

# The language of dreams - growing up with Kamala

*Vijay Nair*

## 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, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,  
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? The language I speak  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses  
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half  
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,  
It is as human as I am human, don't  
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my  
Hopes, and it 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 and not there. 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."

- Kamala Das, An Introduction

It was just like her to write that and just like me to remember her after so many years. For she was present even before I knew myself or my dreams. Looking back, my childhood seems to have comprised entirely of sneaking around in search of the morsels of adult conversation. How I relished the pungent aftermath not knowing that someday those forbidden fruits would translate into bits of dialogues that would float from the darkness of an auditorium, like songs only half memorized.

"She is a wretched woman," I heard my mother tell my father one evening. "Who," I asked my ears perking up. "Go and read something," she chastised.

“How many times do I tell you not to listen to what the elders are talking about?”

I pretended not to listen. In fact I am not even sure whether I asked that question in the first place. It may just as well have lain around unspoken just as mother's admonishments sometimes lingered only in the furrowing of her brows. There must have been other things to occupy her that day. Like Kamala's public indiscretions. Not only was the woman dying, but she had chosen to pen her autobiography, flogging among others, her reticent husband, claiming that on their first wedding anniversary, or was it her first birthday after the wedding, he bought her a gold necklace and then locked himself with his best friend in the bedroom. Again I may or may not have heard father, but I am sure he grunted his approval.

For Kamala was a disgrace, maybe on a lesser scale than to merit national attention, but a disgrace nonetheless to the state of Kerala, to all Malayalees and to her entire gender. A woman so wanton that she wrote poems that called her body “The old play house” and tempted other women to peep through her looking glass:

“Getting a man to love is easy  
 Only be honest about your wants as a woman.  
 Stand nude before the glass with him so that he sees  
 Himself the stronger one.  
 And believes it is so, and you so much softer,  
 Younger, lovelier. Admit your admiration. Notice the  
 Perfection of his limbs, his eyes reddening under the shower,  
 The shy walk across the bathroom floor, dropping towels  
 And the jerky way he urinates. All the fond details that  
 Make him male and your own only man.”

- Kamala Das, “The Looking Glass”

For my mother, Kamala was always a burden. Not only was my mother exiled after marriage to a land that was three nights and four days in a train from the land of her birth, she was constantly having to answer the hidden queries in the eyes of the new neighbours as to how she managed to give birth to two fair and beautiful daughters as opposed to the three sons, dark and unbecoming like the man she had married. After all my mother hailed from a land where women were dark, their lips thick and the hair curly. Just like Kamala. I am sure mother did not want anyone to know the link. Before they could scrutinize her ambivalent features, she clammed up preferring solitude to the afternoon rendezvous of hungry eyed housewives surveying the neighbourhood for some additional scraps of gossip that could make existence bearable in that small soot layered township.

Kamala crept in nevertheless as a scarcely welcome intrusion through the pages of the tabloid “Blitz” that father always brought back after his half days

at work on Saturdays. They were serializing the autobiography and to add salt to mother's wounds were publicizing it as the most honest piece of an Indian autobiography after Mahatama Gandhi's "My experiments with truth." Mother could have done without it. Especially since back in her large rambling house in Kerala, her youngest sister was getting sufficiently influenced by Kamala's intemperate poems to attempt to be a poet and a writer herself. Whenever dismay cloaked my aunt for not being able to match either Kamala's genius or her prolific outpourings as a poet, she popped a few sleeping pills, enough to drive her to the hospital with wailing family in tow, insufficient to give her the release that she so half heartedly sought. She gave up the struggle eventually after some half a dozen attempts opting to work as a translator and then as an editor in a publishing house in Chennai. I guess she gave up dreaming and made do with all the fights she had with all her male bosses and which were described in entertaining details in the letters she sent to mother. They were read out to father and weren't meant for my ears, but by then I had perfected the fine art of eavesdropping and knew exactly how to pretend to be concentrating on my mathematics homework, but keep my ears open for the floating music of rumours and gossip. I didn't know it then but entwined in those scraps of subjective information lay my dreams to tell stories through whatever means available- one to one whispering sessions in classrooms of school and college, the "addas" of Calcutta, Alexander Graham Bell's invention. Anything sufficed so long as I could hear some juicy tit bit about someone I knew and did not know. Many years later my friend Vikram had something to say about that. "Dude," he began, "do you know there are physical manifestations when you gossip. Your pupils dilate and your body goes rigid. You seem to have a fucking orgasm." "Gossip comes close," I retorted. He was unconvinced. At forty two he is still preoccupied with building muscles and seducing women half his age. He has not explored his other side sufficiently. But I have got distracted again. We were on the topic of Kamala and my childhood.

