreover, this shift also reflected her intellectual independence. She did not let others define who she was—be it as a writer, a woman, a wife, or a believer. Just like she broke norms by writing openly about female desire, by rejecting traditional gender roles, and by speaking in a language of her choice, her religious conversion was yet another step in claiming her identity.

Kamala Das's life was full of contradictions, but she embraced them all. She never claimed to be perfect; rather, she was honest about her fears, doubts, and changes. Her conversion to Islam can be understood as part of this ongoing, courageous journey to find a sense of wholeness and authenticity in a complex and often judgmental world.

## V. CONCLUSION

Kamala Das's writings are deeply political in their insistence on individual experience as valid, even revolutionary. Her bold thematic choices—female sexuality, desire, marital discord, linguistic freedom—represent a radical act of self-assertion in a context that often demanded female silence and conformity. Through her poems and prose, Das constructs an identity that is multifaceted, rebellious, and profoundly human.

Her legacy lies in opening the floodgates for Indian women writers to speak their truths, assert their identities, and write their own stories.

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