

CHAPTER: 6

**AUTUMN LEAVES: AGE AND MARGINALITY IN THE POETRY OF  
KAMALA DAS**

“Die early and avoid the fate.  
Or if predestined to die late,  
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!  
If need be occupy a throne.  
Where nobody can call *you* a crone.”

– Robert Frost

“Forgive me, mother,  
that I left you  
a life-long widow  
old alone.

It was to kill or die  
and you got me anyway;  
The blood congeals at lover’s touch.  
The guts dissolve in shit.

I was never young.  
Now I’m old, alone.

In dreams  
I hack you.”

– Eunice De Souza

A woman's frame, a long life, and the changing times have ensured that Kamala Das has had to bear witness to and put up with the abominable treatment meted out to the *ageing* and the *aged* by a *productivity-driven* and *youth-oriented* society. Sociologists have used the term 'ageism' to define this 'discrimination against people on grounds of age' (Giddens: 2001, 683). Society operates on the basis of 'age-sets' or 'age-grades'. According to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, these 'broad age-bands' indicate the 'social status', 'assigned and permitted roles', and 'activities' of individuals or groups belonging to them (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 8). Transitions from one of such grades into the next are always marked by rites of passage, changes in societal expectations and perceptions, and changes in both physical and mental abilities.

These changes associated with the phenomenon of ageing lead to 'age-stratification', a term defined as a 'system of inequalities' linked to 'age-sets', whereby both the young and the old are treated as 'relatively incompetent' and 'excluded' from 'much social life' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 8). In fact, the physiological process of ageing has important socio-cultural ramifications. Since 'age' is not only a 'biological inevitability' but also a 'cultural category', its meaning, significance, and traits are seen to vary with time and across cultures (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 9). In our industrialized and capitalist system, the retirement from external production at a certain age means that the aged are viewed as unproductive and a burden. The concept of the nuclear family entails a perceived 'uselessness' and 'undesirability' of the elderly. In the case of women, the fact of ageing with its attendant certainty of the menopause, leads to a further physical impairment. Besides, in most cases, older women's financial dependence on their children makes them vulnerable to neglect and abandonment.

Ethel Shanas et al. have criticized the acquiescent functionalism under whose influence society is often seen to legitimate ageism by excluding the elderly from the labour market and other significant social roles (Shanas et al.: 1968, 26). In such a society, therefore, the advancing years entail a consequent loss of 'productivity', both financial and reproductive. In this context, Julie McMullin has suggested, "The productive and reproductive lives of the younger people are the ideal against which

older people are judged” (McMullin in Arber and Ginn: 1995, 32). As a result, the aged are often found wanting on these scores.

In many of her poems and prose articles, Kamala Das has tackled the issue of ageing and its consequent degradation as well as discrimination that lead the aged to the accursed fate of ‘structured dependency’. I.G. Ahmed, in this connection, observes, ‘As a Third World Feminist Das exposes the agony of alienation of the aged [...]’ (Ahmed: 2005, 143). It is quite revealing that poems written mainly in and after her mid-forties (the average age of the menopause) reflect this concern of the poet. In poems such as the ‘Anamalai Poems’, ‘A Short Trip’, ‘At Chiangi Airport’, ‘Stock Taking’, ‘A Widow’s Lament’, ‘Middle Age’, ‘Home is a Concept’, ‘My Sons’, ‘Effusions’ etc. the poet presents a rather bleak picture of individuals who find themselves progressively marginalized by their dear ones because of their age.

In fact, alienation, ill-health, nostalgia, and a love-hate relationship with death constitute their thematic range. These poems can be seen as truly ‘autobiographical’ as the ‘mask’ is finally abandoned, merging the man who suffers with the mind which creates. The subdued melancholy, characteristic of them, results from the ingratitude of children and youngsters who ruthlessly abandon their parents and the elderly, since the aged can no longer be of any use to them.

If one of the factors responsible for this progressive marginalization happens to be the failing strength and ability of the aged, then the other factor certainly turns out to be the increasing self-reliance and self dependence of the young ones. In the familial context, this fact is clearly brought out in a poem like ‘Middle Age’. In fact, ‘Middle Age’ gives us a poignant description of a mother who is too old to day-dream and too young perhaps to ‘find / comfort of meaning’ in old memories (Anamalai Poems XVI, *Literature and Criticism* 157). Her children who were once dependant on and attached to her now become self-dependant and assert their personal opinions with an utter unconcern for her feelings. I.N. Agrawal, in this context, has commented, “Middle Age is a poem of illusion and disenchantment. It is a poem about a middle-aged mother – all

mothers in general – whose children have grown up and now they don't need her for the daily task of life or for her guidance" (Agrawal: 1984, 47).

