

International Journal of Research in English

ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.36
IJRE 2026; 8(1): 86-90
<https://www.englishjournal.net>
Received: 11-10-2025
Accepted: 14-11-2025

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Unveiling the Psyche: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma, Desire, and Female Subjectivity in the Works of Kamala Das

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2026.v8.i1b.595>

Abstract

Kamala Das occupies a singular position in Indian English literature for her uncompromising confessional voice that unsettles culturally sanctioned ideals of femininity, sexuality, and selfhood. While her work has been widely read as bold, autobiographical, and feminist, critical discourse has often foregrounded its thematic audacity at the expense of examining the deeper psychic structures that animate her writing. This paper addresses that gap by offering a psychoanalytic feminist reading of Kamala Das's poetry and autobiographical prose, focusing on how trauma, repression, and desire shape the formation of female subjectivity in her oeuvre. Drawing upon psychoanalytic frameworks articulated by Freud, Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and object-relations theorists, the study analyses selected poems from *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, and *The Old Playhouse*, alongside passages from *My Story*. Through close textual analysis, the paper engages key psychoanalytic concepts such as lack, repetition, abjection, the symbolic order, and the divided self to explore how Das's poetic speaker negotiates emotional abandonment, erotic yearning, and patriarchal constraint. Rather than presenting a coherent or unified identity, Das's writing reveals subjectivity as fragmented, unstable, and continuously reconstituted through language and desire. The paper argues that Kamala Das articulates female selfhood as a conflicted psychic space where intimacy and injury coexist, exposing the psychological costs of normative gender roles within a postcolonial context. In doing so, her confessional mode emerges not merely as personal revelation but as a form of psychic resistance that challenges cultural silencing and reclaims female desire as a site of meaning. Ultimately, the study repositions Kamala Das as a profound chronicler of interior life whose work enables a critical rethinking of desire, trauma, and female agency in Indian women's writing.

Keywords: Kamala Das, psychoanalytic feminism, trauma and desire, female subjectivity, confessional poetry, postcolonial psyche

Introduction

Kamala Das remains one of the most provocative and influential voices in Indian English literature, distinguished by her candid exploration of female experience within a deeply patriarchal social milieu. Emerging in the post-independence period, her poetry marked a decisive departure from the restrained emotional idiom that had characterised much of earlier Indian English writing. Through an intensely personal and self-reflexive mode, Das foregrounded the female body, emotional deprivation, erotic longing, and marital disillusionment—subjects largely considered taboo for women writers in India at the time. Her confessional style, rooted in emotional immediacy rather than aesthetic decorum, disrupted conventional expectations of literary propriety and challenged dominant cultural narratives surrounding womanhood. While this audacity brought her widespread recognition, it also generated controversy, with her work frequently moralised, sensationalised, or dismissed as excessively personal. Scholarly engagement with Kamala Das has largely oscillated between celebratory feminist readings and biographical interpretations that treat her poetry as a transparent reflection of lived experience. Critics have emphasised her resistance to patriarchal norms, her articulation of female sexuality, and her defiance of prescribed gender roles. Although these approaches have been valuable in reclaiming Das as a pioneering feminist voice, they often remain confined to thematic assertions, overlooking the complex psychological processes through which her poetic self is constituted. As a result, the inner life that animates her work—marked by anxiety, longing, fragmentation, and

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repetition—has not received sustained critical attention. The absence of a rigorous psychoanalytic inquiry leaves unexplored the ways in which her poetry stages the unconscious struggles of a woman negotiating desire, loss, and identity. This study foregrounds the psyche as a critical site for understanding Kamala Das's literary project. Within a psychoanalytic framework, the psyche is not a unified or transparent interiority but a conflicted space shaped by repression, memory, and unconscious desire. Trauma, in this context, refers not only to overt experiences of emotional injury but also to the cumulative psychic impact of neglect, loveless intimacy, and social constraint. Desire functions as a double-edged force—simultaneously enabling self-expression and intensifying psychic rupture—while female subjectivity emerges as a precarious construction forged within, and against, patriarchal symbolic structures. Psychoanalysis becomes particularly relevant for reading Das because her writing repeatedly returns to moments of loss, dissatisfaction, and longing, suggesting a compulsive engagement with unresolved psychic conflicts.

