

CHAPTER IV

ALIENATION AND THE SEARCH FOR LOVE

I am a writer, and in their eyes a dangerous freak, a flightless bird that employs its wings only in its dreams. I am the one on whom the garlands fade, such is the heat of my loneliness.

There is a love greater than all you know
that awaits you where the red road finally ends
its patience proverbial; not for it
the random caress or the lust
that ends in languor.

Its embrace is truth and it erases
even the soul's ancient indentations so that
some unknown womb shall begin to convulse
to welcome your restructured perfection.

(K. Das)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the diverse modes in which the alienated poetic self of Das engages in a hectic search for love. These modes are the roles in which the "shifting self" manifests itself. The inevitable alternative to love is death and hence the two coexist on the poetic canvas of Das. The poems show a major preoccupation with the distinction between love and lust that very frequently acquires death-like associations in her poetry. Just as the footfalls of death are heard in the intense moments of love, so

death is presented in a dialectical relation with life. The two are seen as coexistent in a natural cyclical process. Attempts are made to trace the poet's development from her experience of alienation through her quest for love, basically as a performer, to her realization of death and the burgeoning of life.

The strength of Das is so much attributed to her love poetry that she is often called the queen of erotica. She has indeed written extensively on love and passion; she has very few poems in which words like love or lust do not figure. But to those readers whose notion of love poetry as a subgenre is shaped by poets like Donne, the Rossettis, Swinburne, Morris and others, Das may prove challenging. The experiences in Das's love poems cannot be assessed at their face value. She writes of the pains and wounds of love, of the final disillusionment, and very seldom of fulfilment in love. Love is a mere dream to be sought for in the world of fantasy and myth. These love-less poems are elegies on the death of love, against which even a marriage, often drab and banal to the persona, is no insurance. Trapped in a loveless relationship with an insensate husband, the poetic persona escapes from the "primary world" or the real world, into the "secondary world" which the poet fills with fantasy, as discussed in the first chapter.

Das's poetry revolves around a hectic search for love. Indeed, what distresses her most is that too often lust is passed off as love. As she asserts with characteristically bitter candour, "a woman can get into a man's heart only through his loins". She admits that it is

an ugly remark and then adds that "it tells an ugly truth that cannot be put in gentler words" (*Asiaweek*, 12 Nov 1976, 46, 31). Das appears to be more of a naturalist in her treatment of love and human relationship because she has a penchant for the minutest details. An acrid note of disenchantment, born of a tension between love and lust, characterizes the poetry of her earlier phase.

The profound anguish in Das's poetry stems from her experience of alienation from early childhood. This plunges her into an acute identity crisis. As one can gather from *My Story*, the speaker is alienated as a child from her father, a symbol of domineering patriarchy, from her mother, who all the time lay on her stomach writing poetry and had hence no time for the children; from her classmates and teachers at the English Boarding school in Calcutta. She presents her brother and herself at the beginning of her autobiography as the children of loveless parents. "Gradually" she says, "our instincts told us to keep away from the limelight" (MS 5). By "limelight" is also implied affection, the desired focal point of every child. This anguish of alienation gives birth to sad poems written at a very early age about dolls that lost their heads and had to remain headless for ever. Subsequently the poet feels isolated from her own Nair community that failed to recognize and throughout misunderstood her. Over and above, her forced premature marriage alienated her from her grandmother and the Nalapat house, her ultimate shelter. Thus the marriage marks the second phase of her alienation. When union begins to mean only physical union and nothing else and lust comes in the guise of love—"the skin's lazy

hunger"—the female persona feels betrayed in every possible way. Often alienation generates profound loneliness that becomes one of the most recurrent themes of her poetry. Interestingly enough, loneliness is often given a visual presentation and is almost invariably associated with whiteness: "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"). In "Punishment in Kindergarten" she finds her loneliness is shared by the lonely white sun: "No need to remember/That picnic day when I lay hidden/By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun/Standing lonely in the sky". As a child she is, however, alienated in the company of the "white children". Significantly, the "frock" which her father buys for her and which she dislikes is also "white": "I disliked the white frocks which my father bought for me and wished to wear silks of different colours" (MS). Her mother too was forced by her father to wear "white khaddar". Thus into the morass of loneliness she sinks and continues to sink ever after. This alienation is basically emotional and spiritual. It becomes further intensified by the poet's experience of humiliation and domination as discussed in the preceding chapter. Humiliated at the boarding school by the Britishers and at home by the brutally domineering husband, she becomes a psychopathological dwarf: "Cowering beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and/Became a dwarf" ("The Old Playhouse").

Coerced into a state of total alienation, the personae find their very survival threatened. What is at stake, however, is not physical

but spiritual survival. She can write away the body, undo it psychologically. She can cast it away like a worn out, outgrown garment of the soul that by virtue of its immortality will always find a new dwelling place, a new container, many such new garments. She declares she wears the "body without joy" ("Gino"). It must be "de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded/To reach the supreme indifference of the bone" ("I Shall Some Day"). This view of the terrestrial life and the soul and the struggle for spiritual survival is consistent with the Hindu doctrine.

Alienation hastens the poet's premature cultural transformation from a child into a woman. "An Introduction" cameo's the poet in the very process of metamorphosis:

...I was child, and later they
told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.

