

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 scores, 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 Pançgani 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.