Those were the years when my fair and beautiful sisters were bringing back snippets that I munched on, sometimes pretending to be asleep in their room when they chatted and sometimes hiding behind doors after being asked to go out and play like boys ought to do. Saroja the girl who lived down the road was seen holding hands from the kitchen window with Jassi, the lone Sikh boy in the locality and Israr had eloped with Bhoomi, the neighbour's maid. They were people like Kamala I thought. No morals at all. Sometimes my sisters discovered a more aggressive past time. They would call out for me lovingly and make me sit between them. By then I would know what the game was all about and I would clench my hands firmly behind me so that they stayed there like lowered flags in mourning and had to be coaxed out with threats of telling mother about some past misdemeanour of mine, previously unreported. Then they would chant in unison- "Look at our hands. So fair, so beautiful and look at his, so dark and so ugly. He

must be from the garbage bin. They took pity on him and brought him to live with us." I would run yelling to my father who would be digesting yet another slice of Kamala's life and would look up half distracted and pat me absently on my head. I noticed he kept on going back to the instalments during the week as if one dose of Kamala's potion was not enough to last seven days until the next flowed in with the latest issue of Blitz.

Fortified with an adult insight today I am sure that father lusted for Kamala. Which south Indian man wouldn't, at a woman who shamelessly enticed men by asking them to pose in the buff with her in front of the mirror and provoked them by saying :

"Readers  
You may say  
Now here is a girl with vast  
Sexual hungers,  
A bitch after my own heart."

- Kamala Das,  
"Composition"

Especially since the tantalizing bard behind the lines hailed from an aristocratic family in Malabar. My case having been ignored in the court of appeal, I would slink back to my sisters and listen once again to their gossip. They didn't remain long enough with me. One left to pursue a medical degree in another city and the other one got married to a man with sideburns and a large mole next to them that I found highly suspect. In my selective memory my two sisters are always fused. Although when in recent years, I blamed one of them for the early trauma she inflicted on me along with the other, she turned indignant. I was sure, I accused her, that what they did to me in some ways contributed to my breakdown when I was in my late thirties. She quickly sprang to her defence. "What nonsense," she exclaimed "That was years ago." Precisely," I declared sanctimoniously. "Go for therapy. They always find these early links."

"Why should I go for therapy?" she retorted very cross now. "I am not the mad one in the family, attempting to be a writer and all that rubbish. Besides I didn't even like her those days." I was delighted. After years of knowing her, she actually confessed something that I had always suspected. Sibling rivalry wasn't just a cliché. It had existed in my family. "But the two of you always did that to me together, that fair and dark thing with your hands," I persisted hoping for further confessions from her.

"You must have been one of the things we actually agreed on those days, I think," she paused. "Both of us love you." "Why?" I wasn't giving up so easily this time. She always has a way of deflating me with emotional blackmail. "I don't

know. There has never been a time when I haven't felt that I need to look after you in some ways," she concluded wearily. We both cried a little that day, together, after many years.

This abject lack of focus wouldn't do. I have to get back to Kamala and my dreams. She was forgotten for a few years because she survived the cancer and came back to the land of living. In our annual visits to Kerala, there were whispers about how her husband had let her get away with "all the rubbish", she wrote about him because she was dying, but now was clueless about how to handle a living life partner who had made public his same sex indiscretions. Kamala and her husband continued to live together. And he died after she tended to him for three long years. But those days I couldn't have been bothered about what happened to Kamala. My tormentors, my sisters, had flown the coop, and my brothers simply ignored me. I was always an embarrassment to them. This sickly brother, wheezing with asthma, who had no manly pursuits like cricket. Their world was cricket. If they weren't playing it, they were listening to the commentary on the radio. The game held no charm for me. There was no story in it at all. So I discovered books and movies. I began with the classics, the legacy from my mother, perhaps the only dowry she got along, and the movies my father took me to. Actually he took mother for them and I managed to get included, because I was the youngest, because I was sickly, and because unfortunately unlike my brothers I did not play cricket in the evenings.

Kamala slipped out of my consciousness and was replaced by the queenly Hema Malini and the voluptuous Rekha, bollywood icons of the seventies. They have settled to playing the mother now, but in those days there was nothing motherly about them. Rekha in particular was buxom and was game to do a cabaret in all the movies she acted in. She led me and I guess all my friends to the forbidden pleasures of masturbation. For the loftier notions of love, I had Scarlett O'Hara. "She is the kind of a woman I want as my wife," I declared in an impromptu speech competition in high school. It did not bother me that most of the audience tittered. A couple of decades later, my wife couldn't stop laughing when I told her who I had wanted her to be when I was in high school.