In keeping with Agrawal's opinion mentioned above, the poem begins by showing a perceptible change in the attitude of the children towards the woman-speaker who happens to be a mother as well:

Middle age is when your children are no longer  
Friends but critics, stern of face and severe with their tongue  
It's the time when like pupae they burst their cocoons and  
Emerge in harsh adult glory, and they no longer  
Need you expect for serving tea and for pressing  
Clothes, [...] (*Symphony*, 26)

The fact that the mother's entry into her middle age coincides with the children's entry into their youth means that the generation gap begins to widen. As a result, her children who were once 'friends' become 'critics' as revealed by their stern 'faces' and harsh words. The bursting of cocoons and the emergence of the children in harsh adult glory pushed the mother to the precincts of the family. Having grown out of needs and out of arms, the children make her almost redundant to their needs, asking of her only to serve them tea or press their clothes.

This sudden demotion of the mother and diminution of her usefulness are, however, very difficult to accept, since the mother's needs for her children rather than diminishing in fact increases with her greying hair:

[...] but you need them all the same, and badly too, so  
That when left alone, you touch their books and things, and  
Weep a little secretly.... (*Symphony*, 26)

The mother's marginal status is clearly revealed by her secret tears while touching the children's 'books and things' at their absence. Harish Raizada, in this context, calls attention to the mother's loss of her identity as a 'feeling woman' in the eyes of her children and their treatment of her as a mere commodity of their utility (Raizada in Prasad: 1983, 124).

As if to prove the ever-widening generation gap between the mother and her son, whereby the views of the older generation seem preposterous to the younger ones, we now get to hear a fierce rebuttal of the mother's life-philosophy by her son:

Middle age is when your son to whom you sent,  
Once open a time, the squirrels' invitation to their  
Jungle-feast, writing in golden ink and posting  
It at night, turns round in disgust, crying, you have lived  
In a dream world all your life, it's time to wake up, Mother,  
You are no longer so young you know. (*Symphony*, 26)

The son's argument that the mother has lived all her life in a dream that she should wake up from those dreams now and that she is no longer so young as to day dream reinforce his undeniable ageism. He seems to forget the fact that his own youth and authority will not last forever either. Moreover, his rude reminder to his mother that she is not the young woman any more seems unduly harsh.

It seems that the poet's motive in writing this poem is to prepare ageing mothers like her to face the banalities of the inevitable 'middle age'. Thus, as K.V. Surendran points out, "'Middle Age' is a poem which surveys the little unnoticed pangs of mothers who are already on the 'wrong side of the forties'" (Surendran in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 133).

If 'Middle Age' shows us the poet's concern with the fate of the ageing mothers, then 'Home is a Concept' gives us Das' take on the condition of the aged fathers. That

the fathers described in this poem are a little bit more advanced in years is shown by their desperate attempts to 'find / comfort of meaning' in old memories (Anamalai Poems XVI, *Literature and Criticism* 157).

Among all the poems of Kamala Das on the subject of old age, 'Home is a Concept' has a special place, because in this poem the poet-speaker remains extradiegetic, sympathizing or rather empathizing with the aged male-figures described in the poem. The mental picture that the poet helps us conjure up is that of a busy airport with its luggage-toting air-travelers waiting for aeroplanes. For practical reasons, they are required to tote their 'luggage' even if it feels 'heavy'. Similarly, for emotional reasons, they are bound to bear the burden of their past (e.g. photographs of laughing children) even if the only reward they can expect is 'pain':

The unwanted wait here and there for aeroplanes  
clutching at heavy briefcases that hold  
the papers to be read at seminars,  
passports, visas and photographs of laughing  
children. The unwanted carry heavy bags  
and overcoats but the heaviest luggage  
they tote is pain. [...] (BKD 117)

Evidently, the poet is writing about ageing persons whom she has termed 'the unwanted'. They have to bear this pain because they want to cling to 'photographs of their laughing children'. But, their children no longer want them; for children grow into adults and 'grow out of needs' ('Composition').

