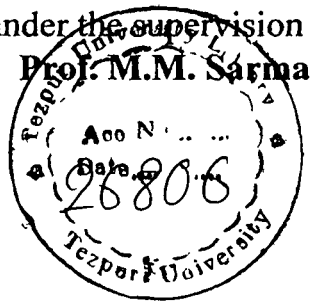
THE MAKING OF THE SELF: A FEMINIST READING OF KAMALA DAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Dipti Mahanta

under the supervision of
Prof. M.M. Sarma



Department of English and Foreign Languages

TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

TEZPUR – 784028

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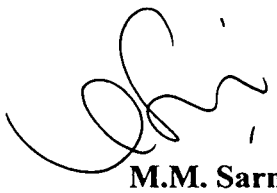
In the memory of

Deuta
Atul Mama
&
Phrakrupariyattisaramedhi (Anat Thongbanthum)
Phrakru Bodhisarakun (Luang Poo Boh)

CERTIFICATE

Certified that this thesis, **"The Making of the Self: A Feminist Reading of Kamala Das,"** submitted by Ms Dipti Mahanta, M.A., M.F.A., for the Ph.D. Degree, is a bonafide record of the research work done by her under my supervision during her period of study at the University for the Degree, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or other similar title, and that it is her original work done independently. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged in the thesis.



M.M. Sarma
Professor,
Department of English
and Foreign Languages
Tezpur University
Tezpur - 784028
Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a relatively broad study of Kamala Das's writings from the feminist perspective. I have included both her poetry and prose writings and among her prose works, I have preferred to concentrate on her controversial autobiography *My Story* and some of her short stories that are published in English. Kamala Das is a bilingual writer writing both in English and her native language, Malayalam. In this thesis I have incorporated only the works in English.

Though a prolific writer, who in the words of Eunice de Souza "mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms," Kamala Das's writings have hitherto received scant critical attention, particularly from the feminist perspective. It is the purpose of this thesis to merge this hiatus.

In the process of analysis I have attempted to critically focus on her thematic concerns so as to elucidate and highlight the feminine sensibility at work. In this context it is worth noting that Kamala Das has never declared herself a feminist writer. Nevertheless, to a sympathetic reader Das's thematic concerns and use of language that has a direct appeal undeniably reflect her feminist stance. Her texts reveal a critical awareness women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category. In

this thesis there are altogether six chapters including the conclusion. I have dealt with Kamala Das's poetry, her autobiography *My Story* and some of her short stories separately in three distinct chapters. The first chapter titled "Towards a Feminist Reading", is a brief introduction to what feminist reading of a text entails. With the advent of feminism as a global and revolutionary ideology new critical outlooks and modes of exegesis are introduced in the practice of reading. The practice of reading is no longer neutral but has become a site in the struggle for change in gender biases and prejudices. Today feminist reading of any text tends to ask such pertinent questions like in what way the text represents women, gender relations and how it defines sexual questions. In this chapter I have incorporated ideas of different feminist critics on woman's writing and have also made it clear what my feminist reading of Kamala Das entails. Kamala Das's writings would respond to many kinds of reading but the present analysis concentrates on her thematic concerns. Though thematic analysis is regarded outdated in the West in the Indian context one cannot dismiss the legitimacy of feminism as a thematic criticism. It is still an appropriate route into critical practice. Since her subjects are a reflection of feminine condition

my concerns are fundamentally thematic.In the second chapter "The Critical Perspective" I have reflected on some of the characteristic critical assessments of Kamala Das. This chapter fulfils the exigent need to re-view existing critical writings on Kamala Das with a fresh outlook. It is observed that critical concerns tend to be equally divided between her morals and her grammar. In India, most male critics (and a few female critics writing in the shadow of malestream critical perspective) in general are quick in expressing reservations about Kamala Das's thematic concerns—love, sexuality, selfhood. It is as though the poet seems to have failed to live up to the critics' expectations. This chapter is a critical reassessment of all the myopic and parochial judgments on the poet from a strictly resisting reader's perspective. The strength imbibed from feminist criticism serves as a guiding maxim here.

The third chapter offers an analysis of her autobiography *My Story*. In the Indian context, Kamala Das's autobiography is a radical attempt at using the genre to subvert prevalent patriarchal biases. In this chapter I have analysed both the content and the form of the autobiography from the feminist perspective. I have shown that the autobiography is revolutionary and subversive at many levels. It challenges traditional notions about the genre of

'autobiography' through its form and content. It presents an easy mixture of genre, which is relatively rare in autobiographies of male authors. The main thematic concern of the text, as in all autobiographies, is the question of identity and the presentation of the self. The autobiography is subversive in its treatment of domesticity, marriage and conventional lifestyle of a woman.

The fourth chapter is a re-appraisal of Kamala Das's poetry. I have observed that most of her poems like her autobiography can be regarded as confessional because together they signal the intention of the author to foreground the most personal and intimate details of her life. The poetic persona is portrayed in different guises as wife, lover, mother, daughter, granddaughter, and a devotee of Krishna and Allah. Through each of these roles woman's multi-faceted emotions, thoughts, feelings, reactions are delineated in a manner that is not only subversive as far as it helps question conventional gender related values and prejudices but also audacious and frank in its use of the confessional tone. In this chapter I have analysed some of her poems individually and have also inserted critics' comments to juxtapose my own counter-arguments along side.

