

**THE POETIC WORLD OF  
KAMALA DAS  
A THEMATIC STUDY**

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## *Preface*

*Early English poetry by Indian women poets is a strange hybrid. Composed by the women saturated in Western literary culture and yet shackled by the ideals of Indian womanhood, it deals with themes more conventional than personal. Legends, peasants, morals and such like stereotypes dominate it. The pioneers' lack of strong personal conviction and of the urge to self expression is, however, more than counterbalanced by their social consciousness and their sensitivity to natural beauty. If Taru Dutta and Sarojini Naidu have not yet totally dated, it is because they possess these two qualities in abundance.*

*Kamala Das is something of an innovator in the history of Indo-Anglian-poetry. She is one of the first women poets to have the courage of her convictions and to lay bare her heart to the world at large. The sincerity of her feelings is perfectly matched by the authenticity of her expression. Though a trailblazer, she does not altogether abjure the established tradition in Indo-Anglian poetry handed down by her predecessors. Hence it would be too simplistic to call her either confessional or traditional precisely because she is both at once. She is in fact that rare entity that T.S. Eliot conceives an ideal poet to be : a fine blend of tradition and the individual talent. I undertake a reappraisal of her poetry from this perspective.*

*I am immensely grateful to Professor Kamal K Roy for so patiently, so painstakingly supervising my research for the present thesis. For a working woman to be a wife, a mother, and a researcher at the same time is more than a handful. I appreciate the understanding my husband and son have shown and the sacrifices they have gladly made during the years I was busy researching and writing the thesis out. I will remain ever obliged to the educationist Mr. Mani Bhushan Ray, Headmaster, Principal Sunil Bhowmick, Prof. Sakti Pada Ghosh, Prof. Dilip Kumar Chakraborty. and Advocate Narendra Ghosh for constantly inspiring me in my research. The only thing, however, that has sustained me all through is the sheer joy of exploring the inviting and intriguing, entrancing and enigmatic poetic world of Kamala Das. I am profoundly indebted to her for granting me a personal interview.*

S.S

# CHAPTER ONE

## Tradition and Innovation

**My Story** is all of Kamala Das. This candid autobiography testifies that her brush with the muse was no accident: "My mother vague and indifferent spent her time lying on her belly on a large fourpost bed composing poems in Malayalam"<sup>1</sup>. (*Kamala Das, My Story, p-2*) She was born with this love of poetry in her blood. It was rooted deep into her nature. She derived her inspiration first of all from among her own relations. She has put it on record that she was hailed as a poet by her grand uncle. Indeed, it boosted her spirits and she admits in her article "*Leaves of Grass on the Kerala Coast*" that "It was a great moment in my life". (*Span January 1985 Vol.-XXVI No. 1*) (*Reprinted from Span October 1975*) This appreciation and recognition fuelled her poetic impulse. Of this she says that this was a nice beginning for a child poet to start with. She was immersed in love of poetry and literature. In childhood she had a go at acting in plays. The first one they staged was a Malayalam adaptation of a part of Victor Hugo's classic **Les Miserables**. Of course, in her opinion her best performance "was in the role of the Mughal Queen Nurjehan". She had appeared in many other Malayalam plays adapted from Dwijendralal Roy. Her histrionic talent reached its culmination in acting in Kalidasa's **Swapna Basavadattam**.

She was something of a child prodigy; her literary talent was nurtured in her early life. She got all the impetus as well as admiration from her superiors, her brothers and all. This may bring to our mind a similar backdrop in the life of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore also drew his primary inspiration from the cultural atmosphere of his family. Nalapat House helped to nourish and nurture Das's mind as did the Thakurbari Tagore's. The cultural as well as intellectual environment they were born into helped both Das and Tagore immensely.

It would be unfair to say that the young Das was concerned with art and literature alone. Even when still young, she betrayed fervent faith in our

rites and rituals, a Hindu as she is. She also “learned to light the temple lamps and the many oiled wicks which had to be placed every evening at several spots around the house to honour the gods of directions.” (*My Story*, p.27) It inspired in her a love of the Hindu scriptures. Consequently she became familiar with the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. They included among others Brahma, Indra, Baruna, Shiva, Vayu, Kubera, Agni, Ratri, Yama, etc. What is still more striking, she came under the spell of Gayatri Mantra which she loved to recite. This was no passing fancy of a young girl. She came to acquire a great knowledge of 'Divine Love' and 'Nirvana'. In this context her study of the great epics — **The Ramayana** and **The Mahabharata** should also be mentioned. Like other devout Hindu girls, she used to worship Lord Ganesh every morning. Of course, Lord Krishna was the supreme God to her. She was thus initiated into the Hindu religious practices, which influenced her poetic personality. All these point that her root was in tradition. Nevertheless she was not a traditional poet. She forged a poetic path of her own testifying to the spark of revolt in her character. Had she remained confined to traditions alone, she would not have become the poet she is. These traditions would have fettered her mind and determined her mode of expression.

In this context, however, we cannot but refer to two Indian women poets of great merit. They are Sorojini Naidu and Taru Dutta, who wrote about social awareness as well as patriotic fervour. But nowhere do we find in their poetry any reflection of their personal feelings and sensibilities. They lack poetic individuality. But Das, always with a streak of revolt in her, gave expression to her personal aches and joys, her thrills and delights. Her expressions do always ring true and sincere. So bold, so frank she is, that she candidly lays bare her heart, her personal grievances against social customs. She comes out luminously as a new poet with a new voice and with a new sense of urgency. As a creative person, she brings in new innovations and thus ushers in a new era.

Repression, as we all know, is one of the facets of life in early childhood. It was very acute around her time in the lives of young Indian girls. Das did not meekly submit to any repression or imposition on her sensitive mind. Sharply she reacted to any such attempt to curb her spirit. She says :

## My desires

Were many, if granted freedom I knew they would burn  
Down like tongues of flame, the monastic peace of my home.  
The ancient lusts are blinded in the mind, they stagger  
Through the light of day as mad men stumble on sidewalks  
At noon. (*Kamala Das, "A Souvenir of Bone" Collected Poems,*  
*Vol. 1, p.32.*)

Tamed she is not, nor is she subdued by the forces at work to restrain her ebullient spirit. So we find her shaking her frail but firm fist against all such demons of restraints and also against social taboos and inhibitions. An Indian woman has to fight against so many odds for the full flowering of her natural self.

After the anguished phase of puberty is over, a girl blooms into a mature young woman for love, marriage and motherhood.

Of course in India a girl is not allowed to have her way on most vital matters. In her school days Das felt attracted to an unruly and boisterous young boy. Before this fascination could turn into a sweet and romantic experience, her grandmother put her foot down and told her to banish the thought of the boy from her mind. Her marriage which came up a bit early at the age of sixteen, proved to be a real trial for her. In spite of her disgust, she had to yield to the lust of her husband. It was a traumatic experience for her. In this brutal consummation lust drove out all love. She pours out her bitter and anguished feelings in these lines not only at her husband's forced sex with her but also at his self-confessed lechery :

he folded

Me each night in his arms and told me of greater  
Pleasures that had come in his way, richer harvests of  
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine.<sup>1</sup> (*"Of Calcutta",*  
*Collected Poems, Vol.-1, p.59*).

Marriage at the age of sixteen brings in its wake a string of unsavoury experiences, not any romantic splendour. She was brutally and savagely initiated

into sex. This traumatic experience lingers with her till she attends to the glory of motherhood. This seems to be a soothing salve on the pestering sore in her heart. She writes about motherhood in glowing terms :

Out of the mire of a moonless night was  
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of  
The wrong is born the right and out of night  
The sun - drenched golden day. (*Kamala Das, "Jaisuriya",  
The Descendants, p. 28*).

Kamala Das came in for bitter attack for the free, frank and unabashed pot — pourri of her emotions in respect of love and sex. I want to emphasize the fact that she was no woman hungry for sex. In fact she had to offer herself passively to the demands of her husband's lust. Further it would be wrong to equate her with any western woman claiming and clamouring for her share of physical enjoyment. She is no Madame Bovary itching for a tumble in the hayrick. On the other hand, she is no prudish Mrs Grundy in any sense of the term. But it does not mean that she has cast aside the ideals of Indian womanhood. She remains true to the modes of Indian culture and tradition. At the same time, she exhibits her awareness of the changing social scenarios. What is striking about her is her inquisitiveness about life and its manifold problems. This is a gift of her westernized education and western lifestyle as she had quite a few family friends like Ross, Menon, etc. This unique poetic mind moulded by both Indian tradition and Western culture, unfolds itself petal by petal in whatever she writes with an intense feeling and a delicate sensibility.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Nature : A Recurrent Symbol

Nature in India is infinitely rich and varied in its beauty and appeal. India's climate makes its inhabitants warmly passionate and delicately sensuous. No wonder passionate intensity of feelings and delicate sensuousness are the hallmarks of Kamala Das's poetry in which nature figures insistently as both background and subject matter.

Crowned with the lofty mountain range of the Himalayas, India stands mighty, proud, in her regal beauty. The Vindhya, Satkura, the Western Ghat and the Eastern Ghat Hills add voluptuous touches to her beauty. Mighty rivers like the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, the Sindhu, the Godavari, the Krishna, etc. form her far-stretched green plains of emerald. There are thousand other smaller rivers and streams which glisten like ornaments in different parts of her body. The Deccan Plateau and the Thor - desert beyond Araballi Hills add new touches of beauty. Mighty Indian forests dress up her beautiful limbs. On all three sides, India is guarded by the blue Arabian sea, the mighty Indian Ocean and the stormy Bay of Bengal. One can only imagine but can never fully realise how such a geographical setting can enrich the seasons and their cycles in this terrain.

Flora and fauna of the different parts of India are gorgeously rich in varieties and colours. In all seasons Indian climes are heavy with the fragrance of sweet flowers. In the flowering seasons mighty plains, plateaus and hills of India are awash with colours. There are innumerable kinds of song birds singing in the court of Indian nature with different mellifluous tunes. The Indian sky displays an infinite range of moods and colours. This India is the inspiration for Kamala Das's nature poetry.

Kamala Das's response to the beauty of nature is typically Indian. Sorojini Naidu was largely care-ridden and anxious in her nature portrayals. But Das is

primarily carefree and spontaneous as evidenced by the pieces like "*Jaisurya*", "*The Ancient Mango Tree*", "*Rain*", "*The Blind Walk*", "*Old Cattle*", "*Of Calcutta*", etc.

In her poems Kamala Das expresses almost a Romantic feeling for nature in its Indian setting. Indian trees, flowers, fruits, gardens, fields, forests, hills, rivers even birds like crows, koels, pigeons, animals like elephants, horses, dogs, cows, cats, cattle, monkeys, turtles, mice, snakes, lizards and worms and insects like fireflies, scorpions (in "*Faded Epaulet on His shoulder*"), fat worms ("*Jaisurya*"), Maggots, white ants, toads (Stool), spiders, kraits, goose etc - all these come alive in Das's poetry with all their glistening colours and bewildering variety.

Das feels nature and nature is embodied in her self. Sometimes she loses herself in the midst of nature. She feels nature in the depth of her physical, mental, and spiritual being. Pregnant Das in her labour pains easily becomes the rain - soaked earth about to mother myriads of life :

For a while I too was earth  
In me the seed was silent, waiting as  
A baby does, for the womb's quite expulsion.  
(*"Jaisurya"*, *The Descendants*, p.27).

Right from her girlhood, she feels her spirit embodied in nature. In this respect, she resembles Tagore who felt the pattering rains of Ashar on his senses, consciousness and being, spread out on the emerald of the rain-soaked field. When she loses her identity in nature, she approximates to the primitive; woman in her primordial character stands close to the earth. They are mothers, delighting in creating, making light of the attendant pains. Das's sense of oneness with nature borders on pantheism. She feels a sort of kinship with the rough-barked trees in the yard of their house. Standing knee-deep in mud, she feels ecstatic when she intuitively perceives her kinship with the ground around Nalapat House. Groaning in labour pains, she feels her closeness to mother

earth. Her feeling for the sea is quite deep and intimate. In a moment of depression, she treats the sea as her confidante :

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, just dead.

*("The Suicide", Collected Poems, Vol-I, p.72).*

India is rich in colour and fragrance. India's hills and plains reverberate with the songs of birds and insects. In her basket Kamala Das has collected a good many flowers with which she is intimately acquainted. They are, the 'white and purple Bougainvillea' (*"Honour", Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 47*), the 'flowering shrubs', (*"Wood Ash", Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 49*) 'Lotuses and waterlilies', (*"Honour" , Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 47*) 'rose', 'parijat', 'gulmohor', etc. Indian seasons often touch the human senses and spirit with a very delicate sensuousness. Their seductive charm is hard to resist. But at the same time the seasons are quite capable of assuming a terrifying aspect. The hurricane speed of the storm is simply overwhelming. The sea beats upon the shore with a demon's frenzy. The summer in many parts of India proves a cruel tyrant. The flood and drought recur regularly. The swirl of dust engulfing the horizon in its mighty sweep proves a challenging experience in the arid plains and desert - stretches of India. Das observes and draws nature in all her moods. She experiences the devastating power of summer :

Summer's catchword was always,  
always destruction; and this  
year's, wrapping us like some  
prickly mantle cried kill, kill  
all that was". (*"Summer 1980", Collected Poems,  
Vol. 1, p. 79.*)

Summer often denotes drought and destruction of life. It also comes richly

dressed up in scenic beauty. Summer colours the flowering shrubs with red, yellow etc. Gulmohors and Krishnachuras brighten the plains and the roadside views. Kamala Das's senses feasted on these riotous colours of summer landscapes in India. In *My Story* she describes. "I got married in the month of February. The mango trees were in brown bloom and the blue bees flew about humming in the sun. All the flowering trees were in bloom including the ancient Nirmatala which perfumed even the inner rooms with its spring". (*My Story*, p.76).

