

An Introduction

Kamala Das

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, critics, 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, 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 the

Incoherent mutterings of the blazing

Funeral pyre. I was child, and later they

Told me 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 the

Bedroom and closed 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 said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be 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 oceans' tireless
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I
In this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

The Editor Revisited

Agha Shahid Ali

You still haven't called me a poet, Dear Sir,
and I've been at it,
this business of meanings, sometimes delayed,
selling words in bottles, at times in boxes.
I began with a laugh, stirred my tea with English,
drank India down with a faint British accent,
temples, beggars, and dust
spread like marmalade on my toast:
A bitter taste: On Parliament Street
a policeman beat a child on the head.
Hermaphrodites walked by in Saffron saris,
their drums echoing a drought-rhythm.
The Marxists said,
In Delhi English sounds obscene.
Return to Hindi or Bengali, each word will burn
like hunger.
A language must measure up to one's native dust.
Divided between two cultures, I spoke a language foreign even to my ears;
I diluted it in a glass of Scotch.

A terrible trade, my lip service to Revolution
punctuated by a whisky-god.

Now collecting a degree in English,
will I embrace my hungry country
with an armful of soliloquies?

This trade in words continues however as
Shakespeare feeds my alienation.

Please note, Dear Sir, my terrible plight
as I collect rejection slips
from your esteemed journal.