

## Simplicity and Lucidity: Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das

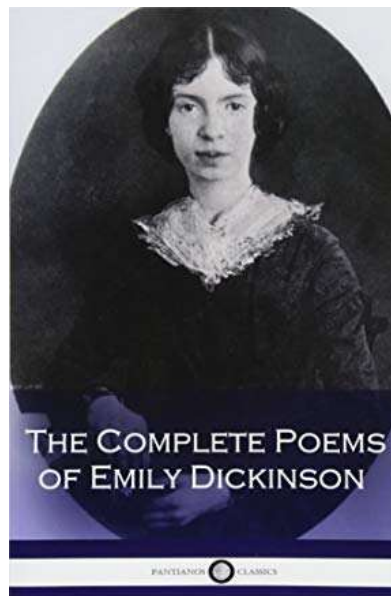
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### Abstract

This article attempts to analyze simplicity and Lucidity as the hallmarks of the diction and verification of both Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das. Comparing these two poets, both have achieved the heights of literary recognition. Kamala Das's simple everyday expression gives beauty to her poetry in the same way Emily Dickinson's poetic words are always suggestive and various interpretations can be given for a word. This article throws light upon how both poets gain mastery over the poetic expression.

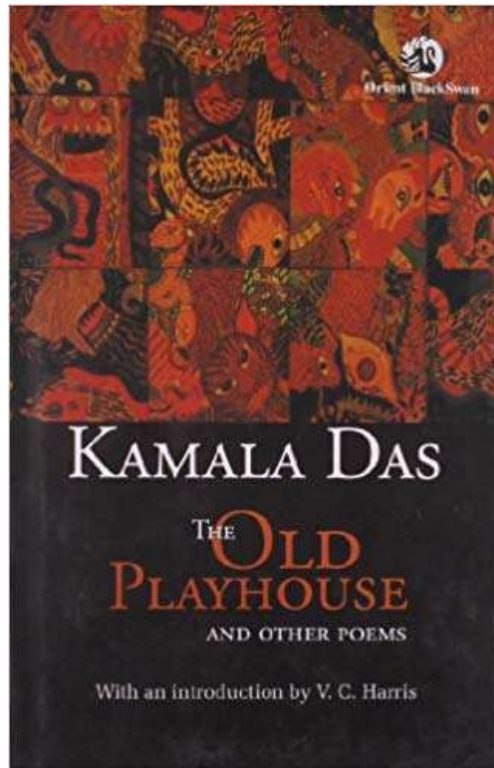
**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, Kamala Das, Simplicity, Lucidity, Poetry, Imagination, Diction, Lyricism, Provincialism.



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The most characteristic quality of Emily Dickinson's poetry is the simple vocabulary and its unaffected diction. Quite consciously and carefully making her poetry simple, she used each word in such a way to do a heavy duty in the work of communication of meaning, emotion and beauty. Her diction is peculiarly her own. Emily Dickinson's language is her own mixture of the standard speech of her own time, the theological words of religious preachers, the words of the Bible and of Shakespeare and of provincialisms. Her poetry is the indirect outcome of her rich experience. Using simple vocabulary, she builds haunting and unforgettable phrases and lines.



Courtesy: [https://www.amazon.com/Old-Playhouse-Other-Poems/dp/8125043241/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?keywords=Kamala+Das+poems&qid=1564350382&s=books&sr=1-3](https://www.amazon.com/Old-Playhouse-Other-Poems/dp/8125043241/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=Kamala+Das+poems&qid=1564350382&s=books&sr=1-3)

Simplicity and lucidity are the hallmarks of Kamala Das's diction. All superfluity is avoided, and terseness and condensation achieved. Kamala Das is economical in her use of language but is never obscure. Using words from the common everyday vocabulary, she imparts them a new emotive significance. She carefully avoids the use of archaic, obsolete and grandiloquent words. These characteristics make her poetry easily understandable. As A. N. Dwivedi points out, "It is hardly ever -wrapped up in philosophical broodings or mystical abstraction" (P 53). With these characteristics which make the poetry of both Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das, their diction and versification are to be studied.

Emily Dickinson uses the apt words at the right situation. Henry W. Wells writes:

"She seeks to give the word a poetic  
luminance over and beyond its literal  
connotation as defined by the dictionary  
or its prosaic meanings in familiar

conversation” (P 279).

The lines from the poem “He lived the life of ambush” can be cited as example:

“He lived the life of ambush

And went the way of dusk”

(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 638)

Here “ambush” and “dusk” are the vital words. They seem to be simple prose words but are poetically clear and emotionally powerful. The word “ambush” indicates that his life was filled with unexpected and sudden losses and failure which led him in the way of dusk, “that is to darkness. Sometimes the simplest words prove to be the most effective and powerful in conveying the meaning. In the words of David Porter”, No other poet consistently practised such complexity” (P 39). In the lyric “A clock stopped – not the mantels, the word ‘No’ at the end of the third stanza, carries on the meaning of the sentence into the stanza following without any distortion in the meaning:

“The Shop man importunes it –

While cool-concern less no –

Nods from the gilded pointers –

Nods from the seconds slim –

Decodes of Arrogance between the Dial life –

And Him” (Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 133)

Poetic words are always suggestive. Various interpretations can be given for a word and Emily Dickinson mastered in this art. As David Porter puts it, “The distortion, combined with her transposition and omissions along the compositional plane, creates a complication of language sometimes so unusual as to conceal meaning and to separate words from things” (P 55). In a love poem, beginning “Except the heaven had come so near,” there is no clear indication of the love that she is mentioning. She mentions heaven, angels, bee, a flower, the winds, butterflies and an image and there is no indication of love. Emily Dickinson employs a common word in a rare usage. In a poem when she describes butterflies, she says they swim “plash less”. In this description, a rare usage of the word ‘swim’ is apparent. Butterflies only fly in the air and they have nothing to do with swimming. Though she uses familiar words, her language appears highly uncommon and poetic.