She has reasons enough to feel her oneness with nature. For : "During that summer while the gulmohurs burnt the edges of sky, he dressed my hair with scented white flowers plucking them from beneath my window". (*My Story*, p.102.).

The same sense of intimacy with nature finds expression in the poem *Nani* where she says that,

Before the summer's end  
The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway  
And the walls" (*Nani*", *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1 p. 18.).

Sometimes Kamala Das universalises her senses so that they may assume the traits of nature herself. She projects herself into nature. She becomes a part of nature. She becomes the monsoon cloud heavy with mellow sympathy and ready to drench the thirsty, drought - stricken earth :

When every night my littlest child wakes and  
Limpets to my side, I am heavy with unshed tears,  
I am the grey black monsoon sky  
Just before the rain. (*The Time of Drought*", *Collected Poems*,  
Vol. I, p. 98.).

In *My Story* she describes the nature of rain in Bengal so as to humanize it :

In Bengal, the rain falls suddenly, with no warning, like the hysterical tears of a woman who herself does not know why she must suddenly burst into tears. (*My Story*, p. 64.)

In *Jaisurya*, she draws the picture of the Rainy season like a true naturalist. Truth is explored almost with the zeal of a scientist. She is not daunted by any unpleasantness in the process. The rainsoaked earth swollen with teeming life inside her dark womb matches well the image of a pregnant woman about to give birth to a child. The point of comparison as well as the things compared is stated with the candidness of a scientific observer :

It was again the time of rain and on  
Every weeping tree, the lush moss spread like  
Eczema, and from beneath the swashy  
Earth the fat worms surfaced to explode  
Under rain. ("*Jaisurya*", *The Descendants*, p. 27).

Here rather the emphasis is on the unpleasant aspect of the rainy season. Earthworms, insects, mushrooms start covering the beautiful face of nature as do rashes a human face.

In "*Another Birthday*" we have a penpicture of the fallen leaves and Autumn in its senescence :

Autumn has a loosened grip. Why hope to retain  
The leaves that fall, to yellow on the ground and brown,  
Or the ovate, velvet graces of the spring ? ("*Another Birthday*",  
*Collected Poems, Vol. 1 p. 42.*)

Thus it appears that Kamala Das's canvas is much wider and her brush much bolder. Nature in all her elements and with all her furies and fineness lies sprawling across her works. She is sensitive to anything and everything in nature. From the minutest touch of a stone to the blinding flash of lightning, nothing escapes her notice.

In most of her poems, the dark natural settings easily become the symbols for her dark inner landscape such as 'coiling snakes' in "*The Freaks*", (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 11*) 'Sleek Crow', 'Carnivorous Plants' in "*In Love*". (*Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 76*). Nature for Kamala Das as for Sylvia Plath becomes ultimately a projection of her inner world. She follows the

Romantic practice of using the external world to body forth her values and visions. The sea was for her the one element in which she discovered the deepest reflection of her own melancholy and sense of isolation. The sea, the moon, the sun, water are the recurring symbols in her poems.

Kamala Das finds the reflection of her mind in the sky. Quite often she used to look at the sky. The sky changes its colour. Mercurial human feelings and moods have their counterparts in the everchanging views of the sky. In a bit of strained and extended figure of speech, Das seeks to find in the burning face of the sun a reflection of her beloved's lust for her. With the progress of the day and its final relapse into the night, both the lust and the sky change their hue and character :

Of what does the burning mouth  
of sun, burning in today's  
sky remind me ... oh, yes, his  
Mouth, and his limbs like pale and  
Carnivorous plants reaching  
Out for me, and the sad lie  
Of my unending lust.  
(*"In Love" Collected Poems, Vol. 1. p.76*).

If she humanizes nature, she also naturalizes man. Sometimes she approaches Nature like other modern poets to intellectualize her. In *The Suicide* she explores the sea with all the raw feel of a diver and explains it with the precision of an oceanographer :

While I enter deeper  
With joy, I discover  
The sea's hostile cold  
Is after all skin deep.  
The sea's inner chambers  
are all very warm.  
There must be a sun slumbering  
At the vortex of the sea. (*"The Suicide" The Descendants, p.2*).

She also shows an inclination for the grotesque. The moonless night grows ominous with the cry of 'Bol Hari Bol' by the corpse bearers. The strange forlornness of her mind gets deepened by the forlornness of the night's sky echoing with the cry of hori-bol. Here it is the morbidity that lends a tang to her feelings.

Nature is frequently used by the Indians as a bouquet of sweetness. They love to decorate their persons and abodes with flowers or their fragrance. Girls use flowers to decorate their plaits. Indian rituals and worships make an abundant use of flowers. For flowers grow profusely all over India all the year round. Flowers embellish Indian life and literature in many ways. Kamala Das's poetry betrays her passion for flowers. She says in "*A Faded Epaulet on his Shoulder*" that :

I wore again  
and again the parijat in my hair and rubbed  
sandalwood on my breasts'.

(*"A Faded Epaulet on his shoulder"* **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p. 103 ).

Flowers often take on a symbolic significance. Our tenderest emotions are akin to flowers. A lover, for instance, may indicate the offer of her heart through a rose bud. A flower in the button-hole or on the locks denotes the mute affection coy enough not to speak otherwise. In Kamala Das's poem flowers function as the language of her heart and feelings:

Next morning from the young man, there was gift of roses which came in many hues, including two of a pale heliotrope which I fondled for a long while. The roses remained on my window-sill for three days. I wanted to see the man and thank him for the happiness his flowers had given me, but he did not appear again. (*My Story*, p.180.).

# CHAPTER THREE

## Ecstasy of Love

In ecstasy the everyday empirical self is replaced by the buried transcendental self putting the ecstatic in touch with the numinous. With his senses cleansed and his spirit attuned to the supernal plane, the ecstatic sees the entire cosmos from a new perspective. Intelligence, rationality and sagacity retreat then before his quickened sensibility and intuition. It is this euphoric state of mind that vouchsafes to him glimpses of the depths and heights of life.

Kamala Das's claim to the status of a poet lies in her capacity for innocence and honesty. An artist realises something at the depth of his heart in a fashion unique to him. Authentic transcription of his feelings requires him to be honest. Das is fundamentally sincere, she pours out all her emotional exuberance in her poetry. Her tears and laughter have an unmistakable ring of sincerity about them.

With her native plasticity, she opens up to anything and everything that comes her way. She is sensitive and sensuous. She wants to feel everything with white heat intensity. Her cup is now filled with the brine of tears, now with gall, and now with nectar. Running as she does the entire gamut of emotions, she is more given to letting them rip than anatomising them.

With her characteristic naivete, she expresses her love to her art-tutor when she was fourteen ! One day she went to him and clung to his shirt front sobbing uncontrollably. But the man did not reciprocate her love. So coming back to her friend, Das asks : "Why did he not kiss me ? Why didn't he make love to me?" (*My Story*, p. 65.).

It is above all her ingenuousness that comes through in her recording the following pre-marital incident with her husband : "... my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers." (*My Story*, p. 73).

The sheer helplessness of the narrator starkly contrasts with the brutality of the molester. Her innocence takes on a new turn when it combines with her gift for

introspection. The result is her superb self - analysis as lover :

I could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I knew that I was frigid and that love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards.

*(My Story, p. 92.)*

Such is Das's candour that she has practically no secrets from her readers.

In an interview Kamala Das was asked how honest her writing was. Her response was, "As honest as I am". The question "How honest are you?" elicited from her a self-revelatory explanation that "I suppose I am honest that's why I suffer a lot. No, it is not of my own making".

Kamala Das's love for children and her grandmother evidences her capacity for deep affection. Nostalgically she reminisces her happy days with her grandmother. When little Kamala asserts that she will rebuild the ancient house now fallen in ruins, her grandmother touches her cheeks and smiles quite affectionately. She draws the picture of her grandmother quite feelingly. The caress of her affectionate style is evident in the portrayal of her grandmother :

My great grandmother  
Touched my cheeks and smiled  
... she was really simple,  
Fed on God for years.  
All the feasts were monotonous  
For the only dish served was always God  
And the rest mere condiments. (*"Blood", Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p.4).*

Kamala Das had much appreciation for her brother. Next to her father, her brother was a hero in her life. Expectation from her father was too much. It was, however, cruelly belied by his callous indifference to her and his adherence

to customs. The result was that she felt lonely and slighted. The adolescent Kamala started suffering from a sense of emptiness, all because of her father's callousness. She then craved for a friend's company. She primarily sought it from her brother. In **My Story** she reveals how lonely she felt because of her separation from her brother. The relations between the two were a symbolic one:

When we were separated, my brother and I, I felt alone and lost, for between us even in the silence we shared a pure kind of communication, an interminable dialogue that went on and on like that of the wind with the trees. Each drew sustenance from the other's unspoken support. (**My Story**, p.45).

Her love for her brother becomes obvious from other incidents. In the European school, while William taunted her brother by saying : "Blackie, your blood is red," Kamala "scratched his face in a mad rage, but was soon overpowered by the tough Anglo - Indians..." Her sisterly love for Mohondas contributes much to build up her career.

Kamala Das had also traditional feeling of love for and duty to her father. In spite of his cruel indifference to her feelings and cravings she continued loving him almost unilaterally. The warmth of her love for him comes through in her nursing him during his illness in his old age : "For a month I stayed near him, sleeping on the terrace on a mattress laid out on the floor and looked after him, serving him soups and fruit -juice." (*"Blood"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p. 4.).

"*I shall not forget*", ( **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1. , p.30.) "*A Requiem for my Father*" (**Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.39.) are pieces in which she laments her father's death. In the first poem she mourns for her father :

I have seen death  
And I shall not forget...

And the second presents her bereavement and sense of loss as simply stunning :

We were tongue - tied, humbled and quiet  
Although within we wept for you  
And more for ourselves, now without a guardian.

Death wrings out of her heart her intense avowal of love for the deceased father:

I loved you father, I loved you  
all my life.

We find a striking similarity between Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath - the American poet. Both of them hungered for that kind of love which a father gives his child: selfless love or pure affection. It is the sort of love a woman can never get from her husband. Like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das wants someone to replace the father she had lost for ever. Hence she sighs in *Glass* that she has misplaced her father somewhere:

I do not bother  
To tell : I've misplaced a father  
Somewhere, and I look  
For him now everywhere. (*"The Old Playhouse"*, **The Old Playhouse and Other Poems**, p.1.).

She feels frustrated by her husband's humiliating indifference. Then she seeks fulfilment of all her unrealised dreams and her cravings for love with her sons. Her children have more than compensated for her unloving husband : "The nicest thing of my marriage has been my children, They have been my greatest friends". (*Kamala Das, "I believe"*, *Savvy*, Vol. 7, No. 7, Dec. 1990, p.17).

Subhas Chandra Saha rightly says that being frustrated in conjugal love, Kamala Das finds a relief and an anchor in the warmth and worth of the creation of a child, a new life :

Only that matters which forms as  
Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft  
Stir in womb, the foetus growing for  
Only the treasures matter that were washed  
Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them  
In. (*"Jaisurya"*, **The Descendants**, p.27).

Her description of the conception and growth of a child in the womb has all the feel of first-hand experience. It is super abundantly sensuous and realistic too. Her love and yearning for the issue of her womb have both psychic and physical edge.

Kamala Das's love of nature is so profound that the entire previous chapter was devoted to it. No less intense is her love for animals and birds. Even after the death of her pet, the thought that it will get wet through continues to bother her. "*Rain*" (*Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p,64.*) expresses her fear lest the peace of her buried pet is disturbed :

but when  
It rains here, I see the rain drench  
That empty house, I hear it fall  
Where my puppy now lies,  
Alone.

A measure of male hypocrisy in India is that men extol sexual purity, but they themselves indulge in debauchery. The puritanical and hypocritical excesses of the men have spiritually emasculated Indian women and even stifled all creativity. For they always undermine spontaneity and encourage perversion. Kamala Das's poetry is a shrill cry of protest against all the sex taboos and hypocrisies prevalent in India down the centuries. Her candid treatment of sex has predictably shocked the Indian male intellectuals. Indian intellects mostly shine in the glory borrowed from the West. But under their brown skin they keep hidden a mind nurtured by the sterile traditions of India. These traditions are mostly constituted by taboos, superstitions and the inherited ethos. Misguided mysticism has also its share in the making of this tradition. Naturally an Indian intellect feels confounded by Das's free, frank and uninhibited talks about sex.

Of course, there is the raw feel of sex in most of her poems that project her as a sexy woman :

ask me the flavour of his  
Mouth, 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. (*"The Stone Age" Collected poems, Vol. 1, p. 96*).