The unself-conscious adolescent is forced to take note of the change coming over her:

I had a house in Malabar
And a pale green pond,
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months,
I swam about and floated,
I dived into the cold and green

I lay speckled-green and gold
In all the hours of the sun,
Until
My grandmother cried,
Darling, you must stop this bathing now
You are much too big to play
Naked in the pond.

(“The Suicide”)

The voice of the grandmother is nothing but the cold command of culture inflicting untimely womanhood upon a girl still exhilarating in an Edenic world of innocence. The child's naked body is waiting to bear on it the whip-marks of hegemonic patriarchal culture. This illustrates Madam S. Beauvoir's oft-quoted remark that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. With her childhood left behind but innocence still lingering on, the persona enters her conjugal life with some legitimate expectations and dreams:

I had expected him (the husband) to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life (*MS 87*).

Her actual experience totally belies all her fond expectations. What is more, she is shocked beyond measure by her husband's open display of homosexual advances in her presence. In this act of ignominy the speaker sees the rejection of her very womanliness:

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 breast and womb crushed me . I
Shrank
Pitifully.

The incident is narrated with similar poignancy in *My Story*. The near-identity between the prose account and the poetic presentation testifies to the veracity of the incident and to the intensity of the concomitant trauma:

At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. they behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they showed 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. (110).

She finds her self-esteem bruised and her very soul flagellated by patriarchy. She begins to find her “woman-body” repulsive but she cannot discard it; she cannot change it so she decides to change her appearance and abandon sari in favour of shirt and trousers, signifying convention and rebellion respectively:

then...I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness....

But tradition has its own ready-made roles for the woman. As Harrex puts it: “Many of Kamala Das’s poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who attempts to free herself, sexually and domestically, from role bondage sanctioned by the past,” (1986, 163). The dilemma in Das is compounded and intensified by the conflicting but inevitable roles that she has to play as a creative writer and as a wife/mother/daughter. The poet finds herself oscillating between these roles, with her existence divided and her self fragmented. The predicament arising out of this dilemma is ventilated in the following quotation from one of her autobiographical write-ups:

I am positive that if I had been unmarried, I would have been a better writer. I feel the intrusion all the time. Trying to be a good wife and a daughter really inhibits me. I have to resort to play acting. People say, "Oh you have everything." I don't. I don't have the freedom to be myself; the person that I am among those strangers who know me only for my work. At home there are strangle-holds...(*In Savvy*, Dec 1990).

Any kind of protest by her against such role bondage is bound to arouse the resentment of the watch-dogs of culture: "Dress in saris, be girl,/Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,/be a quarreller with servants." Significantly enough, these are roles exclusively associated with domesticity; the list deliberately excludes a writer that the speaker already is. Writing must take precedence over every other consideration in life as she recalls in her autobiography:

...it had become clear to them that I had become a truth-addict and that I loved my writing more than I loved them or my own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my doting husband and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was, a writer. (*MS 211*).

As a "truth-addict" she becomes an eyesore to her relatives. The categories are formulated in conformity with the harsh

prescriptions of a phallocentric culture. The speaker must fit in with these categories or else face ostracism and notoriety: "Fit in. Oh belong, cried the categorizers." Implied in these "categories" is also a rigidly stipulated restrictive behavioural pattern which is equally repugnant to the speaker:

Don't sit
On walls or peep in our lace-draped
Windows,
.....
Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho . Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love....

However, these negative injunctions can hardly alter the behaviour of the speaker/poet who has determinedly risen in defiance of the worn-out norms of convention. Indeed, the entire poetic career of Das is a spirited defiance of the coercive commands of the "categorizers". The poem articulates, among other things, the sustained social pressure on the poet to choose a name and accept the socially sanctioned role which becomes almost synonymous with the name: "Be Ammi, or be Kamala. Or better/Still, be Madhavikutti. It is time to/choose a name, a role..." ("An Introduction"). The poet is Ammi to her husband as well as to her very close friends; Kamala to the readers of her English-language poetry and also to her parents and other relatives including her

favourite grandmother; and Madhavikutti to the readers of her fiction in Malayalam. The three names of the poet represent three highly diversified types of role—though they are not without common grounds—and three major sources or areas of roles in her drama of selfhood. These names often represent contradictory roles and make contradictory demands on the poetic performer. For example, most of the social diatribes are directed at Madhavikutti because she is supposedly the most “notorious” of the three! And many of her favourite persons like her grandmother did not know that Kamala and Madhavikutti were one and the same person:

I think I was compelled to choose a name because I did not want to embarrass my conservative family. I knew that I was a misfit within my family. I think I practised writing as people practise a secret vice. Like boys going to the bathroom to smoke. Especially, I did not want to hurt my grandmother who was my favourite human being. And I don't think she knew that I was Madhavikutti till she died. (*IL* 155, 1995, 148).

Evidently, life and art make conflicting demands on the poet. It requires her to play conflicting roles. But she would like to play the roles of her choice. These are roles assigned to her by creative imagination and, therefore, must take precedence over those inflicted upon her by society through the medium of a name which is nothing but an abstraction and hence inconsequential to the poet.

The poet's rejection of a name finds a more comprehensive treatment in her poem "Spoiling the Name" which was published along with "An Introduction" in *Summer In Calcutta*:

I have a name, and had it for 30 years
Chosen by someone else
For convenience, but when you say
Don't spoil your name, I feel I
Must laugh, for I know I have a life

To be lived, and each nameless
Corpuscle in me had its life to
Be lived?