In the next section of the poem, the poet presents 'home' not as a physical entity but as a concept (love) or in terms of its inmates or family members (a group prepared to love). In fact, the aged are seen to be craving only for love but to no avail:

[...] If home is a concept

they shall not know it, if home is a group  
prepared to love, the traveller has not known that  
group and never shall. [...] (*BKD 117*)

It is the inability of the travellers to know the concepts of home and homey that has caused them the 'pain'. As a result, their worldly accomplishments like seminar papers, passports, and visas all seem utterly meaningless to them.

In order to hide this pain and their feeling of nullity, these aged persons try in vain to engage in loud talk and excessive work:

[...] The unwanted speak in  
strident voices. Silence holds terrors for them.  
When they speak of the need for a Centre  
to promote Commonwealth Literature or of  
the Nuclear Holocaust they are merely  
crying out to you, love me, I am not so  
different from the ones seem to love. (*BKD 117*)

The strident voice adopted by these men is only a means of self-deception, because their loud talks on divergent subjects like Commonwealth Literature and the Nuclear Holocaust are mere empty words, concealing their only-too-human need to be loved. Just like 'An Introduction', this poem too ends with the speaker's tentative attempt at pointing up human similarity and human solidarity, because just like the fact 'I too call myself I' ('An Introduction'), here too the speaker suggests, 'they are merely / crying out to you, love me, I am not so / different from the ones you seem to love'. The marginalization of the aged with an utter disregard for their previous centrality within the family betrays the ingratitude of 'children' whose laughing photographs still accompany and haunt them. That the laughing children are captured in photographs, and then therefore, taken out of the stream of time can justify their durability as a sentient

image of the past whose real-life growth in and with time these aged persons have failed to come to terms with.

Retaining the setting of the airport and yet returning to her characteristic singular narrative ('I'/'Me'), 'At Chiangi Airport' acts as a companion piece of the pervious poem. The poem begins and ends with the desire as well as the desirability of 'forgetting', and yet the middle part of the poem betrays the speaker's inability to do the same. The alternative title of this poem, 'In Transit at Chiangi', highlights the temporary story that the speaker must have had at the airport (Das in Paniker: 2004, 51-52). Moreover, it includes both the suggestions of 'in transit' and 'transit', indicating thereby the act of being transported from one place to another and the transition or passage from a 'fifty and two' year old life to 'death's lustrous chambers'.

The poem begins at Singapore with the speaker's auto-suggestions of 'travelling light' and of 'forgetting' (presumably her past). But, the fact that she is unable to do so having been burdened by memory is made clear just a few lines later in the poem:

[...] Each evening I had  
asked the reception-desk, any message for me,  
any mail? I had watched the younger ones pick up  
their mail, had heard them swagger up the stairs humming  
pop tunes. The old have no mail. A displaced generation  
must find its comfort in tea; fifty and two is  
not a nice age to be. [...] (BKD 114)

In this excerpt, the aged speaker gives vent to her feelings of loneliness and abandonment. It is obvious that the speaker belongs to this 'displaced generation', which is why 'each evening' 'she has to ask for 'any message' or 'any mail'. She is left only to watch the younger ones pick up their mail. Hence the rueful realization, 'fifty and two is / not a nice age to be'.



A few things should be clarified in this context if we are to fathom out the speaker's mental state. Reviewed from her ultimate realization about the seamy side of being old, her decision/desire to 'travel light' seems to have been determined by her unwanted status. The absence of 'any mail' or 'any message' for her proves this contention beyond any reasonable doubt. However, her act of asking the reception desk for the non-existent mail or message, and that too 'each evening', points up her own 'urge for communion and reintegration' that I.G. Ahmed has alluded to (Ahmed: 2005, 143). Her lack of the coveted mails and the young ones' stack of them not only place them (the speaker and the young ones) at the two extremes of alienation and acceptance, it also alerts the sensitive poet to the same fate that awaits those 'young ones' in future. Thus, her agony is not only self-centred but also tinged with her sympathies for the young ones. In fact, she cannot forget that the 'displaced generation' of which she is a present member and to which by implication the young ones will have to enter 'must find its comfort in tea'. Das here seems to second Osip Mandelstamm in looking back on days gone by:

The buds will swell again,  
And the sprouts will burst.  
But your spine has been shattered,  
My beautiful, pitiful age.  
And you look back, cruel and weak,  
With a senseless smile,  
like a beast that was once supple,  
at the tracks of your own paws.