The vivid imagery delicately captures the very essence of an experiential but inexpressible truth. In *"The Looking Glass" (The Descendants, p.25)* she perfectly matches her experienced sensuality with her sensuous expression. The poem derives its strength from the passionate experience underlying it :

Stand nude before the glass with him  
Notice the perfection  
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under  
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,  
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he  
Urinate. 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.  
(*"The Looking Glass", The Descendants, p. 25*).

This poem confirms the view that it is the Keatsian intensity of experience and concreteness of expression rather than the Wordsworthian meditateness that constitute Das's poetic forte.

In *"An Introduction"* she details her physical transformation as she changes from a child into an adolescent :

I was child, and later they  
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.  
(*"An Introduction" The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 26.*).

In *The Old Playhouse* she puts across the very throb and tingle of sex experience :

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"*,  
*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, p.1.).

It is because Das is a free spirit, she can authentically express what she experiences, Not only the above lines but also the words she uses in her poems like lip, musk, kiss, womb, pubis, lipstick, bangles, bed-room, mouth, love, lust, honeymoon, breast, pregnant etc. enable her to capture the tang of her existential experience.

In the *"Convicts"* Das for a change focuses on a metaphor rather than a felt experience :

There was a time when our lusts were  
Like multicoloured flags of no  
particular country. (*"Convicts"* *The Old Playhouse  
and Other Poems*,p.25.).

In *"Substitute"* she is on her native ground. The very contours of her love experience show through her well-chosen metaphor :

After that love became a swivel-door,  
When one went out, another came in,  
Then I lost count, for always in my arms,  
Was a substitute for a substitute. (*"Substitute"*  
*The Descendants*, p.7).

The heavy rhythm itself denotes that love has lost altogether the headiness of a novel experience and has taken on the monotonousness of a routine.

*"The Stone Age"* offers a counterpoint. It presents love as an insatiable frenzy. The lyric speaker is something of an erotic in desperate need of a love object.

If deserted by one, she rushes to the other in defiance of the whole world.

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.  
Through peep holes, the neighbours watch,  
they watch me come  
And go like rain. (*"The Stone Age"*, *The Old Playhouse  
and Other Poems*, p. 51.).

In *"The Corridors"* love has totally depersonalized the lover presumably by the multitude of her lovers so that

I do  
Not seem to recollect names  
Or the real nature of their  
Relationship with me. (*"The Corridors"*, *The Old Playhouse  
and Other Poems*, p.45.).

Evidently Das has captured the whole spectrum of love experience. Her poetic success consists in perpetuating the individual flavour of each of them.

In **My Story** Kamala Das admits that like the majority of the city-bred women, she tried adultery for a short while but found it distasteful. When she was ready for love, ripe for sexual abandon, her husband's indifference compelled her to think of the handsome bricklayer as her heartthrob. One day she offered herself to one of her cousins to hold her in his arms for a couple of minutes and kiss her. In **My Story** she confesses that —

That was probably the most bewitching spring of my life. (**My Story**, p.163.). It is this felt intensity of love experience that lends a corresponding intensity to her love poems.

A passionate lover that she has been, her middle-age discovery of the loss of her capacity to bewitch a male anymore comes as something of a shock:

What was happening to me, I wondered. Was it no longer possible to lure a charming male into a complicated and satisfying love-affair with the right words, the right glances, the right gestures? Was I finished as a charmer? (*My Story*, p. 158.)

Perhaps this unusually candid confession has led her critics to charge her with obscenity. Anisur Rahman writes that

the sexual mud that has ever clung to the image of Kamala Das has led her critics, pitifully enough to associate lust with her personality and poetry (*Raghukul Tilak, New Indian English Poets and Poetry*, p.84.).

C.N. Srinath too has emphasized Das's absorption in the theme of love :  
Love-desire, genuine love, love on various planes... is Kamala Das' main pre-occupation, her obsession. (*Ibid*, p.84)

With their delectable freshness and vigour, the love poems of Kamala Das simply enthral a robust reader. Bijoy Kumar Das in his **Contemporary Indo-English Poetry** rightly says : What enchants the reader unsettles the poet. (*Bijoy Kumar Das, Contemporary Indo-English Poetry*, p.42).

It is no wonder that critics have levelled the charge of over indulgence in sex against Kamala Das's poetry. What she has really done is that she has raised her voice against the forces, rituals and institutions which systematically undermine the vigour of sex and its sublimation into works on literature. If fidelity to the lived experience is an artistic sin, she has deliberately committed it. Before she is condemned out of hand, some of the biographical facts of Das should be taken into account. She was married at sixteen. At that time, her body was immature and not yet ready for love making. So on the wedding night, the ritualistic 'rape' was unsuccessful. In *An Introduction* she registers very poignantly all the dismay and helplessness of an innocent, inexperienced girl in the grip of male brutality.

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. (*"An Introduction", The Old Playhouse and  
Other Poems*, p. 26).

This is the kind of experience that has left an indelible imprint on the poetic sensibility of Das and has turned her into an unrivalled Indo-Anglian love poet of the present time.

In **My Story** Kamala Das vividly records her nightmarish experience of what normally goes under the name of consummation :

Then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack... The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual congress. Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me". (*My Story*, p.79)

Das's deliberate use of the word "rape" to express her bridal experience speaks volumes for her sense of outrage. She expected understanding. Instead she was subjected to sexual assault. Like John Donne, she believed that love to be "a satisfying passion must be a mutual relationship" (*John Donne, Ed. Raghukul Tilak*, p.51).

A wife desires full physical as well as emotional satisfaction from her husband. This satisfaction must be based on mutual understanding. But what Das experienced is nothing but physical oppression. I. K. Sharma in his essay "*The Irony of Sex*" (*Bijoy Kumar Das, Contemporary Indo-English Poetry*, p.43) rightly says that Kamala Das" feels 'raped' in life by all - husband, lover, society, etc. Marriage is a bond between two souls. Like other newly married

wives, Kamala Das expected her husband to befriend and commune with her. But her expectation was totally belied. Immediately after marriage, her husband had so much taken up with his cousins that with her "he was terse and impatient" (*My Story*, p.88). To matters worse was her sense of betrayal at the nonoccurrence of the much coveted honeymoon. Giving vent to her deep disappointment on this score, she has confided in her autobiography that —

I shall not remember,

The betrayed honeymoon (*My Story*, p. 181).

It was a very natural expectation on the part of Das that her husband should write fond letters first to her. From Bombay Madhav Das wrote his first letter not to his wife but to a female cousin with whom he had a flirting relation. The piqued Kamala made up her mind to be unfaithful to him, at least physically.

When she was pregnant for the first time, her husband sent her away to Malabar. She had got so used to seeing him and sleeping with him that her forced separation from him was an emotional wrench that forced her to confess that "I cannot get on without you". (*My Story*, p.81).

Strangely enough, when Manoo, her first child was born, her husband came to see it at her request. What she got from him was more than she had ever bargained for. His night's sleep disturbed by the child's crying, the exasperated husband ordered the wife and the child to be out of the room. The hurt mother's anguish finds poignant expression in "*The Time of the Drought*":

When every night my littlest child wakes and  
Limpets to my side, I am heavy with unshed tears  
I am the grey black monsoon sky  
Just before the rain... (*"The Time of Drought"* **Collected Poems**, Vol.1, p.98).

Her Husband never deigned to treat her as a free and full being with an emotional life and a sense of dignity of her own. In consequence he never bothered to achieve emotional intimacy with her. She was exclusively a love object to gratify his lust. Hence she writes :

In him... the hungry haste  
Of rivers, in me... the oceans tireless  
Waiting. (*"An Introduction", The Old Playhouse and  
Other Poems*, p.27).

It is this dehumanization and humiliation that figures as a recurrent motif in her writings. In *My Story* she says : "The taking was brutal and brief. The only topic of conversation that delighted him was sex and I was ignorant in the study of it. I did not have any sex appeal either." (*My Story*, p. 84).

Her conjugal life is nothing short of a travesty. Brutalisation of love by her husband causes her the emotional wound that serves as her creative fount.

A measure of his heartlessness is that one night her husband locked up their two-year old child in the kitchen. This brutal treatment hurt her. She felt miserable. She had lost whatever emotional contact she once had with him. He was always busy with his office work and had no time at all for his family. On one occasion Das hoped that her husband would come to the airport to receive her, but he did not. His refusal to make this simplest gesture of love made her feel unloved and unwanted. When she broached the issue with him, he airily dismissed it on the grounds of tiredness : "Why didn't you come to the airport, I asked him. Don't you love me at all ? I sobbed holding him close to me. He said I am tired and sleepy, we shall talk in the morning tomorrow. (*My Story*, p.113).

It is this traumatically realized emptiness of love that she pours out in an interview with Tara Patel :

I did not find love except in a dog and my search for love ended there, I was happy, my poodle loved me. Yes it's a crazy world, no man can find adequate love from a man. Stop looking for it and do some serious work. (*Tara Patel, "Poetess of Love', Kamala Das", "Flair", Feb. 1988*).

So bitter has been her existential experience that it has eroded her faith in the

human possibility of love. She confirms the saying that nobody is born a pessimist; life makes one a pessimist.

Temperamentally Kamala Das and her husband were polar opposites. A poet, she was fond of natural sights and scenes. While they were holidaying at Panchgani they used to walk together. She ambled savouring every bit of natural beauty; he strode along as if engaged in a strenuous physical exercise:

I could never keep pace with my husband who did not pause to pick ferns, to smell them or the berries to take a tiny tentative bite as I did. So he walked in silence a few yards ahead of me. (*My Story*, p. 116).

So mismatched were the couple that even when they lived together, there was no mental contact between the two. A husband never likes his wife to talk of her unhappiness. So, any reference on Das's part to her existential anguish was, enough to exasperate her husband or to drive him away. In *Drama* she presents the flip side of her conjugal relationship with unconcealed sarcasm :

'I sip my tea  
In sunlit balconies, adore  
A married man; and when I speak  
My lines, though his lips do not move  
I hear him laugh, ha ha ha ha,  
ha ha. (*Drama*, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*,  
p.49)

Naturally the absence of any communication between the two and her desperate attempt to batter down the wall of separation figure prominently in her intimate autobiography :

There were silences between the two of us that seemed to me interminable, although at times I broke them by a word or two about our little son or about the Grocer's bill. (*My Story*, .p.171).

Her husband's sexual peccadillos were an added source of mortification for Das, What can be more galling than her confession that she did her best to make herself attractive in a bid to wean him from their seductive maid servant. Admittedly sin has its irresistible charm :

Even a fair-skinned  
maid servant could  
take him away from me for hours and while returning his eyes  
looked not at  
mine but at the trees the brown flowers of the mango as  
though they were to  
be blamed for his fever the brown flowers and the black flies  
but I wore again  
and again the pariijat in my hair and rubbed sandalwood on my  
breasts all the  
aroma wasted for guilt had always its overpowering smell.  
(*"A Faded Epaulet on His Shoulder"* Collected Poems,  
Vol. 1 p. 103.).

The irony of ironies is that to celebrate the wife's birthday the husband engaged himself in homosexual act with his friend under the very nose of Das. The spurned Das took her husband's perversion as a slight to her womanhood. The result is her abysmal self-abasement memorialized in *My Story* :

To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after some time, my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me... My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through.... Whenever I lay clutching my husband's feet at night I felt that his love was never to be mine. It had luckier takers."  
(*My Story*, p. 81).

It is this sense of desertion that added to her sense of isolation. What further aggravates her situation is that though, she forfeited her husband's love, she had to satisfy his lust, which was almost insatiable. The betrayed, frustrated, slighted wife turns into an eloquent poet. She distils her agony in "Substitute":

Love, blackmail and sorrow. ("Substitute"  
**The Descendants**, p.6.

Her experienced emptiness as woman becomes grist to her poet's mill. No wonder her poetry has an unmistakable confessional overtone :

My love is an empty gift, a gilded  
Empty container, good for show, nothing  
else." ("Captive", **The Descendants**, p.17.).

Frustration in love is her obsessive theme. It recurs as much in her interviews as in her poems. When R. Balashankar interviews her, she draws a sharp distinction between man and women in terms of their discriminatory status as lovers on the basis of her personal experience:

The greatest privilege a man enjoys is a woman's love.  
That kind of love is denied to women. I have not been  
loved the way I have loved. I have always been seeking  
love, unsuccessfully (*Alok Mitra, Probe India*, Vol. 8,  
No.6, August'86.).

Loving as she does actively, passionately, she inevitably courts frustration. Frustration begets loneliness. Das's loneliness inspires the line :

The only secrets I always  
withhold  
are that I am so alone ("Composition", **The Old  
Playhouse and Other Poems**, p.5.)

Unreciprocated love engenders her spectatorial stance on life. It generates her wish not to have married at all :

I feel alienated I feel I am stranded somewhere. As though  
I am standing on the seashore and watching others swim

away. And this loneliness is killing. Looking back on my life, I don't have regret. I only wish I had not got married.

She has hit upon a very expressive metaphor for all her pent-up feelings as a disillusioned wife :

There is  
No more singing, no more a dance my mind is an old  
Playhouse with all its lights put out ("*The Old Playhouse*"  
**The Old Playhouse and other Poems**, p.1).