The poet mocks at the meaningless pride associated with a name. Its superficiality lies in the fact that it is chosen for mere "convenience." Like the stereotypical roles, the name is chosen by somebody else and is, therefore, in no way a component of the poet's authentic identity. A name is just a word, abstract and amorphous. The idea is reminiscent of Shakespeare's famous words: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet." The superfluity of a name contrasts with the beauty of the urge to live. Consistent with Das's aesthetics of opposition, the poem presents a contrast between surface and depth, shadow and substance, appearance and reality, death and life, its "sweet-soundingness" and the bitterness it generates in the poet. Gift of life is far more precious to the poet than the gift of name, which is projected as an intruder in her celebration of life:

Why should this name so
Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room where I go to
meet a man

Who gives me nothing but himself, who
Calls me in his private hours

By no name. Why should I remember or bear
That sweet-sounding name, pinned to
Me, a medal, undeservedly gained, at moments when,
all of

He is ablaze with life?

A lyrical situation is presented in a rhetorical mode and the tone is one of sustained derision. In the lines that follow a name evokes a sense of heaviness, a burden that the poet is constrained to carry around, creating a death-in-life situation:

...You ask of
Me a silly thing, carry
This gift of a name like a corpse and
Totter beneath its weight
And perhaps even fall—I who love
This gift of life more than all.

The highly suggestive corpse simile brings the argument to its acrid climax, for name is seen not just as an unwelcome load that the poet must jettison in moments of exhilaration but also as having death-

like associations. In the surrender to her name the speaker senses a cessation of life because name, by further implication, also suggests loss, or at least curtailment of freedom which is so precious to the poet. In this sense names can also be a nuisance like words: "...But I tell myself, words/Are a nuisance, beware of them, they/Can be so many things,..." ("Words"). Of course the context of the warning is quite different. The poem is very much in the manner of the Metaphysical school of Donne and the far-fetched comparison between gift of name and a corpse is redolent of a Metaphysical conceit.

Das's obsession with role-playing has a distinct bearing on her poetry as a whole that acquires a dramatic quality: the image of theatricality is integral to her poetry. One of her finest poems as seen above is titled "The Old Playhouse" while another is called "Drama." Furthermore she images herself as a tragedienne as seen in the following lines:

It was soon my turn to be the
Tragedienne, to take vague steps,
Black-gowned, black-veiled,
And wail, and beat my breast
And speak of unrequited love.
I am wronged, I am wronged,
I am so wronged.

(“Drama”)

The effect is achieved by putting to use important theatrical devices. The poetry as a whole has a dialogic structure and many of the poems can, in fact, be seen as dramatic monologues as most of them have imaginary addressees. Theatricality is interwoven with the idea of dissembling. Life is seen as performance and the self as performer. The speaker in many of these poems is an actress, a “tragedienne” in black gown, black veil, burdened with painful roles and her steps often guided by compulsions. The poet as a little girl also loved acting—“when I first entered the stage” Das writes, “...I shed all wraps of shyness and began to sing in a clear cool voice” (*MS 36*). The role she played was that of the Moghul queen Noor Jahan.

Nair women totally depersonalised by authoritarian patriarchy are repeatedly imaged as playthings. A young aunt of hers wrote poetry to Krishna and became totally paralysed: “she lay like a broken doll, a pale faced toy” (*MS 16*). She tells us her own parents “considered us mere puppets” (*MS 77*). According to Vincent O’Sullivan , the self is distorted by the roles it is assigned. As is the case with many performances, the motive here is survival, particularly spiritual survival. This multiple role-playing can also be seen as multivocalism in the poetry of Das in consonance with the notion of the “kaleidoscopic self” as discussed earlier.

A fair measure of sensationalism associated with Das results from her descriptions of and references to the naked female body, including her own:

I've stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice.

(“Loud Poster”)

The price for this has been anger, ostracism and notoriety. A close reading of her poems would, however, show that nudity as a concept is psycho-philosophical. It implies the loss of the empirical self, the “average social identity” to which she refers in one of her poems entitled “Siesta”. It is a firm refusal to be defined by and contained in superficial the layers which the poet on her poetic pilgrimage, must “peel off.” For “by peeling off my layers/I reach closer to the soul/And the bone’s supreme/Indifference, (“Composition”). This ultimate exposure is also the final escape. The “peeling” of layers is an upward journey to spiritual survival, to be a part of the worldly cycle. Thus when alienation envelops her complete being and her identity as a woman gets irretrievably lost, in a state of creative resignation the poet begins to alienate her self, perhaps the autobiographical self: “I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself (*MS 182*). The autobiographical “I” is transformed into the transcendental “I.”

Indeed, the first layer to be “peeled off is the layer of social identity with the label of a virtuous and submissive Indian woman committed to the protection of “family honour”. The second layer to be peeled off is the layer of clothes, the garments of the body. This

is psychological denuding which is described by the poet as the "striptease of the mind". This idea finds a parallel, as discussed in chapter two, in the medieval saint-poet Akka Mahadevi who reputedly discarded clothes in an attempt to rise above the body. Although they share a common idea Akka is said to have actually wandered naked in search of her Lord while Das conceptualises nudity as something metaphorical and psycho-philosophical. However, in both cases nudity can be seen as an attempt at self-transcendence. The idea also struck Yeats who said: "There is greater enterprise in walking naked".