It was towards the end of that uncertain period, around the time of school board exams, aunt decided to become a more real presence than the letters she sent. She came to visit. The publishing house she worked in had brought out new editions of Kamala's volume of poems in English. "They are terrible," mother exclaimed. "So shameless! When she can write that well, why can't she write nobler things." Aunt gave me a look that said your mother is too old fashioned. But I am sure you would appreciate her as much as I would. By then word had got around in the extended family that I was as mad as my aunt and seemed to have inherited her strange notion that people in books were as real as the people one knew in real life.

I read all the poems in a single gulp one night. They were alluring. They were terrifying. They were what my dreams were made of. I would never be able to write like Dickens, or Hardy or D.H. Lawrence. But I should be able to write like her, I thought. In a language, half Indian, half English, funny perhaps, but honest. As honest as cawing is to crows and roaring to lions!

I started writing them in secret. I had written half a dozen poems by the time I entered college. Then as was the fashion of the day, I fell in love. Sonali was everything that a young man studying political science in St. Xaviers' College with hopes of making it in the Indian Administrative Services, ought to have dreamt about. She was pert and pretty. She was articulate and studied English and was a topper in her class and aspired to go to Oxford for a M.A. Sonali was also in love with Jango. Jango was everything I was not. Jango was Jehangir, a fair and handsome Muslim boy. Jango was the cultural secretary of the college. Jango was two years our senior. Jango was brilliant and was tipped to be a topper in the university exams.

"I love him, I love him, I love him, Vijjay," she would cry out to me in the history classes we shared as a pass subject. She always insisted that I sit next to her in those classes raising my hopes. "He doesn't even know I exist, but I love him." After three months of "I love him, I love him, I love him Vijjay," I decided I had had enough. "What you feel for Jango, I feel too," I whispered to Sonali as Miss Bose lectured on the battle of Plassey.

"What?" Sonali hissed. "You also love Jango?"

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" I yelled. Miss Bose threw me out of the class.

I sat brooding in the canteen. Sonali found me there afterwards. "I realized later that you were in love with someone else. Who is it?" "You!" I knew I had to make myself clear. "Oh..." she said and went on repeating the word much in the same way she said "I love him, I love him, I love him Vijjay." "Go on. Say something. Say how much you hate me for betraying your trust," I said bitterly. That was also the fashion of the day in St. Xaviers' College, Calcutta in the eighties. Whenever a boy told a girl that he loved her, she first accused him of betraying her trust. And if she followed it up by saying that he was like a brother for her, then there was no scene. However if she continued to be miffed for a few days without bringing in the fraternal aspect, then there was a fifty percent chance that she was considering his proposal seriously. Sonali didn't say anything for a long time. Then finally the words tumbled out.

"I am sorry. I thought you were gay. Men are usually not so understanding as you are." I must have looked wretched because she added immediately, "Don't

worry. Now I know you are a man. It is just that I love Jango. Did you read the poem he has written for the college magazine? It is so good. I love him. I love him. I love him, Vijjay.”

“I write poems too,” I said bravely. “You are full of surprises today. I would only believe you if you showed me one,” she said and sailed out of college because her father’s driver had come to fetch her.

In the next History class, Miss Bose made the two of us sit separately. But I managed to give her what I thought was my best poem. She slipped it inside her note book and I could see her smile as she read it. Afterwards, we met in the corridor. “That was pretty good, did you write it for me?” she asked archly. “Yes,” I lied. I think I had written it much before I knew her. In high school. For Scarlett O’Hara.

“It is just that it reminded me of Kamala Das. You are funny, you know. A man who writes like a woman,” Sonali gave her devastating verdict.

“She is such a bitch. Stay away from her,” Jai, my best friend in college and wicket keeper of the college cricket team, told me after I narrated the whole sorry episode to him in the hostel room. “Besides, I don’t think you stand much of a chance with any of the girls. You should play some games. Girls like that sort of thing, not poems.”

“But she says she is in love with that Jango because he writes poems,” I complained. “Jango is a stud. He is also a good bowler. Almost good enough to be in the college team. Be realistic yaar.”

Jango did notice Sonali’s devotion and had a brief fling with her. Then he dumped her for another girl called Monali. The dressing room of the college cricket team vibrated with the aftermath. Jai brought back a sample that he thought would cheer up his friend. “The whole team was making jokes about how Jango caught Monali and dropped Sonali.” The whole thing just made me sad. I knew exactly how Sonali was feeling. We settled to being good friends in the remaining two years of college.

Kamala and her influence were of no good to me those days.

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I met Kamala in person many many years later. I was married to Dipti who seemed to love me despite the fact I did not play cricket and that I wrote like a woman. In fact she claimed she first fell in love with my writing and then with the man behind them. When she shared her dreams of wanting to open a shelter for strays, I knew what she offered was a chance to be loved.

