

PUBLICATION

Why Kamala Harris is My Avatar

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My name is Kavita. My name has six letters, starts with KA- and ends with -A. I was born in California and was a child of the '90s. My Sanskrit name should be pronounced KA-vit-ta. I choose to pronounce it Ka-VI-ta, because that is an easier, more natural pronunciation for our American ears. My name is easy to pronounce for everyone.

Kamala Harris also has six letters in her first name, and it starts with KA- and ends with -A. She was born in California and was a child of the '70s. Her Sanskrit name should be pronounced KA-ma-la. She chooses to pronounce it that way. Many people have no trouble with it. Some people get tripped up by it.

When Kamala Harris was sworn in as the next Vice President of the United States, millions of people cheered at the sight. She reflects bits and pieces of the history and life story of millions of Americans who can see some of themselves reflected in her. Those Americans who hail from the Caribbean take pride that she is the daughter of a Jamaican-born father, Donald Harris, who was an esteemed professor at Stanford University. Those Americans like me who are of Indian descent thrill every time she mentions her beloved Indian-born mother Shyamala Gopalan, who was a hard-working, resourceful, and fearless breast cancer researcher, single mother, and maker of fresh Indian food from scratch every day for her two daughters. Those Americans who are African-American observe a woman who is seen and treated as a Black woman and who embraced being African-American by attending Howard University and pledging Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Now that the confetti and parades are over, millions of American women in particular will study Kamala Harris with an intense interest because she is an avatar for us, showing us what works and what doesn't when navigating and leading at the highest levels of political power. How she chooses to engage with political supporters, political opponents, and the public – what economic and social priorities she pushes, and what choices she makes in dress, posture, word choice, and emotiveness to push those priorities - will be an instructional manual for millions of us. Kamala Harris will be photographed a million times, and her images will be endlessly streamed from our smartphones into our collective consciousness.

I believe Kamala Harris has a deep-seated commitment to social and economic justice for all Americans, which requires addressing deep-seated, long-lasting injustice toward Black Americans. She chose to make changes through legal institutions, resulting in change that comes more slowly, but once implemented, is harder to undo. She chose to work in public service and seek public office, accumulating enough personal and coalitional power to make real changes. As California Attorney General, Kamala Harris took steps to address injustice in ways that Kamala Harris as San Francisco District Attorney could not. And Kamala Harris as Vice President in the Biden Administration will be able to take steps that Kamala Harris as a senator from California in a minority democratic U.S. Senate could not.

Millions of Americans who follow Kamala Harris also choose to exercise their values through our workplaces and communities. Those of us who become lawyers give enormous amounts of our time to pro bono legal services and recruiting and mentoring the next generation of lawyers. Our ability to sustain those changes, however, depends on our collective ability to steadily accumulate personal and coalitional power. And that is why Kamala Harris is an avatar for Americans like me. She pursued a career in law. She worked hard. She

cultivated the necessary relationships and formed the necessary alliances. She dresses in an unimpeachable uniform of dark suit and pearl necklace. And she continues to pronounce her name KA-ma-la.