Secondly, nudity in Das is symbolic of the state of innocence in the human consciousness, often with pre-Lapsarian suggestions. This idea can be further highlighted by her paintings which are nudes. Nudity becomes one of her major themes and a recurrent motif in her writings as well as her paintings which significantly enough, belong to the current phase of her career. This refusal to abandon the idea even at this advanced stage of her life, is rooted in a distinct vision of the body and the soul which she articulates in very clear terms:

I have never found anything obscene in God's creations. I am very fortunate that I have this vision of God's creations as beautiful. There is no question of obscenity at all. I'd love to paint the human soul, but the soul is like clear water. Without a container, you cannot show it, can you? I think the human soul's

barest container is the body." (*The Sunday Observer*
20 Nov 1994, 8).

Whether she employs words or colours, her vision is the same.

Linked with sensuality is death which, along with the idea of sickness and disease, is hauntingly present in Das. On her poetic canvas death is juxtaposed with lust and sexuality that makes her as much a poet of death as of love and passion. Death is set above lust and sexuality in which she apprehends the death of her soul. Indeed, the failure of her search for love very often releases her contrary urge to embrace death:

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")

This is precisely why one hears in the background of her sex roles the reverberations of death:

when mouth on
Mouth I lie, ignoring my poor
Moody mind, while pleasure

With deliberate gaiety
Trumpets harshly into the
Silence of the room...At noon
I watch the sleek crows flying
Like poison on wings...and at
Night, from behind the Burdwan
Road, the corpse-bearers cry "bol
Hari bol"

(“In Love”)

A dichotomy is deliberately posited between sexuality and the speaker's “moody mind”. It is implied that indulgence in sensuality causes the cessation of the finer activities of the mind; the poet sees a haunting image of death that gets interwoven with sensuality. The nature of this kind of sensual pleasure is imaged as being “harsh” or coarse, a quality that finds an auditory reaffirmation in the use of the verb “trumpets”. “bol hari bol” is an auditory image of death that also lends a native hue to the poem and its context. The overall cultural framework of the poem is incompatible with this native expression. Das quite often blends dissimilar discourses in a single poem which is in many ways redolent of Bakhtin's “heteroglossia” or “polyglossia”. Similarly In “The Wild Bougainvillaea” there is a complete fusion of sexuality with death and rottenness. The effect is achieved with the help of imagery that is basically olfactory:

I walked through the streets beside
The sea, where the barges

Float, undersides rotting in the garbage
Rot, and the dead fish rot,
And, I smelled the smell of dying things and the
Smell of rotting
Dead, I walked on streets where the night-girls with
sham
Obtrusive breasts sauntered
And under yellow lamps, up-and-down wandered
Beaming their sickly smiles
at men....

The rotting undersides of barges, dead and rotting fish, dying things and the “night girls” with “sham” and “obtrusive breasts” suggesting perverse sexuality, are brought under one and the same poetic umbrella making sexuality totally inseparable from death and rottenness. Even the smiles of the prostitutes are “sickly” and the pallor of sickness and disease is suggested by “the yellow lamps” under which they “saunter” as pathological temptresses. Her obsession with flesh makes the street girl corpse-like:

Near the sea behind Cadell Road
They burn as joss-sticks
The poor men’s bodies
Those dark, thin corpses
All bound with strings of tube-rose
And the brilliant marigold
We saw them bring one, last Sunday

An hour after our
Tea time, scented up
To smell like a low-paid
Street-girl

(“The Joss-sticks at Cadell Road”)

The obsessive juxtaposition of sexuality and death results from the need to transcend physicality and look beyond the “chilling flesh”:

obsessed as we are by our
physicality, restrained,
by the eyes” inadequate power
to perceive beyond the farthest
precincts of truth, if only the
human eye could look beyond the
chilling flesh, the funeral pyre’s
rapid repast and then beyond
the mourner’s vanquished stance, where would
death be then, that meaningless word
when life is all that there is, that
raging continuity that
the wise ones often recognize as God?

(Annamalai Poems, IV)

Life is seen here as a vast continuum that lies beyond the “chilling flesh”. The vast phenomenon of life is pitted against the life of an individual that ends with death. Death nevertheless, as the poet says,

promotes its own kind of life through the maggots. Das sees death only as a condition in which the component cells of the perishable body disperse and return to the elements from which they come and then enter into new combinations, new forms. This brings us to the third layer that the poetic pilgrim must peel off. It is the body itself that is presented as the garment or container of the soul that must ultimately be “de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded” or “discomposed” into its constituent cells. The old “systems and arrangements” perish and the new ones are created. It is an unending process. In other words, the essence is immortal but the “systems and arrangements” are mortal:

The ultimate discovery will be
That we are immortal,
The only things mortal being
Systems and arrangements,
Even our pains continuing
In the devourers who constitute
The world. Even
Oft-repeated moves
Of every scattered cell
Will give no power
To escape
From cages of involvement.
I must linger on,
Trapped in immortality.
Only my freedom being

The freedom to
Discompose.

