

# 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.