

Voice, Identity, and Resistance: Major Trends in Kamala Das's Poetry

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Submitted: 08- Sep -2026 Revised: 13-Sep-2026 Accepted: 15-Oct.- 2026 Published: 31-Oct.-2026

Manuscript ID:

IJEWLPSIR-2026-030504



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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23433260

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23433260>

Volume: 3

Issue: 5

Month: October 2026

E-ISSN: 3065-7873

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How to cite this article:

Brahmane, S. Y. (2026). Voice, Identity,
and Resistance: Major Trends in Kamala
Das's Poetry. International Journal of
English and World Languages &
Literature Paradigm Shift in
International Research, 3(5), 11–13.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23433260>

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Abstract:

Kamala Das was a prominent Indian English poet. She is also known as Madhavikutti. She was a bilingual writer who wrote in English and Malayalam. Kamala Das wrote freely about the body and the body hunger in her poems. She was very out spoken about sexuality. Kamala Das challenged the patriarchal society and resisted the patriarchal norms. Her poetry deals with the themes of love, Identity, body lust, desire, self alienation, memory, resistance and sex.

Keywords: Kamala Das; Voice; Identity; Resistance; Patriarchy, Confessional Poetry.

Introduction:

Voice, Identity and Resistance are the important trends in the poetry of Kamala Das. One of the important feature of her poetry is that it is confessional. She wrote about her own desires, emotions, and personal experiences, intimate relationships and psychological relationships.

This paper examines the concept of Voice, Identity, and Resistance in the Poetry of Kamala Das.

The poem selected for the present research paper is 'An Introduction'

In the poem 'An Introduction' Kamala das asserts her female voice and identity.

"I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, /I speak three languages, write in /Two, dream in one (Papke 59).

Kamala das strongly expresses her identity in these lines. The poet accepts that she was born in Malabar and the colour of her skin is very brown. Thus the poetess accepts and emphasizes her physical identity. She firmly establishes her identity as an Indian woman. Her linguistic, cultural and personal identity is expressed in these lines. She can speak in three different languages. She writes poetry in two languages and dreams in one language. Thus the poet reveals her innermost feelings, thoughts and emotional identity in one particular language.

Zaidi and Priya argue that Kamala Das "redefined the concept of 'voice' in Indian literature" (370)

In this poem Kamala Das expresses her resistance against societal norms and patriarchy. "Why not leave Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, /Every one of you? Why not let me speak in /Any language I like?" (Papke 59).

The poetess directly asks critics, friends, and relatives to leave her alone and not to interfere with her life. This shows that she has strong desire for freedom and independence. She wants to have her linguistic freedom without the interference of people. She expresses resistance in these lines by strongly rejecting the interference of other people in her life. There are many restrictions on how women are expected to behave, talk and dress. In Indian society, women are often expected to behave in ways that place them in an inferior position to men.

There are many restrictions on women as how they should behave and dress. The Indian society people expect the women to behave in inferior manner than men. Kamala Das rejects societal expectations, conventions and restrictions that are imposed to control woman's voice, writing, and personal expression.

Kamala Das's poetry can be understood as an assertion of resistance at three interconnected levels: social expectations, patriarchal authority, and restrictions on individual and creative expression. By addressing "critics, friends, visiting cousins, / Every one of you," she draws attention to the various people who attempt to regulate or judge her choices. Her use of these figures suggests that the pressure placed on women does not come exclusively from formal patriarchal structures but can also operate through everyday social relationships.

At the level of patriarchy, Das challenges the conventional roles assigned to women. Traditional social structures frequently encourage women to remain submissive, restrained, and compliant with established expectations. Rather than accepting these prescribed roles, Das asserts her individuality and questions the norms that seek to determine how a woman should behave and express herself.

Her resistance is also evident in her approach to creative expression, particularly in her choice of language. When others question her decision to write in English and imply that she should use another language, Das refuses to allow external expectations to determine her artistic voice. Her insistence on choosing the language in which she wishes to write becomes an assertion of creative autonomy.

Thus, language in Das's poetry extends beyond its function as a means of communication. It becomes closely associated with personal freedom, selfhood, and identity. Her deliberate choice of language represents her refusal to surrender control over her own voice and demonstrates her determination to define herself on her own terms.

Kumari Priyanka observes that Das's poetry engages with the "cultural and linguistic tangles of postcolonial India," where language becomes connected with identity and political power (4).

Then ... I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored My womanliness. (Papke 59).