(“Composition”)

This is the poet's concept of immortality that is in consonance with the underlying undying principle or the *Brahman* as expounded in the *Bhagwadgita*. As is evident in Das's poetic universe death often heralds a new beginning and is in a perpetual coexistence with life. The idea is also reflected in her treatment of nature. As will be seen in “Afterwards” in the next chapter. Characteristically, nature in this poem is presented as a cyclical pattern of life and death and the two coexist in a continuing process. In every gesture and in every move, life and death reside, playing a tug of war in a rhythm of coexistence, because:

Life's obscure parallel is death. Quite often
I wonder 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
But within. The built-in terrors of my mind
Swoop down on me from the treetops at dusk and in
The kitchen's unlit corners large birds of prey
Perch with rustling claws and an all-knowing gaze.

(“Life's Obscure Parallel”)

Thus, in this natural cycle death is not finality. It is also a beginning. Here the poet is not talking about the Hindu cycle of death and rebirth but a natural process:

Through a corpse's eye glazed to 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
toadstool 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")

As suggested above, what seems to end is an individual life which implies to the poet mere "systems and arrangements". "Discomposition" implies the idea of being metamorphosed into the other more potent forms of nature, the state of being in everything by being nothing. "Discomposition" is mistaken for "Decomposition" by almost all the critics of Das including Anne Brewster. Kirpal Singh has written a full-length paper on the poem "composition" entitled "Kamala Das and the Problem with composition". He makes only passing references to this key word and fails to come to its actual meaning.

Having failed to find true love in the human world the poet turns to the Radha-Krishna myth which receives a highly

innovative treatment at her hands. Her frequent references to Radha and Krishna make many of her critics see a sustained religious strain in her poetry. Some critics, like Vincent O'Sullivan, call her a religious poet while others equate her with Mira and locate her in the Indian bhakti tradition. I.K. Sharma and M.L. Sharma advocate this view. According to I.K. Sharma:

Beneath the explosive poetry of Kamala Das, which is so much talked of and which is so well-known, there flows a subterranean stream of bhakti heading towards its known destination, (1981).

It is certainly a valuable interpretation, useful in its own way. Most of these critics tend to regard the bhakti tradition as monolithic and homogeneous which is certainly not the case. Indian bhakti tradition is quite diversified and the "bhaktas" (devotees) display contradictory attitudes towards the deity. By North Indian standards Das cannot qualify as a devotional poet. Accordingly critics like Fritz Blackwell refuse to place her in this tradition. Das makes only literary use of religious concepts, asserts Blackwell: "I feel her concern to be literary and existential, not religious; I think she is using a religious concept for a literary motif and metaphor," (Journal of South Asian Literature Vol. 13, Nos 1-4, 1978, 9-14). This is admittedly true. But when one considers her prolonged obsession with the Radha Krishna myth and her experienced intimacy with Krishna, as

evident from her autobiography as well as her poetry, one is persuaded of the sincerity of her faith. Her confession in this regard puts the issue almost beyond any doubt:

But illogical that I am, from birth onwards, I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child I used to regard him as my only friend. When I became an adult I thought of him as my lover. It was only my imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure. Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all women, did she not have his incomparably beautiful body in her arms.... We do not have him physically to love us; we have to worship a bodyless one. How are we to get close to him without the secret entrances of the body which may have helped us in establishing a true contact? Now in middle age, having no more desire unfulfilled I think of Krishna as my friend, like me grown wiser with the years, a householder and a patriarch. And illogically again, I believe that in death I might come face to face with him. Then the shehnai can begin, the birds can sing, the river can start its lullaby, for another of his brides would have come home. (*Femina*, 6 Jun 1975, 19).

The passage presents a demythicized Krishna, consistent with the poet's essentially anthropomorphic vision. Krishna is imaged as a friend, a lover/husband and as a householder and a patriarch. What

is significant here is that he and the poet share the same human platform with a deliberate annulling of status difference. The intensity of the relationship is conceived and described in sexual terms. The union with the “bodyless” Krishna can only be attained through “the secret entrances of the body” as the poet puts it. This is also a defilement of the body which becomes a humbling experience for the soul and a necessary precondition for such a union. Hence her assertion: “Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change”(MS 194). Obviously the confession cannot be taken at its face value and may equally be the voice of the fictional persona. It is easier to establish the correspondence between Akka and her work because the internal and the available external evidence pointing to her autobiographical positions do not conflict. She was a practising saint and her vacanas are records of her mystic search for her Lord. But in the case of Das there is no relation between the two types of evidence, specially about the delineated sexual adventures. External evidence is in favour of a total divorce between the poet and the person while the internal evidence, the narrative voice, makes such a separation impossible. However, whether it be the poetic persona or not, the narrative position cannot be ignored. Whatever the differences between Akka and Das as discussed in chapter two, the nature of their search is remarkably similar. It is a poetic pilgrimage from the body to the bodiless, from the form to the formless, from the finite to the infinite, from the temporal to the eternal. The “defilement” of the body does not signify indulgence or involvement in the corporeal or the carnal but an escape from it, an

undoing of it: "...I shall some day see/My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,/Just a skeletal thing" (Das: "I Shall Some Day"). The quest for the bodiless is borne out by the following excerpt from Das's prose writings as quoted by M.L. Sharma in his article entitled "Road to Brindavan": The Themes of Love in the Poetry of Kamala Das:

I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed like a blue lotus in the water of my dream. It was to get closer to that bodyless one that I approached other forms and lost my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination. (1980, 164).