The Playhouse described is indistinguishable from a chameleone. Emotionally so desiccated has been Das that her life has nothing about it to mark it off from death. It is this extremity of her situation that has driven to seek some relief in the delusive love outside marriage. The falling snow acutely conveys the chill of her husbands vanishing love for her. She herself is the migratory bird in search of the warmth of illicit love :

In love when the snow slowly began to fall  
Like a bird I migrated to warmer climes  
That was my only method of survival  
In this tragic game, the unwise, Like children, play  
And often lose in . ("*Ghanashyam*", **Collected Poems**,  
Vol. 1, p. 94).

Self-deception can sometime yield consolation. The lyric persona is, however, fully alive to the futility of clandestine love. Even the purely physical love has its intoxicating headiness to compensate for the bliss of genuine love:

...isn't each  
Embrace a complete thing, a  
Finished jigsaw, when mouth on mouth  
I lie" ("*In Love*", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1. p. 76).

With the benefit of hindsight, Das tries to identify the force that impelled her to

surrender to sheer lust. Her conclusion is that : "Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways so that the soul turned humble for a change". (*My Story*, p. 163.)

Sex can never have been her ultimate desideratum. She had, however, written articles on free love that titillated many. In *My Story* she confesses to having projected a highly distorted self-image. She was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest her except as a gift she could grant to her husband to make him happy. A few of their acquaintances made a pass at her and attempted seduction. She was horrified. When she showed her disgust at their behaviour they became her bitterest critics and started to spread the scandals about her. If she were really promiscuous and obliging she would not have incurred her baiters' animosity and the notoriety that she has.

In her article 'I believe', Kamala Das says that when she had written about true love for a man, she had thought of classic lovers. When she was young, she was inclined to fall in love. At that time she could have walked out of her marriage but she did not. What restrained her was her consideration for her children for whom she sacrificed her sexual fulfilment :

Had

my children to think that I had left them only for some sexual happiness, that would have been so wrong. It has never been sexual ecstasy that I have been seeking"  
(*Kamala Das "I believe" Savvy*, Vol. 7, No. 7, Dec. 1990, p.18).

In her interview with Amrita Kumar, She offers a slightly different reason for her constancy. The very togetherness with her family precluded her from being closeted with a lover : "When did I get time to go off with a lover? I'm not Lord Krishna — I cannot be in different places at the same time". (*The Airport Magazine*, Udit, Mar/April 1989, Vol. 1, No.1, p.28-29).

She has done her best to disabuse the reader of her tendentious critical image as a profligate. The apologia she offers through the lyric speaker of

"*Composition*" is that she stubbornly refuses to act up to the reader's image of her as a lividinous woman not because she is a stickler for morality but because she is a hater of mechanical, mindless sex :

Reader,  
You may say,  
now here is a girl with vast  
sexual hungers,  
a bitch after my own heart,  
But  
I am not yours for the asking,  
Grovel at my feet,  
remove your monkey-suits and dance  
sing Erato Erato Erato.  
Yet I shall be indifferent  
Not because of morality  
but because  
I do not feel the need. ("*Composition*", *The Descendants*,  
p.31).

According to the **Manu Samhita**, women are to stay within the four-walls of the home. They are not to mix with others than their husbands. If they do, they will lose their chastity. Modern civilization, however, grants man and woman equal freedom. If we judge Kamala Das in this light, it will be easier to dismiss her critics's charge of obscenity against her poetry.

No guilt would have attached to Kamala Das even if she had deserted her husband for her lover. She did nothing of the kind. On the contrary, she boldly decided to stick out her married life for all its unhappiness. In her article "*I believe*", she analyses her predicament, her option and her constraint :

I have loved my husband, but I have hated sex. I have felt sullied, nauseated. Still, even when I had the choice of walking out of my marriage I couldn't because I had never

found someone considerate enough, good enough to look after my husband. And now I cannot think of it, now that he needs me through his old-age and illness. (*"I believe"* Savvy Dec 1990, Vol. 7, No. 7, p.17).

Opposites nicely blend in Kamala Das's life. She welcomes the Western idea of man's and woman's equal freedom, equal right. At the same time she remains loyal to the Indian maxim of the wife's unwavering fidelity and commitment to the husband.

Bijoy Kumar Das challenges the critics who charge her with obscenity and immorality. He contends that in poem after poem, Das seeks love and through different persons she tries to look for an eternal lover. In doing so, she never intends to be disloyal and faithless to her husband. She tries on the other hand to work out the tradition of the Gopi — Lord Krishna love play, as perpetuated in our mythology. Her search for the eternal lover through different lovers continues but her heart was set on "*Ghanashyam*", (Lord Krishna). In a poem entitled 'Ghanashyam' she speaks to the Lord :

You led me along a route I have never known before  
But at each turn when I near you  
Like a spectral flame you vanish. (*"Ghanashyam"* **Collective Poems**, Vol. 1, p. 93).

Das overcomes physical desire for any human lover because her heart is exclusively possessed by the eternal lover.

Kamala Das has presented her own life in her poems and in **My Story**. The life she has suffered and the life she has been forced to live provide the material for her art. Her poetry is mostly born out of her existential anguish. It is really a pity that she was not allowed to complete her Western education. And the full flowering of her personality has been thwarted by her early unsuitable conventional marriage. In '*The Old Playhouse*' she presents her degeneration into her husband's sick nurse and his echo :

You called me wife.

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
Became a dwarf, I lost my will and reason, to all your  
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (*"The Old  
Playhouse"*, **The Old Playhouse and Other Poems**,  
p.1).

An alternative to her sickening married life is the void of uncertainty and insecurity. With a meagre education she is thoroughly ineligible for any decent job. Like other helpless poor women of India, she can contemplate only prostitution as a means of livelihood. Her thoughts about committing adultery just to pay her husband in his own coin sound a bit immature though the anguish of her soul made desperate through torture is no less evident.

Negligence and indifference of her husband tortured Das spiritually. Out of this mental anguish grows Kamala Das the poet. Turned out of her bedroom on her birthday by her husband on the score of his homosexual lover, she pours out her night-long anguish into one of her best poems.

Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay,  
Let nothing remain of that yesterday.  
(**My Story**, p.94).

It is because of her anguish that we find violent imagery in her poems. She compares male lust to a bison's thrust :

In bed, he still had the bison's thrust,  
The only fatigue he knew was the one  
After love. ( *"The Last Act"* **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1., p.67).

In *"Ode To A Lynx"*, Das hates the sexy approach of the males :

Oh lynx with piercing eyes,  
I would hate to succumb to your charms,

succumb as a yellowed leaf does,  
when the autumn - gales arrive.

(*"Ode To A Lynx"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p. 88)

In a good many places, Kamala Das argues, speaks, and preaches like a women's lib campaigner. But her distinction lies in voicing her own personal anguish. Her sincerest feelings of humiliation and suffering lend substance to the women's lib slogans. In the poem *"The Stone Age"* (**The Old Playhouse and Other Poems**, p.51) the foolish husband is approached by a tortured feminine soul not to behave like a heartless marauder. With his clumsy and cruel clutching of different parts of her body, her husband evokes the image of an ugly cruel tyrant spider using all its tentacles to fix up its prey for its feed. Her sexual frustration screams out through the lines below :

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,  
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,  
Be kind .

(*"The Stone Age"*, **The Old Playhouse and Other Poems**,  
p.51).

Sometimes we find a strain of wish fulfilment in Kamala Das's poetry. Since she did not have a happy love life, she had formed the habit of dreaming up a happy pair of lovers. Vicariousness informs her picture of rain as a killjoy inconveniencing the lovers by spoiling their rendezvous :

last nights rain has felled the lovers tree  
Where will they  
sit now the young ones the thin ones meeting in the dark  
where will they kiss the tree has fallen...

(*"The Blind Walk"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.90)

Her so-called obsession with sex has its origin in her intense disgust at the physical aspect of married life. She has very lucidly explained her position as a woman writer :

I hated the physical aspect of marriage. It was terrible, all that physical torture for nothing, .... I began writing the way I did because I wanted to write away my disgust for sex. People

thought I was sex-obsessed. But it was only me trying to get over my fear, my hesitation. A woman writer, whatever she leaves incomplete in her life feels compelled to complete in her writings. (*"I believe"*, Savvy, "Vol.7, No.7, p.15).

Perhaps for that reason, fancifulness, fantasy and even grotesqueness often give colour and character to her description of the lovers, their love nests and even their love-making. Her vitriolic picture of the lovers engaged in the act of sex reduces love to the friction of the flesh and denudes it of all significance.

Hence the lyric speaker's justified scepticism about the very use and justification of love :

Where

Is room, excuse or even

Need for love, for isn't each

Embrace a complete thing, a

Finished jigsaw, when mouth on

Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor

Moody mind, while pleasure

With deliberate gaiety

Trumpets harshly into the

'Silence of the room.' (*"In Love"*, Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p.76).

In *"Convicts"* too love is conceived in the main as a purely physical action culminating in a physical union transcending the polarity between man and woman:

We lay

On bed, glassy-eyed, fatigued...

... we were earth under hot

Sun. There was a burning in our

Veins and the cool mountain nights did

Nothing to lessen heat. When he

And I were one, we were neither

Male nor female. (*"Convicts", The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, p.25).

The strident colours of these descriptions originate not so much in the experience as in the fantasy of a sexually frustrated woman. She is quite honest and frank in her admission that she is not a nymphomaniac. In *My Story* (p.170) she expresses her indifference to sex. Sex has never been her obsession either in life or in literature.

What lends weight to her claim is that as devout religious being, she has always looked upon sex, as a means of procreation and never as a source of intoxicating pleasure. Her confession on this account is a counter blast to her iconoclasts :

I somehow cannot associate sex with anything but for the purpose of childbirth because I was, and still am, a very religious person. It is not that I consider sex dirty, it is just that I see not other reason for it except to conceive a child. (*"I believe" Savvy*, Vol.7, No.7 Dec, 1990, p-17.)

Sex was a painful reality in life. As fantasy is a soothing compensation for existential frustration, what was a pain life becomes a pleasure in dream :

In the remoteness

Of sleep I gathered a harvest for my eyes. Oh White man with Whiter legs, luminous in the blue, have I met you in real Life too, or are you just a symbol? (*"White Man with Whiter Legs" Collected Poems*, Vol.1, p.87).

Her phantom lover is a counterpoint to her stolid husband. An artist has this advantage over the nonartist that he can create an alternative world where dreams come true. Imagination puts at this disposal a veritable cornucopia. Das exercises the artists prerogative to create beauty out of ashes, to turn fantasy into reality :

Any stone can make  
An idol. Loving this one, I  
Seek but another way to know  
Him who has no more a body  
To offer, and whose blue face is  
A Phantom lotus on the waters  
of my dreams.

(*"A Phantom Lotus"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol.1, p.92).

Kamala Das is more sensuous than sexy in her response to the life around her. She is more affectionate than amorous. Her feelings for the things and persons she has come across in her life are quite keen and delicate. These constitute her virginal innocence with which she looks at life. Even in her most mature poetical works she sometimes talks in such a manner that one feels inclined to think that her delicate senses of the early teens were never tutored to be mature. Like Peter Pan, she does not want to grow up and face up to life's ills. Hence her atavistic desire to revert to childhood's pristine simplicity, to its serenity. She would have life only on her terms or not at all :

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, just dead.

(*"The Suicide"*, **The Descendants**, p.1).

In this context, Manika Varma rightly says that some verses of Das are full of non-adult expression (Manika Varma, "Kamala Das" **Facing Four**, , p.27) and those are "suitable for young ladies". In support, she specifically refers to the following lines:

What life was worth  
on this earth  
What love was worth

In the end.

(*"Request"*, *The Descendants*, p-5).

Alongside the virginal delicacy and purity of senses, Das has nurtured a deep strain of mystic love for Krishna. She seeks fulfilment in her love and life with Krishna. Even while resigning herself totally to Krishna, she has not desisted from the highly sensuous and suggestive imagery. In her poem "Radha", she pictures the lyric speaker caught in the throes of an overwhelming love for Krishna:

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting,  
Nothing remains but  
You.

(*"Radha"*, *The Descendants*, p.9).

Here the use of the word 'melt' is significantly sensuous. It gives a new turn and character to her mysticism. She is not a mystic in the traditional sense. It would not be accurate to assess her as an ordinary mystic. Indian women traditionally seek in Krishna a way to escape the bitter realities of life. In any superficial analysis, her life fits the traditional pattern of an ordinary Indian woman with a mystic love for Krishna.

She has her bitter cups of life in full. No doubt she seeks a sort of escape route through Krishna. But she seeks in Krishna all kinds of fulfilment in her life. They are no less sensuous than spiritual. In "*Krishna*" she packs a lot of esoteric meaning into her metaphors :

Your body is my prison, Krishna.

I cannot see beyond it.

Your darkness blinds me,

Your love words shut out the wise World's din.

(*"Krishna"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1., p. 75).

Krishna blinds her totally with the expansive darkness of his being. Beyond him, her senses fail to perceive anything. A long wait for him makes her soul virginal and pure. The Radha of his soul unites with Krishna and feels herself

finally merging into his being. He is no longer a means to escape life. He is the ultimate goal of her life. Krishna becomes her final spiritual identity.