Kamala Das deliberately adopted a more masculine appearance. She wore a shirt and trousers, kept her hair short, and tried not to follow the conventional expectations of how a woman should look or behave. In these lines, Kamala Das presents her rejection of conventional expectations of femininity by deliberately adopting a more masculine appearance. Her choice to wear a shirt and trousers, cut her hair short, and distance herself from conventional feminine appearance challenges the social norms that dictate how a woman should dress and present herself. Through this deliberate transformation, Das refuses to allow society's traditional ideas of femininity to determine her appearance or identity. Her rejection of prescribed feminine behaviour reflects her desire for personal autonomy and freedom from gender-based expectations. Thus, her appearance becomes a form of resistance against restrictive gender roles and represents her attempt to assert her individuality and freedom of self-expression.

Rachna Prasad's discussion of "An Introduction" highlights Kamala Das's challenge to the gendered expectations that shape women's identities within a conventional Indian social structure. Das's presentation of herself as a modern woman reflects her refusal to accept a predetermined definition of femininity or to be confined to a socially prescribed role. Her exploration of identity extends beyond personal experience, as she exposes the tension between individual freedom and the pressures of a patriarchal culture. This resistance becomes particularly significant in her treatment of language. Her insistence on writing in English challenges the assumption that a woman's creative expression should be governed by social or cultural expectations. Language consequently becomes more than a medium of literary expression; it functions as a means through which Das asserts her individuality, creative autonomy, and right to define herself on her own terms (313).

I was child, and later they told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. (Papke 59).

In these lines Kamala Das describes the speaker's transition from childhood to womanhood. She describes the gradual transformation of her childhood into a physically matured woman. As she grew, people told her that she had become grownup. Her body became taller, her limbs developed. She refers to the visible changes brought about by puberty, such as increased height, bodily development, and the appearance of body hair.

Das describes puberty and the physical changes of becoming a woman. By openly mentioning her growing body, breasts, and sexuality, she challenges the idea that women should feel ashamed of discussing their bodies. Thus, her frank discussion of womanhood becomes a form of resistance because she openly talks about experiences that society traditionally expected women to keep private or silent about.

Conclusion-

The present study demonstrates that voice, identity, and resistance are closely interconnected in the poetry of Kamala Das. Through her confessional mode of writing, Das transforms personal experiences, emotions, bodily consciousness, desire, and intimate relationships into a powerful poetic expression of female selfhood. Her poetry challenges the traditional expectation that women should remain silent about their bodies, desires, sexuality, and personal experiences. The poems examined in this study—"An Introduction," reveal the different ways in which Das negotiates the tensions between individual identity and the social structures that seek to regulate it.

In "An Introduction," the assertion of her Indian, linguistic, cultural, and gendered identity establishes the importance of voice as a means of self-definition. Her insistence on speaking and writing in the language of her choice represents her rejection of external control over her creative expression. At the same time, her frank representation of bodily transformation, femininity, desire, and sexuality challenges the silence traditionally imposed on women. The body in Das's poetry therefore becomes not merely a site of physical experience but also a significant site of identity and resistance.

Das's resistance is not limited to explicit opposition to patriarchal authority. It also emerges through her refusal to accept socially prescribed definitions of femininity, relationships, language, and personal freedom. Her poetic voice questions the structures that attempt to define what a woman should be, how she should behave, what she should desire, and how she should express herself. Consequently, her poetry presents identity as something that is continuously negotiated between the individual self and the expectations imposed by society. Her use of autobiographical and confessional elements strengthens this process because the personal becomes a means of questioning broader cultural and gender conventions.

Thus, voice, identity, and resistance emerge as mutually reinforcing dimensions of Kamala Das's poetic practice. Her distinctive contribution lies in her willingness to speak openly about experiences that conventional social and literary structures often sought to silence. By claiming the authority to narrate her own body, desires, memories, relationships, and linguistic choices, Das establishes the female poetic voice as a space of self-definition and resistance. Her poetry

consequently remains significant for the study of Indian English literature because it demonstrates how personal expression can become a means of questioning social conventions and articulating an independent sense of self.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the successful completion of this research paper entitled “Voice, Identity, and Resistance: Major Trends in Kamala Das’s Poetry.”

First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my research guide, teachers, and academic mentors for their valuable guidance, insightful suggestions, and constant encouragement throughout this study. Their scholarly support helped me develop a deeper understanding of Kamala Das’s poetry, particularly its exploration of voice, identity, gender, individuality, and resistance.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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