(‘My Age’. Mandelstamm in Bold, 1970, 146)

Just like ‘Middle Age’, ‘My Sons’ is another of Kamala Das’ poems that describes the peripheral existence of the aged in general and the aged mother in particular. Needless to say, the aged mother described here belongs to the ‘displaced generation’ (‘At Chiangi Airport’), and has tried unsuccessfully to ‘find’ and ‘know’ home as ‘a group prepared to love’ (‘Home is a Concept’). Though the title of the poem

suggests a possible description of her sons, it is chiefly about the mother-figure with occasional and topical allusions to her children.

The poem begins with a rueful statement from the poet-speaker about the non-existence or at any rate the non-availability of love as an ennobling emotion even in spite of her sincere attempts at finding and praising the same:

No, there is nothing like love. I used up  
My blood as ink to praise its worth, [...] (*OSKHS 47*)

By mentioning her 'use' of 'blood' as 'ink' to praise the 'worth of love' the speaker subtly hints at the act of poetic creation. This literary act is later on used to implicate the act of procreation or writing the 'unborn generation' on the book of life. The hurry of that unborn generation to see the light of the day resulted in anger at the mother's delay. But, since procreation is a joint responsibility, the would-be father too was hauled up for that delay:

[...] it was  
The unborn generation rattling in  
My pen, angry at my delay, and his. (*OSKHS 47*)

The mention of the husband-figure rather the father-figure in this context reminds the mother of him. The fact that he is no more and no more is the smell of his skin and his words deeply sadden the speaker.

From the remembrance of things past, she is brought back to the world of the present by the perceived transformation of the once-unborn generation into her own adult sons:

[...] My sons are old enough to take  
Their own women, old enough to forget

The lullabies I sang and the prayers

Recited near their beds when they were ill. (*OSKHS* 47)

Since her sons have now grown out of needs and out of arms to have taken their own women, they have managed to forget the love and anxiety with which their mother had reared them up. This fact, along with the earlier exclamation that no body remembers him (her husband) or the father of these sons, highlights the marginalization of the aged in and by a youth-oriented society. In fact, the same idea is expressed by Das (Suraiya) in one of her columns 'Geriatrics, Geriatrics', "The Old are losers all the time" (*PC* 39). The speaker goes on to describe her sons in ironic and insinuating terms as 'users of vulgar words and of jeans' and as creatures impotent to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh with the women of their tribe. But, life has tutored the mother sufficiently enough to make her realize the inevitable transience of their enjoyment. So, she remembers to caution her sons of the imminent arrival of another generation that may similarly marginalize them in the future:

Users of vulgar words and of jeans that

Chafe desire to a hot flame, they swing

Round and round with the females of their tribe.

Yet another generation awaits

At the closed doors behind their faded jeans... (*OSKHS* 47)

While in 'Middle Age' the emphasis was on preparing the ageing mothers to face their inevitable fate of neglect and mockery, in 'My Sons' the poet-speaker focuses on cautioning the younger generation about the inevitability of their own ageing. In this respect, it can be read as a virtual extension of 'At Chiangi Airport' where 'fifty and two' is considered 'not a nice age to be', as much for the aged speaker as for the 'swagger'-ing 'young ones' who can very easily be likened to her sons.

The Anamalai Poems also tell us the sad story of a 'not-so-nice age' of 'fifty and two' from the perspective of lived experience. In fact, along with the gender question

discussed earlier in the chapter on gender and marginality, the Anamalai Poems also deal with the issue of 'ageing' as well as the resultant marginalization. Since these poems have a woman-persona, the issues of gender and ageing are seen to overlap in them. As discussed earlier in the present chapter, this is especially true for women whose advancing years entail a loss of productivity and value, at once financial and reproductive.

Even though throughout the Anamalai Poems we bear witness to the woman-speaker's increasing disillusionment with family and domesticity, it is in the latter group of the Anamalai Poems (nos. XII to XVII) that we get to see Das' sustained treatment of the question of age.