By employing psychoanalytic feminist perspectives, this paper seeks to address several interrelated questions: How does trauma inform the formation of the poetic self in Kamala Das's work? In what ways does desire operate as both a source of agency and a site of psychic injury? How is female subjectivity articulated within, and constrained by, gendered norms that regulate women's bodies and emotions? These questions move beyond surface-level thematic readings to examine the deeper structures that organise her poetic voice. This paper argues that Kamala Das's poetry reveals a fragmented female psyche in which trauma and desire coexist in uneasy tension. Her work challenges the notion of a coherent, stable self, exposing instead the psychic violence embedded in gendered socialisation. Through language that is confessional yet deeply symbolic, Das transforms personal suffering into a critical exploration of female interiority, positioning her writing as both a record of psychic pain and an act of resistance against cultural silencing.

Trauma, Desire, and the Fragmented Female Psyche in Kamala Das's Writings

Kamala Das's poetic universe is marked by an intense preoccupation with psychic pain, emotional abandonment, and unmet longing, which together constitute the core of her exploration of female interiority. Rather than presenting trauma as an isolated or extraordinary event, her poetry reveals it as a cumulative psychological condition produced by sustained affective deprivation, gendered silencing, and relational failure. From a psychoanalytic perspective, trauma in Das's work operates less as a singular rupture and more as a persistent psychic wound that repeatedly resurfaces through memory, desire, and language. This recurring engagement with pain suggests what Freud (1920) identifies as the compulsion to repeat—an unconscious return to unresolved emotional conflicts that resist closure. The origins of this trauma are frequently located in intimate relationships, particularly marriage, which Das depicts not as a site of fulfilment but as a space of emotional negation. In poems such as "The Old Playhouse," the marital home becomes a metaphor for psychic suffocation, where the female self is systematically diminished under the weight of male authority and emotional indifference (Das, 1973). The speaker's sense of self erodes as she is reduced to an object

that exists solely to gratify male desire, resulting in what psychoanalysis recognises as narcissistic injury—the destabilisation of the self caused by persistent lack of recognition (Freud, 1914/1957). This injury does not merely wound the speaker emotionally; it fractures her psychic coherence, producing a divided subjectivity that oscillates between longing and resentment. This division becomes particularly visible in Das's repeated articulation of emotional hunger. Her poetry returns obsessively to the need for love, intimacy, and affirmation, yet these needs remain unfulfilled, reinforcing a state of melancholic desire. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is useful here: while mourning eventually leads to detachment from loss, melancholia internalises loss, transforming it into a constitutive feature of the self (Freud, 1917/1957). Das's speakers do not move beyond loss; instead, they carry it inward, allowing absence to shape identity itself. The self that emerges is therefore not whole but formed around lack, a condition Lacan (1977) ^[13] identifies as fundamental to subjectivity within the symbolic order.