Das's view of this life as performance is redolent of the Shakespearean idea that the world is a stage and its inhabitants are mere players:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.

(*As You Like It*, 2, VII)

In the essentially tragic drama of selfhood that Das's poetic pilgrimage represents, the poet's union with Krishna is delineated, in her poetry as well as her autobiography, as a redeeming finale. Shattered and disillusioned by human bondage the poetic persona

finds herself in a mystic communion with Krishna. It finds a highly imaginative and theatrical presentation in *My Story*:

Free from that last of human bondage I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Thereafter he dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat crosslegged before a lamp reciting mantras in His praise. (MS 195).

It would be naive to delve into the autobiographical veracity of the passage. It is an imaginary dialogue between the speaker's soul and God. It is the surrender of the finite to the infinite, of the soul to God. The recurrent image of the poet's mind as an old playhouse suggests the terrifying state of alienation and ennui that can only be alleviated by her union with the Lord. He comes in a moment of intense spiritual crisis and metaphorically fills the hollow mind of the persona with "His sweet voice".

The contrast between the seasonal and the eternal, the temporal and the permanent, shadow and substance is brought out in

the poem “A Man is a Season”. It is a contrast between the eternal, the archetypal lover and the imperfect and evanescent human lover:

A man is a season,
You are eternity,
To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others' arms. But I saw each
Shadow cast your blurred image in my glass,

Krishna is the ultimate substance and the human lover just the shadow. The price for this knowledge is wanton exposure to experiences, often unpleasant and humiliating. As discussed elsewhere, the defilement of the body is a way of obliterating it in order to merge with the bodiless. But the poet cannot discard the finite and the temporal, for in the finite she apprehends an image of the infinite; the “substance” glimmers in the shadow. God leaves and makes visible a potent fragment of himself in His creation and hence a complete separation of the finite from the infinite, of the shadow from the substance is not possible. The idea is reminiscent of the famous lines from Blake:

To see the world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wild flower;
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

The need to obliterate the body results from the poet's constant awareness of its perishable nature consistent with the Hindu philosophy of the body, the self and Brahman as contained in the Bhagavad Gita:

Bodies are the perishable, self is the imperishable....
There is another unmanifested, the undying reality,
Which does not dissolve though all beings dissolve.
(89 & 90).

In Das human ties are seen as being accidental and confined only to this perishable body and hence inconsequential. The soul's union with God is the only kind of bond that is permanent. It is to this that the poet aspires:

In actuality who is he (the husband)? Who am I? Who are these three boys who call themselves my children? 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 I shall 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....(MS 196-97).

In her urge for union with Krishna the speaker possibly identifies herself with Radha who to her is the archetypal beloved and a symbol of the human soul yearning for union with God that is Krishna. It is the supreme urge of the soul to dissolve, to melt in His divine embrace so that nothing remains but He:

The long waiting

Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting

And the reasoning

So that in his first true embrace, she was girl

And virgin crying

Everything in me

Is melting, even the hardness at the core

Krishna; I am melting, melting, melting

Nothing remains but

You...

("Radha")

The elemental fluid imagery with its obvious sexual overtone suggests that the way fluid is absorbed in the earth the soul is absorbed in the divine Being, the only indestructible entity. In the intensity of her relationship with Krishna, the poetic persona as a

literary incarnation of Radha finds herself imprisoned in the body of her Lord. This surrender of freedom is also her supreme delight:

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")

The sense of intimacy and friendliness with Krishna is a part of a distinct tradition of *Bhakti* poetry that was popular in Maharashtra and Karnataka in the Medieval Age as represented by Jana Bai and Akka Mahadevi respectively, as discussed earlier. Tharu and Lalita highlight some of the striking features of this tradition. It is fascinating that despite chronological polarization Das can be so close to those poets in her treatment of the Radha-Krishna myth. An excerpt from the introduction to the path-breaking book by these critics will shed further light on the attitude of the saint-poets to Krishna:

The devotee cajoles, chides, woos, rages against God, who is a personally chosen husband/lover to the bhakta imaged as wife/lover, and the mystic union is often imagined in sexual terms. In fact status, masculinity, scholarship are seen as obstacles to bhakti. (Tharu and Lalita, 1993, 58).

Radha and Krishna are just too human lovers, with the result that some critics find it hard to identify Das's Radha as a devotee. The typically human traits of Krishna and his consort are admirably brought out in the following poem entitled "The Cobweb" as well as the ones cited above:

Do not look into Radha's eyes O friends
For her soul lies dead inside
As cobwebs block the doorways, unused,
Grief now mars her lonely eyes
He has been gone for years, that Krishna who
Once was hers alone. Perhaps
Another holds him now, a lovelier and
More fortunate one. And yet
Poor Radha must live on for life is long...

(“The Cobweb”)

Thus the poet deliberately refrains from creating any kind of mystic aura about the love experiences of Radha and Krishna, the way, for example, Sarojini Naidu does in her poetry. The following poem is taken from Naidu's second volume of poems entitled *The Bird of Time* in which Radha is imaged as a typical devotee of Krishna. The poem is less personal than those of Das despite the fact that the poem is in the first person while those of Das are in the third person:

I carried my curds to the Mathura fair...

How softly the heifers were lowing...

I wanted to cry, "who will buy, who will buy
These curds that are white as the clouds in the sky
When the breezes of Shrawan are blowing?"