In the thirteenth poem of the series, the woman-persona lays bare her marginal status as an aged mother at the hands of her unfeeling grown up children. Feeling the chill of neglect and desirous of getting the warmth of human love, the woman-speaker enters the room where her grown up children are seated. The use of the word 'sidle' to describe the woman-speaker's entry into the room betrays her feelings of uncertainty and apprehension. Assailed by the same doubt, she does 'unobtrusively' 'settle' herself 'a distance away'. That she has rightly taken such precautions becomes clear, since her children take no notice of her:

The talk goes on

The banter and the laugh

But the language seems to me so alien so strange

*(Literature and Criticism 156)*

The fact that the 'talk', the 'banter' and the 'laugh' are continued without a pause greatly alienates the mother whose feeling of 'strange'-ness makes her uncertain about her biological connections (as a mother) with her impudent children:

Did my womb really spawn these raucous crows

I ask myself amazed  
Did I grant them this strident voice  
The indignity of their stare  
The cunning jest? (*Literature and Criticism* 156)

In fact, their 'strident voice', the 'indignity of their stare' and the 'cunning jest' dehumanize them in her eyes, making them mere 'raucous crows'.

The mother's realization that her only gifts to the world have been 'these raucous crows', when she has received much joy and happiness from it, makes her ashamed of herself. But, beneath this surface feeling of shame, runs a strong undercurrent of sorrow, because the aged mother cannot totally suppress her own need for 'the warmth of human love' that these children could easily have given her.

The fourteenth poem of the Anamalai poems clearly shows up what may befall an aged mother in the eventuality of her being neglected by her children:

Yes, this humble me without a doubt  
The empty mailbag, the silent phone  
And my lying around for the past  
Several days like a parcel left unclaimed.

(*Literature and Criticism* 157)

What humbles the speaker is the lack of concern shown to her by her children. Evidently, she too is a representative of the 'displaced generation' who in an ageist society is fated to lie around for 'several days' like a 'parcel left unclaimed'. The 'empty mailbag' and the 'silent phone' clearly reveal to the speaker 'What love was worth / In the end' ('A Request', D 5).

The experience of 'lying around' like 'a parcel left unclaimed' teaches the aged speaker the necessity as well as the desirability of vacating 'the earthly seat' and leaving

in her own good time. It is this realization that finds poetic expression in the fifteenth poem of the series:

For after all I am a mere guest although  
The decanters are still half full and the long  
Candles still burn on, not for a moment must  
I overstay; other guests are expected  
Yes, I must vacate my earthly seat and leave.

*(Literature and Criticism 157)*

This realization of the speaker is accentuated by the perception that the decanters are already half empty and the candles 'burn on' only because they are 'long'. She, being a mere guest, naturally remembers the possibility of other guests' arriving. The fact that both she, as a guest, and the other would-be guests are under the obligation to leave sooner or later makes her self-conscious and sad about the fateful hour.

The sixteenth poem of the sequence shuns the philosophical aspects of ageing and death to dwell upon the practical problems of the ageing woman-speaker:

The insects have a better time than I do now  
They exult so in the winter sun. I sit behind  
The window pane, the black shawl hiding my greying hair  
Too old to daydream and too young perhaps to find  
Comfort of meaning in old memories.

*(Literature and Criticism 157)*

Her inability to 'exalt' in 'the winter sun' and the compulsion to 'sit behind' the 'window panes', covering her 'grey hair' (and perhaps warding off the chill) in the 'black shawl', betray her advancing years. But, her 'middle age' poses the intractable problem of being 'Too old to daydream' and 'too young perhaps to find / Comfort or meaning in old memories'.

The last poem of the group presents the speaker's loneliness which becomes so acute as to warrant the donning of 'fear' as her nightgown (companion at night):

And if fear is my nightgown tonight  
What of it? I still welcome the change.  
It is not as cold to my skin as  
What I wore on countless nights the blue  
Wrap of loneliness. Yes if fear is  
My nightgown tonight I shall welcome the change.

*(Literature and Criticism 157)*

Bereft of both the warmth of the 'winter sun' and the warmth of 'human love', her 'skin' has become so 'cold' that even being frightened seems a welcome change to her than being lonely.

The Anamalai poems record the depressed feelings of a disturbed psyche with the characteristic candour and the minimum amount of literary frills. Das' perception of her ageing self, the lukewarm response of her grown up children, and the sensitive awareness of her impending death to their ageing mother make the Anamalai poems a true document of her marginality due to age.

What was an awareness of her impending death in the Anamalai Poems, gave way to a grim experience of her husband's death in 'Stock Taking'. In fact, it is her husband's death coupled with the onset of her own old age and ill health that gives her an added incentive to take the 'stock' of her own life this far.