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers critical insight into how desire functions in Das's poetry. Desire, in Lacan's formulation, is never fully satisfiable because it is structured around absence rather than fulfilment. In poems such as "The Freaks," sexual intimacy is stripped of emotional reciprocity, revealing desire as a hollow performance that intensifies alienation rather than alleviating it (Das, 1967) ^[2]. The bodies in the poem touch, but the selves remain profoundly disconnected, underscoring Lacan's assertion that desire is perpetually deferred and misrecognised (Lacan, 1977) ^[13]. For Das's female speaker, erotic encounters promise completion yet consistently reproduce emptiness, reinforcing the psychic trauma they are meant to heal. At the same time, desire in Das's work cannot be reduced to victimhood alone. While it exposes psychic vulnerability, it also functions as a mode of resistance against patriarchal containment. By articulating female erotic longing in explicit terms, Das disrupts cultural norms that demand female passivity and sexual silence. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Chodorow (1978) ^[5] emphasise that women's subjectivity is shaped within relational frameworks that prioritise emotional connection, making emotional neglect particularly traumatic. Das's insistence on voicing desire therefore represents an attempt to reclaim agency within a system that systematically denies women emotional and sexual autonomy. Yet this reclamation remains fraught, as desire simultaneously exposes the speaker to further rejection and psychic pain. The tension between resistance and vulnerability is intensified through Das's use of confessional language. Confession in her poetry operates not as catharsis but as exposure, laying bare the psychic scars inflicted by repeated emotional abandonment. Unlike the therapeutic confessional model that promises healing through articulation, Das's confessions often intensify pain by making it visible without resolving it. This aligns with Kristeva's (1982) ^[12] concept of abjection, wherein the subject confronts aspects of the self that are culturally disavowed and psychologically disturbing. In poems like "An Introduction," the speaker's rejection of prescribed gender roles—linguistic, sexual, and social—positions her at the margins of cultural acceptability, producing both empowerment and psychic instability (Das, 1965) ^[1].

Language itself becomes a contested psychic terrain in Das's work. Her frequent shifts between assertion and withdrawal, confidence and self-doubt, reflect what Lacan describes as the divided nature of the speaking subject, split between conscious articulation and unconscious desire (Lacan, 1977) ^[13]. The poetic "I" in Das's writing is never fully coherent; it emerges through fragments, contradictions, and repetitions that mirror the instability of the psyche it seeks to express. Rather than signalling artistic weakness, this fragmentation becomes a formal representation of psychic truth, capturing the disintegration produced by sustained emotional deprivation. Das's autobiographical prose, particularly *My Story*, further complicates the relationship between trauma and self-representation. While often read as scandalous or sensational, the text can be more productively understood as a psychic narrative shaped by memory, repression, and desire rather than factual accuracy. Psychoanalytic theory recognises autobiography not as transparent self-disclosure but as a reconstruction of the self through language, shaped by unconscious motivations (Eakin, 1999) ^[7]. Das's oscillation between confession and concealment reflects the difficulty of articulating trauma within linguistic structures that are themselves shaped by patriarchal norms. Importantly, trauma in Das's work is inseparable from the broader cultural context in which female subjectivity is formed. As a postcolonial woman writing in English, Das negotiates multiple layers of symbolic constraint—colonial legacies, nationalist ideals of womanhood, and entrenched gender hierarchies. These forces intensify the psychic pressure on the female self, rendering desire both transgressive and perilous. Postcolonial critics note that women's bodies often become sites for negotiating cultural authenticity, further restricting female agency. Das's poetry exposes the psychic cost of this burden, revealing how cultural expectations infiltrate the unconscious and shape emotional life.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the construction of a subjectivity defined not by coherence but by fragmentation. Trauma does not merely appear as content in Das's poetry; it structures the very form of her writing, shaping its rhythms, repetitions, and emotional volatility. Desire, rather than offering escape, becomes entangled with loss, ensuring that the psychic wound remains open. Yet it is precisely through this exposure of vulnerability that Das's work acquires its critical force, transforming private suffering into a challenge to cultural silencing. If trauma and desire fracture the female psyche in Kamala Das's poetry, language becomes the medium through which this fractured self is both expressed and negotiated. Writing functions not as a space of resolution but as a site of psychic struggle, where the speaker attempts to impose meaning on experiences that resist coherence. Psychoanalytic theory emphasises that language is never neutral; it is structured by the symbolic order, which regulates what can be said and how subjectivity is recognised. Das's persistent disruption of linguistic norms—through blunt diction, abrupt tonal shifts, and confessional excess—can therefore be read as an attempt to push against the limits imposed on female self-expression. The confessional mode in Das's work is particularly significant because it destabilises the boundary between the private and the public. Traditionally, women's emotional and sexual experiences have been confined to the private sphere, rendered invisible or insignificant within literary discourse. By foregrounding these experiences, Das

transforms confession into a political act that exposes the psychic violence underlying normative gender roles. However, this exposure is not without cost. As feminist critics have noted, women who articulate desire often face cultural backlash, reinforcing the very trauma they seek to overcome (Showalter, 1985) ^[16]. Das's poetry reflects this paradox: the act of speaking generates visibility but also intensifies alienation.