But my heart was so full of your beauty, Beloved,
They laughed as I cried without knowing:

Govinda! Govinda!

Govinda! Govinda!...

How softly the river was flowing!

I carried my pots to the Mathura tide...

How gaily the rowers were rowing!...

My comrades called, "Ho! Let us dance, let us sing
And wear saffron garments to welcome the spring,
And pluck the new buds that are blowing."

But my heart was so full of your music, Beloved,
They mocked me when I cried without knowing:

Govinda! Govinda!

Govinda! Govinda!...

How gaily the river was flowing!

I carried my gifts to the Mathura shrine...

How brightly the torches were glowing!

I folded my hands at the altar to pray
"O shining ones guard us by night and by day"—
And loudly the conch shells were blowing.

But my heart was so lost in your worship, Beloved,

They were wroth when I cried without knowing:

Govinda! Govinda!

Govinda! Govinda!

How brightly the river was flowing.

(“Song of Radha the Milkmaid”, *The Bird of Time*, 1912)

Naidu’s poem is more contrived and less spontaneous than those of Das. Syllabic regularity and rhythmic control take precedence over intensity of emotion. In fact there is a kind of cloying sweetness about the whole poem created by the manipulation of cadence. However, the poem is called a “song” and a song makes its own demands on the writer. Although both Das and Naidu belong to the twentieth century and both have drawn upon the tradition of Indian devotional poetry, particularly the *abhisharika* (a woman going to meet her lover braving the elements and risking her life and social acceptance), the two poets have nothing else in common. The most conspicuous difference lies in attributing sexuality to the Radha Krishna bond. The business of Naidu’s poem is to refrain from the slightest touch of the erotica with the clear implication that the divine and the carnal are to be held in antithesis. On the other hand in Das sexuality is intrinsic to the poems as a metaphoric device to convey the height of intensity of the union between soul and God. As seen above, Das exhibits amazing parallels with the ancient poets instead of her more immediate predecessor—a fact that makes poetic ancestry a complex issue.

By virtue of their mythical value the divine figures become powerful metaphors for archetypal love and the divine sexual congress symbolizes transcendental bliss and sublime fulfilment. The ultra-physical nature of the relationship between Radha and Krishna that forms the basis of many of Das's poems should be seen as a convenient metaphor for the inviolable bond between the soul and God as elucidated by the following poems:

This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old Kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality...

(“Radha-Krishna”)

Or:

At sunset on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left.
That night in her husband's arms Radha felt
So dead that he asked what is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses love? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

(“The Maggots”)

The underlying theme of these poems is that the soul's surrender to the desire of God and its union with Him far transcend social taboo and recognition. Even infidelity becomes redundant. Indeed, the elaborately delineated infidelity of the speaker to her husband in *My Story* as well as the poems of Das parallels the infidelity of Radha as she too was after all somebody else's wife and hence an adulteress in a more literal sense. Thus, although Krishna motif in Das serves an ostensible literary purpose and can be seen even as a literary strategy, it is in no way inconsistent with the strain of *bhakti* that one may be inclined to find in Das's poetry.

The supremely fulfilling experience of Radha and Krishna is denied to the mundane pseudo-lovers, capable of "unleashing" "nothing more alive/ Than the / Skin's lazy hunger," (*The Freaks*). In the human world by contrast, particularly in the institution of marriage lust is often passed off as love and the woman is invariably made a victim of sexual politics leading to profound anguish and the urge for withdrawal:

Dear night, be my tomb.
It is hard to believe
That I only lost,
Lost all, lost even
What I never had.
Life is quite simple now—
Love, blackmail and sorrow....

("The Substitute")

The moody sea of memory “thumps” against the shore of her consciousness in an unwelcome manner. This is a painful memory and hence intrusive in character. It is triggered off by a gnawing sense of loss coupled with the anguished realization that love is nothing but “blackmail and sorrow.” It could be the loss of the speaker’s inner identity disfigured by the compulsions of role playing. This leaves the persona with the impossible craving to withdraw into a condition, a void where thought and memory can be warded off however temporarily. One such condition is sleep even if it be “banked/ in the heart of pills”:

Love-lorn,
It is only
Wise at times, to let sleep
Make holes in memory, even
If it be the cold and
Luminous sleep banked in
The heart of pills, and he shall not
Enter,
Your ruthless one,
Being human, clumsy
With noise and movement, the soul’s mute
Arena,
That silent sleep inside your sleep.

(“Luminol”)

The poem is a sequel to the earlier extract. Here the intrusion takes a human form and the obvious reference is to the husband-figure of the persona. His vices make him repulsive to the speaker. Her very consciousness is battered by his presence. Just as Keats seeks escape through oblivion and death, so Das seeks escape into sleep and perhaps even death. In this mute arena of the soul the poet is sure of obtaining freedom from "noise and movement." But, for the plaything that the woman has become in her husband's hands, there can be no privacy, no freedom. In "The Stone Age" he is addressed as "an old fat spider, weaving web of bewilderment" and urged to be "kind" because he is "ruthless" in his dealings with the woman. With his "web of bewilderment" the spider-like husband succeeds in completely annulling the reasoning capacity of his wife. He further causes her to be totally drained of all emotion; he reduces her to a real plaything, "a bird of stone" "a granite dove". The oxymoronic metaphors "bird of stone" and "granite dove" also embody a subtle contrast between the diametrically opposite personality traits of the woman and her husband—she the dove, he the granite; she the bird, he the stone.