What was implied in 'My Sons' in the exclamation about the fates of oblivion suffered by 'him' (the speaker's husband), is made explicit in the poem 'Stock Taking'. As the title suggests, it is the time when the speaker needs and wants to 'take stock of all' and this need has been accentuated by her inability to get over her bereavement. In

fact, one factor usually associated with the experience of *ageing* is the awareness of mortality. This awareness acts in two ways to dampen the spirit of the aged (here the woman-speaker) – by snatching away a loved one as also by making her/him aware of the approaching end. The resultant senses of loss and loneliness cause a depression which, for want of a better term, may be called ‘natural marginalization’.

The poet-speaker begins with a vivid account of her husband’s death that has resulted in her utter unconcern with any ‘promise of immortal love’:

Do not beguile me with a promise  
of immortal love  
for, I have seen the glaze in a dying  
husband’s eye and have lost faith in all  
Do not promise great moments  
of self-realization  
or serener incarnations  
I have seen terror twist  
my husband’s face and have heard  
the awesome rattle of his final breath  
Do not talk to me of beauties  
still to be envisaged, for I have  
seen the waxy pallor of a dead man’s  
skin and I do not care now  
to see more. (*OSKHS* 120)

The memory of ‘the glaze in a dying / husband’s eye’, his ‘terror’-twisted face, ‘the awesome rattle of his final breath’, and ‘the waxy pallor of a dead man’s skin’ have turned her cynical about any ‘serener incarnations’ of love and beauty. In fact, the death of her husband has opened her eyes to the inevitability of physical decay, whereby ‘beauties / still to be envisaged’ are also destined to end in the ‘awesome rattle’ of the ‘last breath’.



The above realization forces the speaker to lose any interest in the wisdom of the scriptures or in the peace of the philosophers. Both the enjoyment of the pleasures of sex and the sense of fulfilment inherent in child-care have proved inadequate in neutralizing her thanatonic consciousness:

Do not thrust upon me  
the scriptures compiled by sages  
wise and celibate  
or pacifying philosophies.  
I have held a man  
between my legs and have  
brought forth goodnatured sons  
If there is a God somewhere  
despite the distance he kept  
between himself and me  
please heed my request today  
I need a lull in this living  
a pause to take stock of all. (*OSKHS* 120)

The speaker's sense and sensibility ultimately induce a prayer to the God if any. That she is sceptical about His existence is proved by the decapitalizing of the letter 'h' in 'he' and 'himself'. In spite of the providential indifference she has previously experienced, she begs of 'God' to grant her 'a lull in this living', 'a pause to take stock of all'. The implication may be a death wish as a possible escape from the tyrannies of the flesh.

The death of Das' husband revealed to her the 'tyrannies of the flesh' and the overpowering power of 'sad mortality'. Divested of the care and protection (even if overbearing) of her husband and fed up with the 'cold-platters of faces / heaped with mushy sympathy', the widow is left only to lament her fate. As has previously been

discussed in the first chapter of the present dissertation, 'A Widow's Lament' records an old woman's rough passage from a life of domestic centrality to that of senile superfluity. In fact, it is a dossier that outlines women's marginal status in the patriarchal set-up. The poem begins with an extended question of the now-widowed speaker, regarding her present status and future prospects:

Is the soul too,  
now autumned,  
rusted in the awful recollection  
of spilt blood,  
readying itself for the fall? (OSKHS 125)

Her doubts regarding the soul seem strikingly original, going as it does, against the Hindu concept of the eternal soul:

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin*  
*nā 'yam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ*  
*ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yam purāno*  
*na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*

(He is never born, nor does he die at any time, nor having [once] come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.)

(The Bhagavadgita, ch. II. sloka. 20 1993, 107)

The word 'rusted' with its undeniably physical association brings in the added import of decay. The awful recollection of spilt blood with its elemental association with rust and iron may hint at a post-menopausal existence of the speaker who has no other preoccupation than 'readying' herself for the 'fall' (death). The lamenting widow who can gain her identity only in relation to a now-dead male (her husband) has so long led a subservient and dependent life as a wife. As a natural corollary to wifedom, she had

also been made a mother. In her dual roles as wife and mother she was at least granted a useful existence even though she had to pay the heavy price of tearing to shreds, the tarot cards of her fate to attain this 'bliss'. After the death of her husband and the growth into adulthood of her sons, she loses even the prop of domestic importance. Her realization of this loss snatches away from her even the purpose of existence in 'this' 'someone else's world'. Mushy sympathy and cold platters of faces that remain her only provisions can cause fear and trembling; for there is sadly no prospect of any God's putting forth 'a wrinkled hand to wipe my brow'. The wolves of worry and loneliness are not going to spare her, since with the death or departure of her male relatives the old woman has to walk the 'high way' 'alone' and 'naked' (unprotected and hapless) as a 'babe'.