Kamala Das's treatment of love is both sensuous and realistic. Her philosophy of love is strikingly similar to Donne's. Both of them agree with Plato that true love is spiritual. It is a union of the souls. But unlike Plato, they do not ignore the claims of the body. It is the body which brings the lovers together. Love begins in sensuous apprehension, and spiritual love follows upon the sensuous. So we cannot ignore the claims of the body. Like Donne, Kamala Das accepts physical love. This emphasis on the physical basis of love is a measure of her realism. She strikes an 'earthly note' in her poems. At the same time, she maintains that only physical love is meaningless. Both body and soul are correlated. So true love must be both physical and spiritual at once. That is why she writes that:

Bereft of soul  
my body shall be bare  
Bereft of body  
my soul shall be bare.  
(*"The Suicide", The Descendants*, p.1).

It is worth noting that the very ideas and phrases in some of her poems resemble Donne's. Very often in Donne when the lovers unite, they are neither male nor female. Similarly "*In Convicts*" the lyric speaker claims to have transcended through love's alchemy the male-female polarity :

When he  
And I were one, we were neither  
Male nor female.  
(*"Convicts", The Descendants*, p.26)

Donne too has articulated the lover's achieved identity through the fusion of their beings in "*The Canonization*":

The Phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us : We two being one, are it  
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love.

*(Helen Gardener, Metaphysical Poets, p.62).*

It is fitting to conclude with the reminder that Das's ultimate stress is not on the body but on the mind. In her article 'I believe', she makes her position unmistakable:

‘If you have a mind, quickly forget about the body, and concentrate on the mind, Worship your mind. That’s Where your wholesomeness comes from. And that’s what a man finally falls in love with. That radiance from within. Thinking men don't really want a beautiful face with a body to match. This they can easily pay for and pick up in a high class brothel . (“I believe”, Savvy, Vol.7, No.7, Dec.1990, p.21.)

Definitely in her view, it is the mind that serves as both the object and the source of love.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Self and Society

As a socially conscious being, Kamala Das has been feeling keenly from her very childhood the injustice and deprivation in the society around her. In the European school at Calcutta, her brother and she had to tolerate severe tortures by the white students. The white boys persecuted her brother by pushing a pointed pencil through his nostril. When she protested, she was overpowered by the tough Anglo-Indians. She has known what apartheid means at first hand in the most impressionable period of her life. Much to her chagrin, the Principal of her school passed the poem she had written off as the composition of a Scottish student to a visitor to the school. And to cap it all, the nature coloured students had to keep out of sight of the European visitors to the School.

This clash between the white and the black children left an indelible mark upon the sensitive child Kamala. "*The Sea at Galle Face Green*", (*Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p.12*), "*Smoke in Colombo*" (*Ibid, p.14*) "*After July*" (*Ibid, p.15*), "*Shopper at the Comells, Colombo*" (*Ibid, p.16*), "*A Certain Defect in the Blood*" (*Ibid, p.17*) etc.— are the poems in which she opposes humanitarianism to racial discrimination.

In "*A Certain Defect in the Blood*", she regrets the injustice stemming from the colour of the skin in India itself. The Dravidian's blackness is an index of his inferiority in contrast to the Aryan's fairness :

It was a defect  
In our blood that made us the land's inferior  
A certain muddiness in the usual red  
Revealing our non Aryan descent."  
(*Ibid, "A Certain Defect in the Blood", p.17.*)

She, however, envisages the prospect that in a more enlightened country than her motherland, colour of the skin and merit would not be

equated. Children would perhaps grow up there ignorant of this curse of colour:

Perhaps in a kinder country their stigma  
Might stay unrecognised and the children might  
Play again under the benign skies of  
Summer months.

(*"A Certain Defect in the Blood"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol.1, p.17).

*"Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo"* focuses on apartheid. The lyric person's attempt to conceal her colour falls through, and she is exposed to the ironical humiliation of our politeness :

.....my Indianness  
Concealed, I merge well with the expatriates,  
Despite my nut brown skin, but when at last  
I reach the cashier's counter, the salesgirls  
See through my guise, and their cruel  
mouths bleed  
When they make attempts to stab me with a smile.  
(*Ibid*, *"Shopper at the Cornells; Colombo"*, p.16).

The ambience of the Roman Catholic boarding school revolted Das no less. The nuns always tried to find out the sins of the boarders. In *My Story* (p.43) Das says that if there was a dearth of sin, sin at any cost had to be manufactured, because forgiving the sinners was a therapeutic exercise, popular with the rabidly virtuous. Moreover, the nuns compelled the boarders to write that they were very happy at the boarding house and that everyday they prayed to God for the well-being of their relatives. The nun's practice of checking letters before they were sent for mailing annoyed Das. Besides she realised that the obsession with sin destroyed several girls who were at the beginning of their adolescence, normal and easy going.

Kamala Das's sympathy for the down-trodden is one of the unmistakable marks of her social awareness. She dislikes the discrimination between the rich and the poor. *"In The House Builders"* she extols the withered, dust-covered builders who work themselves to the bone to provide shelter to other:

...these toymen of dust, fathers of light  
Dust children but their hands-like the withered boughs  
Of some mythic hoodoo tree cast only  
Cool shadows and with native grace bestow  
Even on unbelievers, vast shelters  
(*"The House Builders"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol.1, p.1)

It is a kind of affinity born of empathy that she feels with the toilers. In *My Story* (*My Story*, Ch. 49, p. 191) she says that one day her soul might migrate into the womb of a housebuilder's woman, and she might be one of the happy children squatting to see the pink Ganapati.

In the Roman Catholic Boarding School, meals were supplied to the boarders according to their grades based on birth and status. The first class boarders were given at breakfast cereals, eggs, and toast; meat at lunch time, snacks at tea and pudding after supper. The second class girls were given only cereals at breakfast, rice and fish curry at lunch and no pudding at supper. The third class boarders got gruel of maize both in the morning and at night and rice at lunch. Next, the orphans got only two meals of gruel a day. (*My Story*, Ch. 12, p.42) Das could hardly bear such iniquity.

She criticises the British treatment towards beggars. The British influence has changed the urban people's attitude towards beggars. They shout at those who arrive near the gate with outstretched arms. This cruelty hurts her feelings. In Bombay on her way from the Taj Mahal Hotel after dinner, she used to come upon many pavement dwellers asleep on the doorsteps. She is so much touched by this spectacle that she invokes the famous Indian tradition of charity to support her quixotic proposal to remove the sufferings of the vagrants:

I have often wondered why the Government cannot pass an order that all huge buildings must let out their basement hall for the homeless during the harsh monsoons and during the winter. Every hotel can be made to spend one tenth of its daily earning in feeding

the poor. Charity is India's ancient tradition. There is no harm in reviving it when the times are hard. (*My Story*, p.169)

Das maintains an impartial attitude towards the rich and the poor. The poor emerge out of invisible holes in the morning and wander around looking for edible garbage. She watches them when she is well enough to stand on her verandah. The poor boys cannot buy bhelpuri. They only get vicarious pleasure watching the richer ones eating it. So they crowd round the bhelpuriwala. This scene pains Das much.

Since she likes to study people, the unfortunate mad do not escape her attention. She feels for them. On some days she watches a young mad naked woman being tormented by the riff-raff. She gives her a housecoat or a saree to cover her body. Her feeling for the lunatics give rise to the poems like "*The Lunatic Asylum*" (*Collected Poems*, Vol.1, p.2) , "*Peripetral Insanity*", (*Ibid* Vol. 1, p.10) etc. In "*The Lunatic Asylum*", she plays on words like 'light' and 'Lamps' in their skulls' uses the transferred epithet "insomniac lanterns" and the metaphor "sepulchral ballrooms of their minds" all in her bid to capture the plight of those unfortunates who are life's victims, society's liabilities, the asylum's prisoners:

There is a light...

At the lunatic asylum,

....burns

The lamps in their skulls, those lights that

The bromides or the electric whiplash

Of every week cannot put out,

Those large and hot

Insomniac lanterns

Under which grey spectres dance in

The sepulchral

Ballrooms of their minds.

(*"The Lunatic Asylum"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p.2).

Das is too much worried about the children's future in India. For sometime

she was the President of The Kerala Children's Film Society. At that time, she had started Children's Film Movement. The purpose of this movement, in her own words, is "to make the children laugh....not in derision, but in happiness. (Souvenir, *The Kerala Children's Film Society*, Poojappura, Trivanrum, 1982):

Unhappiness in married life is a thing to be kept hidden in our society. Kamala Das has realised this in her early teens. She found her parents mismatched. But her mother always tried to hide her unhappiness under a mask. In spite of all her mental conflict, she maintained a peaceful atmosphere in their house. Das mocks at such pretence of domestic peace in her autobiography. (*My Story*, Ch. 2, p.4).

Ironically when her own turn comes, she behaves exactly like her mother in similar circumstances. She of course gives vent to her outraged feelings in "*The Suicide*" where she projects the lyric persona as a self-conscious, astute roleplayer always maintaining the fixed hiatus between her authentic and her assumed self, between the private reality and the public appearance. Another name for this kind of behaviour is of course hypocrisy :

I must pose,  
I must pretend,  
I must act the role  
Of happy woman,  
Happy wife.  
I must keep the right distance  
Between me and the high,  
I must keep the right distance  
Between me and the low.

(*"The Lunatic Asylum"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol.1, p.2).

Das has a dig at the civilized couples who conceal their hideous reality behind a deceptively pleasant facade in "*Composition*" :

Husbands and wives,  
here is my advice to you,  
Obey each other's crazy commands,  
ignore the sane.

Turn your home into a merry  
dog-house,  
Marriage is meant to be all this  
anyway,  
being arranged in  
most humorous heaven.

(*"Composition", The Descendants, p.33-34*)

Repelled though she is by this middle class hypocrisy, she also envisages it as her own inescapable end. She jumps from the superficial social to the deeper existential plane to demonstrate that dissimulation is innate in the human condition in-as-much as it is one of the inevitabilities of human life at any rate:

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue  
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must  
Roll across the road. I shall be the patient  
On the hospital bed, lying in drugged slumber  
And dreaming of home

(*"Gino", The Old Playhouse and other Poems, p.14*).

In *My Story* Das says that she was to be the victim of a young man's carnal desire and perhaps, out of their union, a few children would be born. She would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shops carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals. She would beat her thin children when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream out for mercy. She would wash her husband's cheap underwear and hang that out to dry in the balcony like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride. (*My Story, p.75*) All these things she paints almost dipping her brush into her bleeding heart and smarting sores. Her social consciousness turns into her creative inspiration.

But I shall end differently, I know our bloods  
Tributaries never once merging. It is  
A dream-river, keep it so, the children are  
Dream children. Real ones never bear such splendid eyes.

(*"Gino", The Old Playhouse, and Other Poems, p.14*).

What starts as the perception of conjugal hypocrisy changes into the realization of existential dissimilation and culminates into the conviction of the ontological incongruity between reality and imagination.

Every society advocates its own norms and stereotypes and opposes others. Das gives poetic expression to the tremendous social pressure to conform. She vividly presents the coercive process in action in Indian society reducing a girl to a doll :

Dress in sarees, be girl,  
Be wife, they said, Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quareller 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.  
(*"An Introduction", The Old Playhouse and Other  
Poems, p.27*).

How spiritedly she herself must have resisted the prescribed role model to emerge as a poet !

Being an oversensitive girl, she finds no male partner to love her without any purpose. She criticises this selfish nature of the male folk. Males are always hankering after physical pleasure. As soon as their desire is satisfied, they depart. She expresses her disgust against such behaviour in "*The Looking Glass*".

Getting a man to love you is easy  
Only be honest about your wants as  
Woman... .  
Oh yes, getting  
A man to love is easy, but living  
Without him afterwards may have to be  
Faced. (*"The Looking Glass", The Descendants, p.25*).

In the context of society, Kamala Das does not hesitate to highlight another aspect of male nature. Many husbands get bored with their wives' talk of love when they are enamoured with youth and power. As youth slides by, they come back to their wives. At this stage, they are already physically unfit for love-making. What can be a wife's feeling at such a moment who had been waiting so long for her husband's love? This long-suffering wife's selfless love and the once disdainful but now impotent husband's very incapacity for love and the consequent pathos are well captured in "*The Last Act*":

I was waiting for you, she said,  
I thought you would need me today, He clung  
To her, he buried his arrogant face —  
Between her breasts, but a little later, sobbing  
Like a hurt child, he said, I am old,  
I am finished  
I cannot even make love.  
(*"The Last Act"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p.67).

This may be one of life's inevitabilities, but this certainly does not make for conjugal felicity.

Kamala Das turned the focus of her attention to another important aspect of our society. Women are helpless physically. They cannot live alone. They need male company to protect them. If they are alone, they are sometimes annoyed and oppressed by some lascivious fellows who bribe their way into fulfilling their design. Here is a concrete instance.

One midnight, while Das's husband was away, she was lying asleep. A thickset man entered the room with her ayah. The ayah left them closing the door. The man forced himself on her to commit rape, she tried her best to resist him but in vain. Her heart thumped wildly. In the morning the old ayah came and when she told her about that intruder, the conniving woman pretended absolute indifference. The incident drove home to Das the sheer helplessness of women as such. The insecure position of women is very truthfully reflected in her autobiography. (*My Story*, Ch. 26, p.96)

Again Das criticises our nature to shun people in adversity. When her husband was ordered by his new superior, to vacate his chair and his room within three hours, none came forward to sympathize with him. So she regrets in **My Story** (p. 173-174) that although they had as family friends, ministers, politicians and members of parliament, none actually helped them, although they were aware that an honest, hardworking man was being gratuitously victimized. She adds that people like them who believe in the essential dignity of human beings are always left to fend for themselves. Kamala Das believes in socialism; she believes in personal honesty. Dishonesty of any kind simply revolts her.