The poet is obsessed with the soul and seeks to obliterate the body. The husband, however, is obsessed with the woman's body and would like to obliterate her soul. The diametrically opposite points of view are presented in her poem entitled "The Herons":

On sedatives

I am more loveable

Says my husband

My speech becomes a mist-laden terrain

My words emerge tinctured with sleep

They rise from the still coves of dreams

In unhurried flight-like herons

And my ragdoll limbs adjust better

To his versatile lust...he would if he could

Sing lullabies to his wife's sleeping soul

Sweet lullabies to thicken its swoon

On sedatives

I look more loveable

Says my husband....

It is a painfully ironic situation in which the speaker finds herself. The poem is a poignant exposure of the woman's alienation from her own body on being abused. Despite her refusal to be treated as a mere body, she does not find herself socially equipped to prevent it. Her search for Krishna is a search for the bodiless. Outside the orbit of her relationship with him, she is only a prisoner, a convict. Her own female body is the cause of her bondage and hence she rejects it. The male body holds her captive and damages her self-esteem; hence she must break its ramparts and come out of it. The poet sees the male body as a prison. Her ultimate freedom lies outside its confines:

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its sneer.

(“The Prisoner”)

Indeed, the poem is an extended conceit of the imprisonment of the female mind. However, the woman-persona is not alone in this kind of suffering. Her predicament is shared by many others of whom she is only one of the descendants. The awareness makes her philosophy of love and worldly life pessimistic. The collective experience of disenchantment and disgust with life and society finds bitter expression in the title poem of the second volume of her poems: *The Descendants*:

We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
Exchanging some insubstantial love and
Often thought we were hurt, but no pain in
Us could remain, no bruise could scar or
Even slightly mar our cold loveliness.

Like “Herons” “Descendants” also sets out to expose the perverted male equation of a woman with her body. Men’s total insensitivity to the female sentiment and emotion manifests itself in their almost necrophilous enjoyment of the female body. Indeed, to these men a

woman can be “lovely” even without an iota of feeling or emotion as suggested by the oxymoron “cold loveliness”. The love is “insubstantial” because it is only a performance, “a sad lie”. The poet writes: “my love is an empty gift, a gilded/Empty container, good for show, nothing/Else....” (“The Captive”). Hence there is no question of a genuine union. The woman is not emotionally attached to the man but only “nailed” to the lethal bed just as Christ was nailed to the cross:

We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not
To crosses, but to soft beds and against
Softer forms, while the heaving, lurching,
Tender hours passed in a half-dusk half-dawn and
Half-dream, half-real trance. We were the yielders
Yielding ourselves to everything.

This is the agony of endless compromise to which women have been subjected since time immemorial. The notion of petrifying uncertainty and her tantalizing position in society is remarkably brought out by the poet’s choice of compound epithets like half-dusk, half-dawn, half-dream, half-real. She is the passive recipient of all that culture has in store for her. She has no authority over her own body; it is patriarchy that must decide on its purpose:

It is
Not for us to scrap the walls of wombs for
Memories, not for us even to

Question death, but as child to mother's arms
We shall give ourselves to the fire or to
The hungry earth to be slowly eaten,
Devoured....

The only thing that is certain is death. The speaker's surrender to death is compared to the child's instinctive surrender to its mother: "...as child to mother's arms/We shall give ourselves to the fire...." In her lifetime she has been a victim of sexual hunger, perennially devoured by concupiscent men; in death she is devoured by the maggots. Men with their necrophilous perversity are brought close to the maggots. Hence the poet's rhetorical question: "...Who can say/For certain that we are superior to the maggots that/Eat us in the end?" ("White Man With Whiter Legs") In an acrid posture of uncompromising resentment and resignation the poetic persona, Casandra-like, sounds the note of doom for her female descendants. The poem ends with her climactic outburst of pessimism:

None will step off his cross
Or show his wounds to us, no God lost in
Silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
Claim us, no we are not going to be
Ever redeemed, or made new.

("*The Descendants*")

The speaker's nihilistic attitude is conveyed by the repetitive use of the negatives: "no", "not", "none". She chooses to speak representatively preferring the first person plural to the singular in a rather uncharacteristic manner. The use of "we" points to the fact that the design of the poem is to be general. It is a scathing commentary on the plight of women. The rather morbidly tragic vision presented by this poem is one of the most important voices, but certainly not the only voice, of Das's poetry. The poet's disillusionment finds a more controlled and cryptic expression in her poem "A Request". It is one of her most structured poems and can be seen as an elegy:

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.

Alienation and search for love are central to the poetry of Das. Evidently the two are in an antecedent-consequent relationship. It is a search that is incomplete and eternal. This requires her to venture into new territories and perform contradictory roles, as she advances in her poetic pilgrimage. She gives an innovative mould to the Radha-Krishna myth that adequately expresses her vision of

ideal love. Quite often she refers to the vanity of worldly life that generates so much of gloom in her poetry. Her vision of life as a continuum is not tragic though her vision of worldly life is. The two are very often confused. "Growing up" she says, "and not death, is the tragedy of life" ("Composition"). Quite contrary to the charge of obsession with physicality, she asserts the need to look beyond the "chilling flesh" and hence to transcend physicality.