Emily Dickinson was greatly influenced by the Bible and Shakespeare. As Henry W. Wells put it, “From the Bible she received encouragement in forthright, dignified, simple and earnest statement; from Shakespeare, she gained encouragement for the bolder flights of her imagination and fancy, for speech and her audacious use of the parts of speech, and occasionally her move more than Asiatic opulence” (P 279). Especially in her nature poems, her imagination and fancy raise to great heights. From the book of Genesis, she adopts the word “was not” which marks the end of somebody.

Kamala Das is mainly guided by impulse and instinct in her hunt for precise and harmonious words. Only a handful of her poems are long, and the others are precise and terse like Dickinson’s

poems. She expresses her feelings and emotions with minimum words. The choice of words, phrases and expressions render her poetry beauty and preciseness. In her well known poem, “An Introduction”, Kamala Das speaks out her mind concerning the use of language. She writes:

“..... the language I speak  
Becomes mine, mine alone. It is half English,  
Half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest  
It is human as I am human, don't  
You see?” (The Old Playhouse 26).

With great simplicity and clarity of expression, she beautifully lays bare her woman's heart when she says in “Composition”:

“What I am able to give  
Is only what your life is qualified  
to give  
We are all alike  
We women  
In our wrappings of hairless skin” (The Old Playhouse 6)

With the simplest words like, “give”, “wrappings”, she creates a tone of utter sincerity and fidelity, in the above lines. The simplest and humblest words are enriched with meaning. Unlike the other Indo-English poets, Kamala Das writes in English with an easy command and skill. She achieves lyricism, in spite of her simple language. High sounding words are not used for this purpose but only words from our everyday vocabulary. The poem “The Suicide” is a marvelous piece of lyricism and simplicity, like the following lines:

“O sea, I am fed up  
I want to be simple  
I want to be loved  
And  
If love is not to be had  
I want to be dead” (Descendents 2).

Both Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das have adopted the device of repetitiveness. Emily Dickinson, in the lyric, “I should not dare to leave my friends” uses the device to enhance pathos. In the second line of each stanza, there is repetition. In the first stanza, the word “because” is used twice; in the second stanza “hunted” occurs twice; in the third, the phrase. “So sure I'd come”; and in the fourth and last, the phrase “since breaking then”. These repetitions show the intensity of the sorrow experienced by the poet. A more artful use of similar repetition occurs in the lyric “softened by Time's consummate plush”. Here the line is used in different contexts and so the meanings are altered. A.N. Dwivedi points out that the device of repetitiveness, “suits the urgency of purpose and the velocity of emotion in Kamala Das's Poems” (P 55). In “The Stone Age” a whole set of expression “ask me” has been repeatedly used:

“Ask me, everybody, ask me

What he sees in me,  
ask me why he is called a lion,  
A libertine, ask me the flavor of his  
month... “ (The Old Playhouse 51).

The repetition of the expression reveals the poet’s discernment and the sorrow in her mind. This device has been used in other poems, “Drama”, “Substitute”, “Radha” and “Composition”. “In Substitute” the line “it will be all right” is used in different contexts. The repetition of words suits her highly sensitive and extremely emotional nature. Kamala Das has made effective use of epithets. In the short poem, “Lines Addressed to a Devadasi”, the epithet “silent Devadasi” occurs. A devadasi has no particular attachment with other people, and she is unheard. So, she calls her a “silent devadasi”. A devadasi is placed in the name of religion but is the outlet of passion but other people. Here a satirical tone can be noted. It is a woman being exploited in the name of religion.

Kamala Das, too, makes effective use of words. In “The Old Playhouse”, the diction is charged with irony and pathos. Words like “fame”, “planned”, “swallow”, “hold” and “long summer” are used to heighten the emotional effect. The poem begins with a sharp note:

“You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her  
In the long summer of your love so  
that she would forget ...”

Kamala Das produces harsh and grating sounds as a means for expressing her discernment and dislike again in the same poem. “The Old Playhouse” when she narrates her husband’s behaviour:

“You dribbled spittle into my mouth,  
you poured  
Yourself into every nook and cranny,  
You embalmed  
My poor lust with your bitter – sweet  
juices”

(The Old Playhouse P.1).

The frequent use of the consonant sounds, ‘b’ ‘d’ and ‘t’, in words like “dribbled”, “poured”, “bitter”, “lust” and “embalmed”, heighten the emotional effect.

To conclude, the structural patterns of Kamala Das has to an extent similarity with the less pervasive patterns of Emily Dickinson. Simplicity and spontaneity can be considered the hallmarks of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das.

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