Dipti works as a journalist and after we moved to Bangalore from Calcutta to make a new life, Arundhati Roy burst into literary horizon with a Booker nomination and tales of the lofty advance. Dipti's editor asked her to go to Kerala and meet the family of the writer who for most people in India appeared to have written a thinly disguised autobiography. The brief was to beat other journalists before the improbable actually happened and Roy won the Booker. I tagged along because I had read the book and loved it. Dipti was happy. I could speak a faltering Malayalam and hopefully she could use me as an interpreter if some of the family members of Roy did not speak English. Our first halt was Cochin where Kamala lived. "Why don't you interview her also?" I suggested hopefully. "Oh I forgot," Dipti laughed. "You love her, don't you?"

We got Kamala's phone number from another journalist who was based in Cochin. Dipti called her. I waited. "She is strange. She wants to meet us right away. Let's go. I can get a quote from her on Roy and the success of an Indian writer."

Kamala had aged. There was nothing from the poems in her. She looked like a mother of three grown up children. She seemed pleased to see us. She laughed a great deal when I told her I wrote poetry and she had selected one of them as a poetry editor for one of the magazines she was associated with. "We publish anyone," she said. My past time kept her amused for some time.

Then Dipti asked her about Roy. Kamala got a little irritated. "All this fuss. Only Canada has serious writers. I do know Arundhati Roy." "You do?" Dipti wasn't letting up, having put on her journalistic cap. "She came to visit her mother the other day. They had a felicitation for her. The mayor asked me. She looked so tiny. Like a waif. Like a pretty school girl," Kamala added a little disdainfully. I hung on to every word. This was my idol speaking. Kamala gave one of her laughs. "Imagine that woman in the book is her own mother. She writes about her own mother sleeping with a lower cast man. Nowadays they can do anything for dollars and pounds."

I was stunned. This was the same Kamala who had written her autobiography and damned so many. Didn't she understand that if you are a writer, you wrote. That your commitment to your words preceded every other thing you hold sacred. She was the first one to teach me that. I guess I was still young those days and did not know "politics."

"I can't quote her," Dipti said on the way back. "What she said is too controversial. The editor won't allow it."

"Never mind. I am sure you would find Roy's family would give you a lot of interesting quotes tomorrow," I replied in a resigned tone, looking out of the car. The lights of Cochin mocked my distress.



I don't know whether it was conscious but I did not write any poems after that meeting. Days passed and a half a dozen years intervened. Kamala converted to Islam and in recent years has turned somewhat reclusive. In some of her stray interviews, she appears in photographs with her head covered. Her eyes are the same, direct and challenging. But the words are elusive.

During the same years I was sacked from a job and had a nervous breakdown. I wrote some plays. A few of them got published. I signed a contract for my first novel. The British Council gave me an award and sent me to a far away land. I came back to a university after many years. It snowed one day and outside my window a girl came out and twirled. She took some flakes in her hand and put them in her mouth. It was an achingly pretty sight. Something that belonged to a poem.

I will go back to poetry when I am here. In the language of my dreams.

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## **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? Why not let me speak in any language I like. The language I speak becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses all mine, mine alone. It is half English, half Indian, Funny perhaps but it's honest, its as human as I am human.

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 and not there, 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, of 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 my 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 my brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored my  
 womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl, be wife,  
 they cried. Be embroiderer, be cook, be 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.... I met a man. Loved him. Call him  
 not by any name, he is every man who wants a  
 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, tightly packed like the sword in its sheath.  
 I 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 drying with a rattle in my throat,  
 I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am the beloved  
 and the betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours  
 no aches which are not yours.  
 I too call myself I.

- Kamala Das

### **The Looking Glass**

Getting a man to love you is easy  
 Only be honest about your wants as  
 Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him  
 So that he sees himself the stronger one  
 And believes it so, and you so much more  
 Softer, younger, lovelier...Admit your  
 Admiration. Notice the perfection  
 Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under  
 The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,  
 Dropping towels, and the jerky way he  
 Urinates. All the fond details that make  
 Him male and your only man. Gift him all,  
 Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
 Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,  
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your  
 Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting  
 A man to love is easy, but living

Without him afterwards may have to be  
Faced. A living without life when you move  
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that  
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only  
His last voice calling out your name and your  
Body which once under his touch had gleamed  
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.

- Kamala Das

### **The Stone Age**

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,  
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,  
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite  
Dove, you build round me a shabby room,  
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while  
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,  
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. And  
Yet, on daydreams, strong men cast their shadows, they sink  
Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood,  
Secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities.  
When you leave, I drive my blue battered car  
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty  
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.  
Though peep-holes, the neighbours watch,  
they watch me come  
And go like rain. Ask me, everybody, ask me  
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,  
A libertine, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake  
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like  
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,  
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is  
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price....

- Kamala Das