Kristeva's (1982) ^[12] notion of abjection provides a useful framework for understanding this paradoxical dynamic. Abjection refers to the psychic process through which the subject confronts what is socially rejected or deemed impure, producing both fascination and revulsion. In poems such as "The Looking Glass," Das forces the reader to confront female sexuality without romanticisation, emphasising bodily vulnerability and emotional need (Das, 1973) ^[7]. This unapologetic exposure destabilises idealised representations of femininity, positioning the female body as a site of both desire and discomfort. The resulting unease reflects the cultural inability to accommodate female desire without moral judgment. At the level of subject formation, Das's work illustrates the difficulty of achieving a stable sense of self within a patriarchal symbolic order. Lacanian theory posits that subjectivity emerges through entry into language, yet this entry is marked by loss, as the subject must conform to pre-existing structures of meaning (Lacan, 1977) ^[13]. For women, this loss is intensified by gendered exclusions that render female desire marginal or illegible. Das's poetic speakers repeatedly articulate a sense of unbelonging, suggesting that their desires cannot be fully recognised within available cultural scripts. The self that emerges is therefore perpetually in process, defined by negotiation rather than resolution. Object-relations theory further illuminates the relational dimensions of this instability. Chodorow (1978) ^[5] argues that women's identities are formed through emotional relationships rather than strict separation, making relational failure particularly damaging. Das's poetry consistently depicts relationships that deny emotional reciprocity, reinforcing a sense of abandonment that shapes the speaker's psychic landscape. Love, when it appears, is fleeting and unreliable, intensifying the desire for connection while deepening the fear of loss. This dynamic produces what psychoanalysis identifies as ambivalence—a simultaneous longing for and distrust of intimacy that prevents psychic integration.

Despite this persistent fragmentation, Das's writing cannot be reduced to despair. The act of articulation itself constitutes a form of survival, enabling the speaker to assert presence within a system that seeks to erase female inferiority. Writing becomes a space where contradictions can coexist without being resolved, allowing the fractured self to speak in its own terms. This aligns with feminist reconfigurations of psychoanalysis that emphasise multiplicity over coherence, viewing subjectivity as fluid rather than fixed (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) ^[10]. Das's refusal to present a unified self thus becomes a critical gesture that challenges normative models of identity. The postcolonial context further complicates this gesture. Writing in English—a language associated with colonial power—Das navigates a linguistic terrain that is both enabling and alienating. English allows her access to a global literary space, yet it also intensifies her sense of dislocation, as emotional experience struggles to find adequate expression within a borrowed tongue. This tension contributes to the