The old woman's rough passage from the life of domestic centrality to that of senile superfluity is neatly encapsulated in her act of walking 'the high way alone'. This journey motif is deftly continued in the poem 'A Short Trip'. The nuclear family, an invention of an ungrateful age, and the old-age home, the socio-economically imposed substitute for home – these factors not only aggravate the marginalization of the aged but cause in them a deep sense of dejection. Kamala Das' poem 'A Short Trip' encapsulates the psycho-spatial polarity between the centrality of youth and home, and the marginality of 'age' and the old age home. It is indeed a 'short trip' from youth to age and from home to old-age home. But, the psychological 'trip' that one has to take in a bid to arrive at the latter from the former is certainly quite long and arduous; for it is the trip of experience and realization.

At the beginning of the poem, the woman-speaker who in the ninth line of the poem expresses her gendered identity by using the feminine pronoun 'her' equates a 'short trip' from 'home' presumably to an old-age home with 'a kind of death'. The recent reality of domestic importance and love and the present realization of brutal displacement at the hands of her ungrateful offsprings seem to the woman-speaker infinitely dissimilar:

Even a short trip from home is  
a kind of death for one who till recent  
times believed that one reaped only what one  
had sown, and the discovery that one  
might reap what another had sown was sad,  
and jolting, as though while plucking flowers  
one gathered with them a squirming snake. [...] (*OSKHS* 105)

In fact, the poet-speaker's earlier belief that one 'reaped only what one / had sown' had given her hope of receiving a humane treatment from her offsprings, because she had showed only love and affection on them. But, her unpleasant discovery that one 'might reap what another had sown' ensures an eventual othering of the aged even though it is based upon an 'illogical hatred'. The expectation of flowers and the reality of the squirming snake adequately encapsulate what the aged expect out of life and what they get.

If the displacement of the aged mother-figure from the centre of domesticity is tantamount to 'some kind of death' for her, it also connotes a kind of change and severance of ties with the past. Though the young offsprings in their foolish conceit dish out hatred to the aged, this hatred is grounded in illogicality and, therefore, destined to be self-defeating:

[...] Yes  
even a trip is a kind of death and  
the traveller by her brief absence lifts  
from others left behind the domestic  
inhibitions that plague human beings  
who have learnt to hate illogically  
although both the hated and the hater  
cannot ever hope to explain why. (*OSKHS* 105)

The reality of a home where the offsprings have become impatient with or indifferent to the aged mother ('Middle Age'), as contrasted with the reality of an old age home to which the aged mother is shifted against her will ('A Short Trip'), presents the confused and aggrieved poet-speaker with the dilemma of choice. The only possible resolution of this 'dilemma', therefore, is to seek a 'lull in this living' ('Stock Taking') or vacation of her 'earthly seat' ('Anamalai Poem XV').

A witness as well as a victim to the process of ageing in her dual specificity as a human being and as a woman, Kamala Das reveals the physical, the psychological and the social aspects associated with this virtual 'tragedy of life'. In 'Lines Addressed to a Husband', she discovers the reality of her 'ageing flesh'. In 'Middle Age', she is reminded by her sons of 'a new found ugliness'. In 'Home is a Concept', by observing the pitiable condition of the aged 'traveller', she realizes the futility of seeking love as and for the aged. The Chiangi airport makes her aware of her generational 'displacement' that leads to the agony of alienation. Looking at her aged mother she shudders at the real possibility that her 'childhood fear' of losing her mother to death will come true sooner rather than later ('My Mother at Sixty Six', *BKD* 148). The death of her husband and the departure of her sons for 'other homes' and 'other loves' leave her alone and under compulsion to fend for herself ('A Widow's Lament'). Thus, she reaches the seventh age of woman, aware of the loss of her past importance, remembering youth as a photograph ('Youth is a Photograph'), and readying herself like the autumn leaves for the 'fall' ('Autumn Leaves' *BKD*, 75).