In "*Summer in Calcutta*", she point her accusing finger at drink, sex, etc. as the main features of parties in Calcutta. Drunken flirtation reduces love to an amusing game, brutalizing in the process what is arguably the finest of human feelings:

Dear, forgive  
This moment's lull in  
Wanting you, the blur  
In memory. How  
Brief the term of my  
Devotion, how brief  
Your reign when I with  
Glass in hand, drink, drink,  
And drink again this  
Juice of April suns.  
(*The Old Playhouse*", *The Old Playhouse and Other  
Poems*, p.24)

Kamala Das is bitterly against all clashes among different religions, particularly amongst their dogmatist champions. From a humanist and truly spiritual outlook, she emphasizes the oneness of the divine spirit. She mocks at the fanatics who destroy this concept of oneness through their bigotry. Her characterization of religious intolerance as the inherited virus encapsulates Indian history and unmask contemporary Indian reality :

This then was our only inheritance, this ancient  
Virus that we nurtured in the soul so  
That when at sundown, the muezzin's high wail sounded from  
The mosques, the chapel bells announced the angelus, and  
From the temple rose the brahmin's assonant chant, we  
Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a hate, illogical .  
(*"The Inheritance"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol.1, p.37).

On 23rd December '90 at Trivandrum, Kamala Das talked to me on religion at my request. I am quoting some lines from that talk to present her idea of religion as a socially conscious woman.

"It is time for us now to discover not only new tools and new technologies but also new religions and new political systems and perhaps new gods to suit the requirement of the times.

We must have a religion that can encompass the world, that can envelope all the living things and teach its followers to be gentle, to be tolerant, and to be generous. This religion will not depend for its survival on rituals, and conventions.

....If there is a religion, that will show the human beings that despite the colouring nationality they are of one large lost tribe and that they will help us all to survive the cateclysms of the new century.'

Das criticises our marriage system. Indian marriage system is totally ludicrous. It is based on the dowry. In it the couple's happiness counts for nothing. Prestige depends on the extravagance of both sides. She can hardly tolerate this system. Her cynical attitude towards the extravagance of her own marriage is found in *My Story*. (p.77) There she says that all this glut made her feel cheap and uncomfortable. Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like theirs. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue. There was nothing remotely Gandhian about her wedding.

Das hates this dowry system. She realises the insecure position of women in society. So she opines that instead of giving dowry, parents should

give the bride a house for her own security. She wanted "the Government to build a house for every girl when she reaches adulthood. In **India Today** Dec. 31, 1984 Kamala Das says "By being provided a house a woman would get a sense of security, which I believe is every woman's birthright." (**India Today**, Dec. 31, 1984, Vol. IX, No. 24, Edited by Aroon Purie). It is out of her own bitter experience that she recommends that every girl should be financially independent. "Otherwise, she will have to submit to an assault on her body. In return she will get bread, but she will even have to make that herself in the kitchen." (**Time**, December 27, 1976).

Kamala Das is particularly provoked by some of our social customs. She mocks at those customs. When a woman dies, our society paints her feet with alta just to show that she has cleverly avoided the pangs of widowhood. And Das says that our society never bothers about the sufferings a wife gets from her husband and family. In our man-dominated world a woman's feelings do not count for much. Das pours out seething scorn on the hollow rite associated with the death of a Hindu wife treated as a privileged being :

And each dead wife's feet are painted red before  
they carry her to the pyre so that we see while  
Passing by; tiny alta-tinted feet wagging  
Red flags of triumph, bragging of a widowhood  
Cleverly avoided.

(*"Of Calcutta"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p. 59-60.)

Reacting very sharply against the narrowness of the Indian values, customs and institutions, Kamala Das opts for the sea of life, wide and limitless, stretching to the sublime. The in-built narrowness of the society stifles our minds and spirits. A person able to swim must prefer the sea to pond. No narrowness binds him then, no slime will stick to his soul. Das celebrates this spirit of defiance and daring in "*Advice to Fellow Swimmers*":

When you learn to swim  
do not enter a river

but go swim in the sea.

go swim in the great blue sea

Where the first tide you meet is your body

that familiar pest,

but if you learn to cross it

you are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe

For, even sinking would make no difference then.

(*"Advice to Fellow Swimmers"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol.1, p. 100.)

In "*The Conflagration*" Das challenges the Indian woman's grotesque idea of happiness:

Women, is this happiness, this lying buried

Beneath a man ? It's time again to come alive.

The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame.

(*"The Conflagration"*, **The Descendants**, p. 20.)

It is a rousing call for rebellion uttered by a revolutionary spirit to the humiliated Indian woman reduced to a mere sex object. Das is now actively involved in social work. She is going about her task by visiting slums and other areas in Kerala. She hears the sad stories of the distressed women and does her best to help them.

Kamala Das, being gifted with an astoundingly keen observation of life, has ably and meaningfully portrayed the minutiae of our disjointed and tumbling society in a satiric vein. She dreams of a world free from apartheid. She dreams of a world where the old, the children, and the helpless will be treated sympathetically. She dreams of a world where husbands and wives can live happily. She dreams of a world free from all sins and obsessions. Her world of wish fulfilment resembles that of Tagore's :

.....

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father,

let my country awake

(*Rabindranath Tagore*, "*Where the mind is Without Fear*", **Gitanjali**, p.20).

Kamala Das wants good deeds to be reported in the newspaper. She feels proud when she watches an old man distributing oranges or mangoes to the poor children. She hopes such kind of benevolence to be reported in the newspaper instead of the crime and empty statements of the ministers. (*My Story*, p.170).

Her encounter with the problems and injustices in our social life always rouses a sort of wide-eyed wonder and mellow pity of an innocent soul. Her shrieks of protest are often mingled with tears. Her attempt to satirise is often mellowed by sympathy into a sort of tearjerking statements about some pathetic state of affairs. Her own sufferings in life add the element of sincerity and urgency to her social awareness. Her social awareness gets manifested in various ways : poetic, rebellious, journalistic etc. Nowhere, she, however, tries to poeticise her awareness in a forced manner. Her social awareness provides a broad background to her poetic creations. Only in a few poems this awareness provides poetic material or becomes poetry.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Time and Eternity

Time and eternity play an important role in Kamala Das's poetry. Death is so palpable an experience that a sensitive soul is bound to react to it in various ways at various stages of life. Hardly is there a poet who does not hold a singular and fixed view of death. Depending on her maturity and experience, Das registers in her poetry a changing perspective on death.

Death has no meaning, and so is not a menace to a child. Both life and death are the same to it. As a child grows up, its attitude to death of course changes. Wordsworth's "*We Are Seven*" tellingly brings out a child's total ignorance of death. No wonder death was indistinguishable from life to the child as it was to the young Das. Her entry in **My Story** makes it abundantly clear that as a youngster she was in the habit of equating the dead with the living: "I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living. I could even go up to the unknown Rosamund and confide in her. From the dead no harshness could emanate, no cruelty." (**My Story**, p.9). A child, however gradually wakes up to the reality of death as irreparable separation and so the object of terror. The six-year-old Das went to stay with her people at Nalapat. She used to spend hours at the bedside of the paralyzed old woman, Ammalu. It is Ammalu's death that initiates Das into one of the inevitables of life and the anguish that follows it as certainly. With characteristic naivety, she transcribes her first ever experience of death in **My Story** :

Ammalu is dead, whispered my brother..... I missed my evening monologue with the paralyzed one. Won't she ever get up from there, I asked my brother, she is dead and soon they will burn her. Then I broke down." Within a short time, another old relation (her grand-uncle's mother) Madhabi Amma died of cancer. Das's record of her response to this death in her autobiography is equally revealing: (**My Story**, p.9).

"I cried too when I saw her frail body being removed ...My father took me back to Calcutta on the next day, feeling that I had had enough of illnesses and deaths and required a change". (*My Story*, p.31). Thus Das discovers death as the transition from existence to nonexistence bringing in train the shock and regret of the survivors.

Subsequently as a frustrated wife, she seeks release from a loveless marriage in death. She then courts death which insinuates itself so much into her mind that it becomes an inspiration. It touches the inmost depths of her soul with a mellow softness of pathos. Her poetry blossoms with it in many pieces but culminates in "*Suicide*".

"*Suicide*" records Das's imaginary tryst with death. She toys with the idea of exchanging life's cruelty with death's serenity :

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. (*The Suicide*", *The Descendants*, p.2)

In "*The Invitation*" she is contemplating an easeful death. The heat and burn of the funeral pyre repel her. The sea holds out the alternative prospect of a calmer death on the cool sea-floor :

End in me, cries the sea. Think of yourself  
Lying on a funeral pyre  
With a burning head. Oh, Just think. Bathe cool,  
Stretch your limbs on cool  
Secret sands, pillow your head on anemones  
(*The Invitation*", *The Descendants*, p.14).

In *My Story* the poet expresses her suicidal tendency : "One day, being able

to bear it no longer, I sent the cook to a Chemists' shop for a dozen tablets of Barbiturates". (*My Story*, p.88).

Dr. Raghukul Tilak's interpretation of Das's death wish is somewhat misleading. He observes :

"To Kamala Das, death has none of the charms of a mystic experiences; she finds death desirable because for her life is not going to be redeemed or made new" (Raghukul Tilak, *New Indian English Poets and Poetry*, p.88) Perhaps Dr. Tilak has overlooked some of Das's observations on death where she insists on the soul's immortality beyond death : what is mortal is the exterior form but not the immutable spirit. Death can never touch it. Death is a spoiler only of the form which binds the immortal spirit for the duration of its embodiment. Such a notion Kamala Das has developed in her famous poem "*Composition*". In its quintessence, her idea almost approaches the Gospel of the Gita on the immortality of soul and the transitoriness of the body. Let Kamala Das herself speak on this momentous issue :

Ultimately  
I will feed only the hunger  
to feed other hungers,  
that basic one.  
To crumble,  
to dissolve  
and to retain in other things  
the potent fragments  
of oneself.  
The ultimate discovery will be  
that we are immortal,  
the only things mortal-being  
systems and arrangements.  
(*"Composition"* , *The Descendants*, p.35)

In "*A Requiem for my Father*" Das gives expression to a very common experience a person encounters after the death of his near relations. The survivor

then feels orphaned, however well-provided he may be otherwise. Parents serve like a protecting canopy without which everyone feels helpless and undone. Das touchingly articulates this feeling :

We were tonguetied, humbled and quiet  
Although within we wept for you  
And more for ourselves, now without a guardian  
Who would send us money to bail us out of jail,  
Who would come when we land as junk at the city hospitals?  
(*"A Requiem for my Father"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, P.39).

Such a reaction to death is no doubt pragmatic. An adult engrossed in life's desires and demands looks at death in terms of his personal advantages and disadvantages, comforts and discomforts.

In contrast to her father's death, and its cowering effects sometimes Das emphasizes her own fearlessness of death. In the face of acute loneliness or illness or love's betrayal or elders' hate, she often has hugged death. Heartbreak has made her desperate :

I was never afraid to die.  
From childhood to middle years I have had a raw deal  
Illness, and loneliness, loves that faded like mist  
And the elders' irrational hate.  
(*"A Requiem for my Father"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol.1, p.40).

Facing death, one often realises how futile and purposeless most of life is. A pregnant girl is driven to commit suicide at the discovery of life's inanity. Her swinging body provides a lot of fun to the children. Its grotesque and macabre dance reduces death to an object of ridicule. Thus, viewing the dead body of a maid servant through the innocent eyes and minds of the children, Das virulently satirizes the desecration of death :

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself  
In the privy one day. For three long hours

Until the police came, she was hanging there,  
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew  
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed  
To us who were children then, that Nani  
was doing, to delight us, a comic  
Dance... ("Nani", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.18).

Kamala's grandmother provided a beautiful frame of love and understanding to her life. When she dies, this prized frame disappears to become a treasured memory. Neither her parents nor her relations could replace it. Whenever she suffers, she resurrects her grandmother's memory as an anodyne. When she feels her youth greedily handled by the flesh-dealers, she almost tearfully reminisces the warm affectionate touch of her grandmother's arm round her shoulders.

Her grandmother remains ever embedded in her blood and marrow, in her thews and sinews, in her physical and mental being. The unforgettable trauma of the grandmother's death has turned out to be the granddaughter's never-failing creative inspiration. She can reify the spirit of the deceased at will and respond to it as if she were present in the flesh. Evidently in so far as Das's grandmother is concerned, death proved to be a benign shower for a rich crop of her poetry all aglow with tears of love:

Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death;  
I wonder why the ache still persists. Was  
She buried, bones and all, in the loose red  
Soil of my heart? All through the sun singing  
Day, all through the moon wailing night, I think,  
Of her, of the warmth that she took away  
(*"The Millionaires at Marine Drive"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.97.)