fragmented quality of her voice, reflecting what postcolonial theorists describe as linguistic and cultural hybridity (Nayar, 2008) [15]. The psychic consequences of this hybridity are evident in the oscillation between assertion and withdrawal that characterises her work. Importantly, Das's articulation of female desire must be understood not as a quest for liberation in the liberal feminist sense, but as an exploration of psychic truth. Desire in her poetry does not culminate in fulfilment or empowerment; instead, it exposes the limitations of available relational and cultural structures. By refusing to resolve this tension, Das resists reductive readings that seek closure or redemption. Her work insists on dwelling within contradiction, acknowledging that female subjectivity is shaped as much by pain as by resistance. Through this insistence, Kamala Das transforms personal suffering into a critical interrogation of gendered experience. Trauma and desire do not simply coexist in her writing; they actively constitute one another, producing a subjectivity that is dynamic, unstable, and deeply self-aware. The fractured psyche that emerges is not a sign of failure but a testament to the psychological cost of negotiating identity within oppressive structures. In articulating this cost, Das's work opens a space for rethinking female interiority beyond ideals of coherence, offering instead a vision of subjectivity that embraces complexity, vulnerability, and unresolved desire.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in psychoanalytic feminist literary criticism to examine the construction of trauma, desire, and female subjectivity in the writings of Kamala Das. Rather than treating the texts as biographical documents, the analysis approaches them as symbolic and linguistic formations through which psychic processes are articulated. The primary focus is on selected poems from *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, and *The Old Playhouse*, along with relevant passages from *My Story*, chosen for their sustained engagement with themes of emotional deprivation, erotic longing, and self-fragmentation. The methodological approach is based on close textual analysis, emphasising imagery, metaphor, tone, repetition, and shifts in narrative voice. These textual elements are examined through key psychoanalytic concepts derived from Freudian, Lacanian, and feminist psychoanalytic theory, including repression, melancholia, lack, ambivalence, abjection, and the divided subject. Lacan's theory of the symbolic order is employed to analyse the role of language in shaping subjectivity, while object-relations theory informs the reading of interpersonal relationships and emotional dependency in the texts. Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection is used to interpret moments where female desire disrupts cultural norms and produces psychic instability. A feminist psychoanalytic lens is central to the methodology, ensuring that psychological inquiry remains attentive to gendered power structures and cultural specificity. This approach allows for an examination of how patriarchal norms infiltrate the psyche and shape female self-perception, without reducing psychic conflict to individual pathology. While psychoanalysis originates in Western intellectual traditions, its application here is critically adapted to a postcolonial context, acknowledging historical, linguistic, and cultural differences that shape Indian women's experiences. By combining theoretical rigour with contextual sensitivity, this methodology enables

a nuanced exploration of Kamala Das's work as a complex articulation of female interior life rather than a purely confessional or autobiographical record.

Discussion and Findings

The psychoanalytic feminist analysis of Kamala Das's writings yields several significant findings that deepen our understanding of her literary engagement with female interiority. Most notably, the study reveals that trauma in Das's work is not episodic or incidental but constitutive of subject formation itself. Emotional neglect, relational failure, and patriarchal regulation repeatedly emerge as formative forces that shape the psychic landscape of the female speaker. Rather than functioning as background context, these experiences organise the structure of thought, memory, and desire, producing a subjectivity marked by fragmentation and emotional volatility. This finding challenges readings that interpret Das's confessional mode as mere personal disclosure, demonstrating instead that her writing systematically stages the psychic consequences of gendered socialisation. A second major finding concerns the ambivalent role of desire in Das's work. Desire functions neither solely as liberation nor exclusively as victimisation; instead, it operates as a conflicted psychic force that simultaneously enables self-assertion and deepens emotional injury. Erotic longing offers the promise of recognition and wholeness, yet it consistently encounters rejection, indifference, or emotional emptiness. This tension reveals desire as structurally tied to lack, reinforcing the instability of the self rather than resolving it. By presenting desire in this unresolved form, Das destabilises idealised feminist narratives of sexual emancipation and exposes the psychological risks involved in articulating female erotic agency within patriarchal frameworks.

The analysis also demonstrates that female subjectivity in Das's writing is fundamentally unstable and processual. The poetic "I" does not consolidate into a coherent identity but remains fractured, shifting between assertion and self-doubt, resistance and vulnerability. This instability is not indicative of aesthetic inconsistency but reflects a conscious representation of the divided psyche. Language itself becomes a site of struggle, as the speaker attempts to articulate experiences that exceed culturally sanctioned modes of expression. The frequent use of repetition, contradiction, and confessional excess emerges as a formal strategy that mirrors the workings of the unconscious, allowing psychic conflict to surface rather than be resolved. Another key finding is the critical function of confession as a mode of psychic resistance. While confession exposes the speaker to cultural judgment, it also disrupts the silence imposed on women's emotional and sexual lives. Das's writing transforms private suffering into a public discourse that challenges normative constructions of femininity. However, this resistance remains incomplete and precarious, underscoring the limited space available for female self-articulation within dominant symbolic structures. The persistence of pain alongside resistance highlights the cost of speaking from the margins rather than offering a narrative of triumph. Finally, the study underscores the importance of situating Das's psychic explorations within a postcolonial context. The pressures of cultural expectation, linguistic displacement, and gendered morality intensify the fragmentation of the self. Das's work thus reveals how the psyche becomes a contested site where personal longing