In "*White Man with Whiter Legs*" Kamala Das develops the platonic idea that everything generates its own opposite and that life and death batter on each other :

We mated like gods but begot  
Only our slayers. Each mother suckles her own enemy  
And hate is first nurtured at her gentle breast and each man's seed  
Is pregnant with his death.

(*"White Man with Whiter Legs," Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 86*).

Here Das touches on life's inherent antinomy in which opposites grow out of each other. This existential experience of Das serves as the basis for the famous philosophical formula of the identity of opposites.

Subsequently the poet narrates in a straightforward, realistic manner how a corpse feeds maggots and thus sustains the growth of some biological beings:

Through a corpse's eye glazed to a visor death peers  
Out at the living. At least it lives on to cool, to rot and  
Fill the hollows with fat maggots that sprout like toadstools without  
Notice, on the epitaphs at graves lichen grows the fastest  
As do scabs on wounds, yes, death promotes a kind of life.

(*"White Man with Whiter Legs," Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p. 86-87*).

All opposites coalesce in the monistic life vision. In *"Death is so Mediocre"* Kamala Das describes with all the macabre and grotesque details the cremation of the body according to the Hindu rites. Here the shocking aspects of the decimation of a corpse, are emphasized. The attitude is cynical and the method realistic. The psyché or soul does not disturb her perception of death. Death is attended by crudities and vulgarities. It marks the dirty end of a biological process. This materialistic view of death shines through the following lines :

Death is

So mediocre, any fool can achieve  
It effortlessly. For those such as me the awful  
Vulgarities of the final rites are not  
Quite right, the slow unwrapping of the carcass

The many paltry, human details that must disgust  
The esthete, the flabby thigh, the breasts that sag,  
The surgery scar, yes, it would indeed be  
Of no bloody use believing in my soul's  
Poise when the paid marauders strip me of that  
Last unbleached shroud and ready me for the fire.  
(*"Death is so Mediocre"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol.1, p.55).

In "*Life's Obscure Parallel*" Das offers a unique vision and perception of death. Death is not the grand finale, of the biological process called life. This process necessarily includes death and rebirth as essential steps. Every moment a living being lives in millions of cells, dies in million others and gets reborn in many other millions. If inhaling is life, exhaling is death. They constitute the rhythm of life. The process of life brackets them together. These ideas of momentary death, momentary rebirth and their continuous process in a cycle are quite unique. They can easily be traced back to the Gita. At the same time, they are quite modern and scientific too. Let Das's poem speak for itself :

Life's obscure parallel is death. Quite often  
I wonder if what I seem to do is living  
Or dying. A little of each is in every  
Gesture, both my mind's and my body's. Inside  
My throat the inward breath combats the outside  
One  
(*"Life's Obscure Parallel"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol.1. p.54.)

Kamala Das also feels that the physical aspects of her motherly existence are slowly atrophying, Death is a life-long process of decay. A man keeps on dying all through his life. The cells die, the limbs atrophy, our physical being declines. It is this inevitable life process that makes Das sceptical about her own lived reality :

Was there a baby once in my bed for which  
Goblets of breasts swelled burdened with milk and love?

A sudden drought seems to have settled itself down  
On the sun-bleached estuaries of my blood (*Ibid*, p.54)

"*Ghanashyam*" offers a miscellany of Das's perceptions about death.  
Water cool and moving sustains life as drought negates it :

Life is moisture  
Life is water, semen and blood  
Death is drought  
Death is the hot sauna leading to cool rest rooms.  
(*"Ghanashyam"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.93.)

Quite logically wetness and dryness take on the dimension of the two contrary symbols of life and death respectively.

As for the condolence occasioned by death, it also engages Das's attention:

Death is the last, lost sob of the relative  
Beside the red walled morgue (*Ibid*, p.93).

Friends and relatives shed tears for the dead. But the deceased never perceives it. Tears shed in condolence bear the mark of both pity and farce. They are sincere but useless.

In "*The Doubt*" Kamala Das studies the identity and significance of sex in the context of death. Death obliterates all our identities, physical or otherwise and reduces the deceased to inert matter :

When a man is dead, or a woman,  
We call the corpse not he  
or she but it.  
(*"The Doubt"*, **The Descendants**, p.16)

After death, a person ceases to bear his or her sex identity and difference. An inert body has no sex. So quite intriguingly Kamala Das questions whether the

soul is the true bearer of the sex identity. She then views the sex identity as a sort of delusion:

Does it  
Not mean that we believe  
That only the souls have sex and that  
Sex is invisible? (*Ibid*, p.16).

Likening death to a long sleep and rebirth to awakening is quite old hat. Still they take on an aura of freshness and authenticity in the hands of Das. In both sleep and death our consciousness and being remain suspended. But the germ and pulse of life never peter out :

When I  
Sleep, the outside  
World crumbles, all contacts  
Broken. So, in that longer sleep  
Only  
The world  
Shall die, and I  
Remain, just being  
Also being a remaining. ( "*Contacts*", *The Descendants*, p.19)

Here is a faint echo of the Vedantic conviction of the immortality of the Atman.

Every person wants to be remembered after death. Through the remembrance of his survivors, he wants to live for all eternity. Kamala Das wants her preserved dead body to testify to the worth of life and love :

When I die  
Do not throw the meat and bones away  
But pile them up  
And  
Let them tell  
By their smell

What life was worth  
On this earth  
What love was worth  
In the end. (*"A Request", The Descendants, p.5*)

Does it obliquely suggest that her stinking body shows up the emptiness of life and love?

Kamala Das envisages death as a holiday in *"A Holiday for Me"*. So she welcomes it with all eagerness marking as it does the end of her lifelong treadmill:

For a great lone holiday  
I shall leave all the heavy luggage behind  
(*"A Holiday for Me", Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p.27.*)

In *"The Maggots"*, Death means the lack of warmth and sincerity of love. Hers has been a kind of death in life because in place of the passionate lover's warm caress she has experienced her husband's loveless brutal handling. She is like Radha palpitatingly waiting for the call of Krishna, the cosmic lover. So when her husband asks her whether she minds his kisses Radha replies :

What is  
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?  
(*"The Maggots", The Descendants, p.22.*)

The suggestion is unmistakable that she has been more dead than alive in her love relations with her husband.

The sights of corpses, of funeral carriage and cremation are as such quite repulsive. Man wants to escape from them through intoxicating drinks or association with friends. Such a note of escapism is quite dominant in *"The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road."* Viewing a dead body and its burning, Kamala Das's husband says:

I think I shall  
Have a beer, it's hot,

Very hot today

(*"The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road"*, *The Descendants*, p.23).

The sensitive poet, however, finds her bulwark against death in friendship:

I must

Drive fast to town and

Lie near my friend for a hour I

Badly need some rest. (*"The Joss-*

*Sticks at Cadell Road"*, *The Descendants*, p.23)

Still the way Kamala Das has drawn the graphically vivid picture of the corpse and its burning emphasizes her innate realism:

When

They fed the body

To the fire, the fire

Leapt high, snarling beast-like. (*Ibid*, p.23).

Death is eternised through the sorrowful reminiscences of a mother in "*Requiem for a Son*". She is moving with a mirror in her hand in the lonely castle of her love :

.....her heart was a throne room locked for years

Where she walked alone with a mirror in her hand.

(*"Requiem for a Son"*, *Collected Poems*, p.29).

The mirror is to reflect the past of her life with her son. Death of her son is described in a fairly realistic manner. But his love and regard for the air as his father is suggestive of the Vedic and Greek myth that the sky is the father and the earth is the mother. Imaging earth as the huge grave yard of her own progeny and a big pile of dead bones is quite original. Life sprouts out of the creeks and crevasses of stony earth in a slow process. With a passionate zeal for life the dead boy seems to have some impatience with this process :

He was impatient with

Old wisdom's slow narrations.

(*"Requiem for a Son"*, *Collected Poems*, p.29).

Earth is at once the mother and the grave of her children. This old cry resonates in Kamala Das's lines in the above poem :

To live on an earth built upon layers and  
Layers of bone requires an extraordinary  
Courage, to walk the corridors of this prison and note with  
A quiet joy the saplings bursting from the cracks in stone and  
Know for certain that life will go on. (*Ibid*, p.29).

Death has been presented from all conceivable angles in Kamala Das's poetry. She has viewed it sometimes realistically, sometimes philosophically, sometimes mysteriously and above all always poetically. She has offered her readers a bouquet of deaths she has culled in course of her journey through life.

# CHAPTER SIX

## The Mystic Quest

Kamala Das is primarily a lyric not a mystic poet. In the technical sense, she is not concerned with mysticism, yoga or spirituality. She is not a 'mystic' in the sense in which Sri Aurobinda is. Yet there is a marked mystical strain in some of her poems which contributes to their depth, colour, intensity and lyricism. These poems reach out beyond the barriers of time and space. They satisfy our craving for something which is transcendent to us. And this brings us nearer to the mystic elements in her poetry.

Kamala Das's love of nature and man had by unconscious steps merged into her love of God. Deep personal sufferings had given a mellowness to her images and themes. Growing experience brought home to her that life is in the ultimate analysis an impenetrable mystery. The wonder and pathos of human life had brought a new sympathy and understanding to her poetry. Unless, however, something is innate, it can never exfoliate. No wonder Das betrays her inchoate mystical tendency on the very day of her marriage. When Madhav Das embraced her, she begged him to think of God. She said : "The is our wedding night, we should first pray to Krishna". (*My Story*, p.79).

Mysticism suffuses her, art as much as her life. Her celebration of her grandmother's single-minded piety, her heart consecrated to Shiva, reflects back upon the poet's own frame of mind :

All her feasts were monotonous  
For the only dish served was always God...  
She told us how she rode her elephant  
When she was ten or eleven  
Every Monday without fail  
To the Siva Shrine.  
(*"Blood"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p.4).

The religiosity of Das comes through in an apparently trivial entry in *My Story*. One day a cook was shouting obscenities at a thieving ape. Then about that cook Das comments that he was not at all religious. He made fun of all the Hindu gods, hurting the sentiments of others. (*My Story*, p.6). Das is a devotee of Krishna. Her Krishna-Prem is seen even in her day-to-day life. Every morning Das's grandmother used to read the **Bhagavatham** and the **Gita** and she sat for an hour listening to her. One day Das told her grandmother that her son was moving in the womb. The grandmother asked her how she knew that it would be a son. In reply Das said: "It will be a son and he will look like Krishna, I told her." (*My Story*, p.82). The reason for her conviction is that she had actually sublimated her sexual love for any earthly lover into spiritual love for the divine lover that Krishna is. Her obsession with Krishna shows through the following confession:

Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beauteous smile of my Krishna. Always, always, I shall love you I told him, not speaking aloud but willing Him to hear me, only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine..... (*My Story*, p.82).

Faith in God can sustain us even at the crucial moment. One day Das's first son fell seriously ill after having castor seeds. She went to the kitchen at midnight, lay on floor, prayed for his recovery. Her whole mind was then exclusively occupied by the beautiful, the incomparably beautiful face of Guruvayur's Krishna and his smile. (*My Story*, p.93) Her love for Krishna is further evident from her childish play with her little son Monoo. Sometimes she painted her fingers blue with blue ink and told Monoo that she was Krishna. Monoo took her at her word and enjoyed very much playing with the surrogate Krishna. Like Whitman, Das firmly believes that man cannot live by bread alone. Material prosperity can never bring real happiness. Spiritual fulfillment is man's paramount need. As in the sphere of the spiritual life, so in the sphere of the artistic life the discovery of the self comes first. And it is the sense of loneliness that brings the process to its culmination.

The feeling of loneliness was a constant in Das's life from her childhood on. She could not adjust to her companions. On a picnic day her teacher scolded her for sitting alone. Remembering that day, Das says in **My Story**.

Oh I was lonely that day.... Helen the only girl who could dance, was telling the others of the film called 'The Blue Bird'. I wondered why I did not join the girls who crowded around her. (**My Story**, p.8).

Gradually a time came when she lost all interest in lessons. During her stay in Calcutta with her father, she wrestled valiantly with the problem of her ever-increasing isolation. **My Story** chronicles this desperate struggle: "Every morning I told myself that I must raise myself from the desolation of my life and escape into another life and in another country". (**My Story**, p.68).

She has thus experienced the Upanisadic dictum "Charaibeti, Charaibeti". In Tagore's "*Balaka*", the same refrain is heard: "Hetha Noi Hetha Noi Annya Kotha, Annya Knokhane".

In "*Composition*" Das confesses that

That only secrets I always  
withhold  
are that I am so alone,  
(*"Composition"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.113).

Marriage changes her life in so many respects, but it brings no end to her self imprisonment. Her isolation remains as impregnable as ever: "It was true that I had my friends, the ladies of the neighbourhood who came every morning to taste what my cook had made for my lunch and to sit on our sofas and gossip, but each of them basked in the warmth of a successful marriage and could never, never, understand why I was so different and felt so deprived" (**My Story**, p.91). "*Ghanashyam*" portrays her as a loner with all the accompanying anguish:

At three in the morning  
I wake trembling from dreams of a stark white loneliness  
Like bleached bones cracking in the desert sun was my loneliness.  
(*"Ghanashyam"*, **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.94).

In her conjugal life Kamala Das settled down to housekeeping and to such chores as sewing the buttons and darning old clothes all through the hot afternoons. In the evening she brought her husband his tea and a plate of snacks. She kept herself busy with dreary housework while her spirit chafed against the constraints and trivia of domesticity. Her lacerated spirit finds its outlet in "*Of Calcutta*".

Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog  
Jumping my routine hoops each day, where is my soul  
My spirit, where the muted tongues of my desire ?  
(*"Of Calcutta"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p.59).

This is the inescapable lot of an average Indian wife. Her more fortunate Western counterpart too feels the sting of isolation. American poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton too share the predicament of Das. Both of them visualized the woman sitting alone in an untidy home in the midmorning, munching left-overs with cold tea after the husbands and children have left for work and school. Adreinnie Reich very vividly pictures the wife as an anonymous cross between cook and mother beyond the capacity of the language to convey her elusive identity:

if I'm lonely  
it must be the loneliness  
of waking first, of breathing  
dawn's first, cold breath or the city  
of being the one awake  
in a house wrapped in sleep  
and if they ask me my identity  
What can I say but  
I am the androgyne  
I am the living mind you fail to describe  
in your dead language  
the lost noun, the verb surviving  
only in the infinitive

the letters of my name are  
written under the lids  
of the newborn child. (*Sanjukta Das, Feminist Literary Criticism:  
A New Look at Old Things*)  
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Creative minds seek diversions when they are intensely lonely. And it is this loneliness, I think, that helped Kamala Das to hear the flute of Lord Krishna. In Indian philosophy she finds the highest expression of the human mind and the greatest unifying force of humanity.

Das's religio-philosophic concerns were there from the very beginning of her life. She is neither a saint scorning the sensual pleasures nor a yogi wandering in the forest for enlightenment, but a woman of parts and of the world. Neither does she address God directly nor does she crave for mercy in the manner of George Herbert. Like Vaughan, she does not soar aloft but remains ever on the earth with her eyes fixed on domestic life. Unlike Shelley's "Skylark", a denizen of the sky, she has rather affinity with Wordsworth's "Skylark". She straddles both the sky and the earth. Her integral mysticism finds eloquent expression mainly in the following pieces: "After the Illness", "Gino", "Luminol", "Radha", "Krishna", "Advice to Fellow-Swimmers", "Composition", "Ghanashyam", "The Blind Walk", "Inheritance", "White Man with Whiter Legs", "Vrindavan", "Radha-Krishna".

Along the path of sin and bliss, of sensual enjoyment and material success, one proceeds towards the spiritual life. Like Nishim Ezekiel, Kamala Das is aware of her sinful self. In "Ode to a Lynx" the lyric speaker reveals the poet's inner most being:

Although with every cell awake in me I desire you  
I shall not eddy to that inky depth again  
Where I shall see, looking down  
Not my familiar face but guilt's . . .  
(*"Ode to a Lynx," Collected Poems, Vol. 1, p.88*).

She has the candour to confess to her lapse in "A Man is a Season":

Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps  
I went astray

("A Man is a Season", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.80).

She has also the contrition of a reformed sinner as testified by "A Souvenir of Bone":

If I am a sinner, please  
Forgive my sins.

("A Souvenir of Bone", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.33).

This consciousness of her own sinfulness sets her on the quest for redemption.

A mystical poem does not deal with the quest, "How does the world work?" but with, "What is the meaning of life, reality and of the universe?" "A Request" radiates the aroma of Das's mysticism:

Let them tell  
By their smell  
What life was worth  
on this earth  
what love was worth  
In the end ("A Request", **The Descendants**, p.5).

Granted the brevity of life and love, she is bent on discovering the compensating bliss:

Ask me why life is short and Love is  
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price.  
("The Stone Age", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.96).

She articulates her realisation of the ever increasing elusiveness of truth as every bit of garnered truth begets a disturbing doubt setting afresh the quest over again. And she summarises in "Nani".

Each truth  
Ends thus with a query. It is this designed  
Deafness that turns mortality into  
Immortality, the definite into  
The sort indefinite. ("Nani", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.18).

The quest for truth figures prominently in Das's mystic poetry. Mystic Poetry ordinarily defies attempts at analysis or description. N.K. Gupta has rightly pointed out that there is a difference between spiritual poetry and mystic poetry. When the spirit speaks its own language in its own name, we have spiritual poetry. If, however, the spirit speaks - out of choice or necessity - an alien language in a strange manner e.g. that of a profane consciousness or of the consciousness of another domain idealistic or philosophical or even occult, puts on or imitates spirit's language and manner, we have what we propose to call mystic poetry. (A.N. Dwivedi, **Four Indo-Anglian Poets**, p.100.) It needs to be examined how far this definition of mystical poetry fits Das's poetry.

In "*Composition*", she conveys the idea of the One underlying the Many, changeless Reality pervading the everchanging world :

Ultimately  
I will feed only the hunger  
to feed other hungers.  
that basic one,  
To crumble,  
to dissolve  
and to retain in other things  
of oneself. ("*Composition*", **Collected Poems**, Vol. 1, p.119.)

In **My Story** Kamala Das says : "We are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal, and perishable. The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to His desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. Then for me there shall be no return journey" (**My Story**, p.166) Here is Vedantism very subtly encapsulated.

The yearning of the finite soul as the lover for union with the infinite God as the beloved is a recurrent or common motif in mystical literature throughout

the world. May be Das is not a religious poet in the strictest sense, but she is not an atheist either. Her mystic quest comes through in "*The Suicide*" for example:

While I enter deeper  
With joys I discover  
The sea's hostile cold  
is after all skin deep.  
The sea's inner chambers are all very warm  
There must be a sun slumbering  
At the vortex of the sea.  
(*"The Suicide"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p.72).

Here the sun symbolizes divine consciousness, which is the aspiring soul's quarry. This is highly reminiscent of Tagore who writes :

I dive down into the depth of the ocean  
of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl  
of the formless.

(Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, Macmillan India Ltd., p.66).

A poem like "*The Inheritance*" is a devastating expose of social evils. Das unmaskes the conventional Indian spirituality as a kind of mindlessness. She strongly opposes the continuation of lifeless conventions and dead customs. The indignity and exploitation of man outrages her. She wants reforms in society, politics, education, and ethics. She mocks at the multi-religious outlook of the Indians :

Oh God,  
Blessed be your fair name, blessed be the religion  
Purified in the unbelievers' blood, blessed be  
Our sacred City, blessed be its incarnadined glory.  
(*"The Inheritance"*, *The Old Playhouse*, p.20).

"*Ghanashyam*" reveals the poet's yearning to merge with Krishna and her joy

at an imminent union. Through a brilliant image, the poet underlines the divine immanence within her own self :

Ghanashyam

You have like a koel built your nest in the harbour of my heart  
My life, until now a sleeping jungle, is at last astir with music  
(*"Ghanashyam"*, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p.93).

Krishna's residence within her own being has totally changed the very temper of her life and has filled her with an ineffable joy. In the culminating metaphor of the poem, the poet's soul is a catch in the net of the fisherman, Ghanashyam :

Shyam O Ghanashyam

You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows  
of my mind  
And towards you my thoughts today  
Must race like enchanted fish. (*ibid*, p.93).

Kamala Das wants this peace and happiness to be enjoyed by all people. The prerequisite for this enjoyment, however, in man's conquest of his physicality, his bondage to the flesh :

When you learn to swim

go swim in the sea,

go swim in the great blue sea

Where the first tide you meet is your body,

that familiar pest,

but if you learn to cross it

You are safe, yes beyond it you are safe

For, even sinking would make no difference then.

(*"Advice to Fellow - Swimmers," Collected Poems*, p. 100.)

In *"A Phantom Lotus"*, Das penetrates through the deceptive veil of appearance into the abiding reality behind. She celebrates here faith's capacity

to spiritualize man and to transport him to the spiritual plane :

Heed

My faith alone, all the rest is

Perishable, and as such, but

Delusions. Any stone can make

An idol. Loving this one, I

Seek but another way to know

Him who has no more a body

To offer, and whose blue face is

A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams.

(*"A Phantom Lotus"*, **Collected Poems**, p.32).

Tagore too is consumed by the burning desire for self-transcendence :

That I want thee, only thee - let my

heart repeat without end. All desires that

distract me, day and night, are false and

empty to the core.

(Rabindranath Tagore, **Gitanjali**, Macmillan India Ltd., p. 22).

In "*Contacts*" Kamala Das treats death as an analogue of sleep and asserts her disembodied spirit's everlastingness:

.... in that longer sleep

only

The world

shall die, and I

Remain, just being

Also being a remaining. (*"Contacts"*, **The Descendants**, p.19).

In the midst of everything's evanescence, spirit alone has eternity. Das has been immensely influenced by the *Gita*. She believes that the soul migrates from one body to another. It is eternal. In **My Story**, she expounds this central tenet of the *Gita* : "What exists must exist. Only the compositions will change. Tomorrow my soul might migrate into the womb of a housebuilder's woman". (**My Story**, p.191).

There is a correlation between this formulation of Das and the Sloka 22 (Samkhya Theory and Yoga Practice) of the Gita :

Just as a person casts off worn out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast out worn-out bodies and take on others that are new. (Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 108).

In "*Composition*" Das defines both man's ultimate discovery and the ultimate reality in terms of both the Vedanta and Modern physics :

The ultimate discovery will be  
that we are immortal  
the only things mortal being  
systems and arrangements.  
("*Composition*", *The Descendants*, p. 35).

The above lines resemble the following from *the Gita* (sloka 20 Ch. II) :

na jayate mriyate va Kadacin  
na 'yam bhutva bhavita va na bhuyah  
ajo nityah sasvato 'yam Purano  
na hanyate hanyamane sarire

In Radhakrishnan's English rendering, this reads as follows :

He is never born, nor does he die at anytime, nor having once come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain. (Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita*, , p.107).

It would therefore be no stretching the truth to claim that the *Gita* has moulded Das's personality. The concluding chapter of *My Story* pretty conclusively demonstrates her unqualified acceptance of the underlying philosophy of the *Gita*:

If we were to forget the words past, present and future and were to see life as a collage, a vast assembly of things and people and motions we shall stop grieving for the dead, stop pining for the living and stop accumulating visible wealth. (**My Story**, p.191).

That Das is echoing here similar ideas from the Gita becomes obvious from the following citation :

For to the one that is born death is certain and certain is birth for the one that has died. Therefore for what is unavoidable, thou shouldst not grieve. (Rādhakrishnan, **The Bhagvad Gita**, p.111)

In the **Gita** it has been said that the world is nothing but the shadow of the eternal God; its pleasures are as transient and short-lived as the bubbles of water. The worldly temptations are the deceptions of the 'Maya', and one should not indulge in them. Writing in this philosophic vein, Emerson says :

What we call nature, the external world, has no real existence is only phenomenal. Youth, age, property are successive maias (deceptions) through which Vishnu mocks and instructs the soul. (Dr. S. D. Sharma, **Thematic Dichotomy of Writing in Indian English Indology and Culture**, p. 67).

Kamala Das too conceives reality in the same metaphysical mystical terms when she observes that : "One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end. (**My Story**, p.98) This realisation serves as the background to most of her poems. In "*A Man is a season*" the poet dramatizes the contrast between man's ephemerality and spirit's éternity:

A man is a season  
You are eternity.

(Dr. A. N. Dwivedi, **Studies in Contemporary Indo English Verse**, p. 104).

Kamala Das has achieved peace because she has shed all desires like water into the sea. In the *Gita* it is said that : "He unto whom all desires enter as water into the sea, which though ever being filled is ever motionless, attains to peace and not he who hugs his desires" (Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita*, p.128). That Das has succeeded in extirpating all carnal desire is manifest in "*The Suicide*".

The white man who offers  
Himself as a stiff drink,  
is for me,  
To tell the truth,  
Only water. ("*The Suicide*", *The Descendants*, p.3).

The **Upanishads** stress that he who has realised the self - "*Atmakama*" - becomes one all whose desires are satisfied — "*Apta-kama*" and ultimately transcends the desires, becoming "*Akam*". Like Whitman, Kamala Das has also an unwavering belief in the permanent self which underlies all the contents of consciousness. This belief finds an emphatic expression in her poem, "*Ghanashyam*".

But if he is you, and I am you  
Who is loving whom  
Who is the husk, who the kernel  
Where is the body where is the soul  
You come in strange forms  
And your names are many.  
(*Ghanashyam*, *Collected poems*, Vol. I, p.94).

Dr. Mohan Lal Sharma rightly says that this is the highest peak that the love experience can scale according to the Vedantic tradition - the point where the lover and the beloved merge into one infinite identity. This is the acme of the advaitic realization. But I cannot agree with his view that "We need not stress that Kamala Das has realized the highest goal of the spiritual journey, but she is very much on the way. (Dr. A. N. Dwivedi, *Studies in Contemporary Indo-English Verse*, p. 106).

The **Upanishads** set a premium on the meditation on self. Like Whitman,

Kamala Das's method of self - realization follows closely the Vedantic precept:

Who are you, I ask each and everyone,  
The answer is it is I. Anywhere and,  
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself  
If in this world, he is tightly packed like the  
Sword in its sheath. (*"An Introduction", The Old  
Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 27*).

This lends weight to the contention that Kamala Das has reached her spiritual destination :

I am sinner  
I am 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. (*ibid*)

This is the summit of self-realization. It is this realization that offers the enlightened the peace that passes all understanding.



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