intersects with historical and cultural constraints. Collectively, these findings reposition Kamala Das as a writer of profound psychological insight whose work articulates not only feminist protest but also the enduring psychic complexities of female existence.

Conclusion

This study has sought to illuminate the psychological depth of Kamala Das's literary project by foregrounding the complex interplay between trauma, desire, and female subjectivity in her work. Rather than approaching her poetry and autobiographical prose as spontaneous confessions or autobiographical outpourings, the analysis has demonstrated that Das constructs a sustained exploration of the inner life shaped by emotional deprivation, unreciprocated intimacy, and gendered regulation. Her writing emerges as a deliberate engagement with the psychic consequences of inhabiting a social order that persistently circumscribes women's emotional and sexual agency. One of the most significant insights of this study lies in its reconfiguration of trauma as a structural condition rather than a narrative theme. Kamala Das does not merely recount experiences of pain; she dramatises how such experiences infiltrate consciousness, memory, and desire, producing a self that is inherently unstable. The fractured voice that characterises her poetry is not a sign of psychological collapse but a faithful representation of a psyche formed under sustained pressure. By refusing to stabilise the self into a coherent identity, Das challenges dominant literary and cultural expectations that equate wholeness with authenticity, instead proposing fragmentation as a truthful mode of self-representation. Equally important is the study's re-evaluation of desire as a central organising force in Das's work. Desire in her writing does not resolve into fulfilment or empowerment; it remains restless, contradictory, and often painful. Yet this very refusal of closure grants her articulation of desire its critical power. By exposing the emotional and psychic vulnerabilities that accompany erotic longing, Das dismantles simplistic narratives of sexual liberation and foregrounds the risks involved in asserting female desire within restrictive social structures. Desire thus becomes a lens through which the limitations of patriarchal intimacy are exposed, revealing how deeply social norms penetrate the psychic realm.

The study also underscores the transformative function of language in Das's work. Writing operates as a space where psychic conflict can be articulated without being resolved, allowing contradictions to coexist. Through stylistic fragmentation, repetition, and tonal instability, Das gives form to unconscious tensions that resist linear narration. Her confessional mode, far from offering therapeutic release, becomes a site of negotiation where the self is continuously reconstructed through language. In this sense, her writing exemplifies how literature can function as a mode of psychic survival, enabling expression in the absence of emotional or social validation. Situating Kamala Das within a postcolonial framework further deepens the significance of her work. The pressures of cultural conformity, moral regulation, and linguistic displacement intensify the psychic struggles represented in her writing. As a woman writing in English within a postcolonial society, Das occupies a liminal position that amplifies her sense of alienation while simultaneously enabling a radical articulation of interior life. Her work exposes how female subjectivity is shaped not

only by personal relationships but also by broader historical and cultural forces that discipline women's bodies and emotions. Ultimately, this paper repositions Kamala Das as a writer of profound psychological and theoretical significance. Her work transcends the boundaries of confessional poetry to offer a sustained interrogation of how female selves are formed, fractured, and expressed under patriarchal constraint. By unveiling the psyche as a site of conflict, vulnerability, and resistance, Das compels readers to confront the psychic costs of silencing women's desire and emotional truth. Her writing remains vital not because it offers resolution or redemption, but because it insists on bearing witness to the unresolved complexities of female existence—an insistence that continues to challenge literary, cultural, and psychological discourses alike.

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