The fifth chapter provides an analysis of some of Kamala Das's short stories. Most of these stories are taken from the

collection "Padmavati, the Harlot". In some of these stories male sexuality has been portrayed as predatory, insatiable, and aggressive. Male pleasure is shown as inextricably tied to victimizing; hurting, exploiting, dominance in the male system being pleasure. This aspect of male sexuality is well expressed in "Padmavati, the Harlot", "The Princess of Avanti", and "A Doll for the Child Prostitute". The corollary of such a representation of male heterosexual practice as violation and domination is an implicit representation of female sexuality as vulnerable and submissive. But in Kamala Das's case though she foregrounds heterosexual women's victimization she never portrays women as totally submissive and powerless. Rather, she aims at problematizing the reproduction of the gendered binary of sexual dominance-submission in her stories by questioning the active/passive dichotomy in heterosexuality. Therefore, though men are portrayed as dominant, women do not necessarily appear submissive and docile. Even a harlot in Kamala Das's hands becomes a symbol of resistance. Moreover, by depicting women caught up and influenced by society's double standards for women, Kamala Das as a female writer has been able to subvert even the most stereotypical images of women.In the last chapter (conclusion) I have summarized the findings in each of the

preceding chapter. I have tried to show that Kamala Das's writings can be re-viewed as literary representations, which depict and subvert stereotypical images of Indian womanhood. She uses her personal experience as the material for creative writing so as to deliberately encase her work in the matrix of confessional writing. The relationship between her experiences, her role as daughter, wife, mother and friend and her views of self-all contribute to the literary construction of the self as subject. Kamala Das's writings do in fact tell all kinds of things about herself. She reveals and expresses herself through the context in which she puts herself in each poem or for that matter in the episodic chapters of the autobiography. It is the context which changes and represents all kinds of different things: her obsessions, her predilections, her feminine claims, the events that have scarred and marked her, the crucial relationships, the way in which she is located culturally. These are the real subjects of her self-portrayal: feelings, identity and the body. She is primarily concerned with these things that construct an identity, an individual subjectivity. As a woman writer she uses writing as a liberating tool, a political act, a subversive strategy, as well as an art form and a "platform" or means of expressing her self.

CONTENTS

Chapter One

Towards a Feminist Reading

The advent of feminism as a global and revolutionary ideology has brought into the field of literary criticism new critical outlooks and modes of exegesis. The practice of reading of any literary text has become a site in the struggle for change in gender relations that prevail in society. A reading that is feminist aims at asking such rudimentary questions: how the text defines sexual questions, what it says about gender relations and how it represents women. In other words, feminist reading/criticism has come to be recognized as a political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism.

The influential feminist critic, Elaine Showalter points out that two factors - gender and politics- which are suppressed in the dominant models of reading gain prominence with the advent of a feminist perspective. In every area of critical reflection whether it is literary representations of sexual difference or the molding/shaping of literary genres by masculine values feminist criticism has established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis. With gender as a tool of literary interpretation the issue of silencing of the female voice in the institutions of literature, criticism and theory has also come to the forefront. Appreciating the widespread importance of gender, feminist philosophers resist speaking in gender-neutral voice. They value women's experiences, interest, and seek to shift the position of women from object to one of subject and agent.

Moreover, it has been an important function of feminist criticism to redirect attention to personal and everyday experience of alienation and oppression of women (as reflected in literary texts). Traditional notion of politics is thus redefined so as to acknowledge the permeation of power relations into the most mundane social practices. The feminist concept of "personal is political" means that woman's distinctive experience as woman occurs within that sphere that has been socially lived as the personal—private, emotional, interiorized, particular, individuated and intimate. Thus what it is to know the politics of woman's situation is to know woman's personal lives.

In her essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Elaine Showalter categorizes two distinct modes of feminist criticism. The first mode, which is ideological, is concerned with the feminist as *reader.* Within the parameters of this mode lies the feminist readings of texts which are specifically male- authored. The focus is on "images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and women-assign in semiotic systems." [1]This mode of criticism which was practised in the earliest years of feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular as well as canonical texts. Showalter calls this mode the feminist critique.Such influential feminist texts from the late sixties and early seventies like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Ellen Moer's *Literary Women*, and Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* paved the way for such critical approach. Millett's *Sexual Politics* is in many ways the starting point from which feminist literary criticism originated. Millett uses literary texts to illustrate her

arguments about sexual politics. Through her analysis of the novels of male writers like Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Jean Genet she exposes their patriarchal bias and their sexual/textual harassment of women. Millett has also fiercely critiqued Sigmund Freud as a great supporter and perpetuator of patriarchal conspiracy against women. She challenges the author's authority and insists on the reader's right to express her own viewpoint. As Toril Moi observes, "Her approach destroys the prevailing image of the reader/critic as passive/feminine recipient of authoritarian discourse, and as such is exactly suited to feminism's political purposes."[2] Ellmann in her analysis shows that the Western culture at all levels is permeated by a phenomenon she labels as "thought by sexual analogy." Ellmann in the words of Toril Moi, "manages to demonstrate first that the very concept of masculinity and femininity are social constructs which refer to no real essence in the world, and second that the feminine stereotypes she describes invariably deconstructs themselves."[3] Ellen Moer had tried to show through her work how women's writing forms a subculture of marginalized sensibilities. Her work shows how woman writers share secret solidarities with other women and formulate strategies of resistance across various cultures. Millett's, Ellmann's and Moer's method has come to be known as " reading against the grain", which the feminist critics have used to great profit in their critique of the patriarchal discourse and ideology. Their influential books greatly influenced what is also known as "Images of Women" approach to literature and criticism inaugurating the first phase of feminist writing, which focuses attention on women as readers. Moreover, their analyses point to the ways in which women are represented as passive, masochistic and totally male-identified. Relationships with men are shown to dictate the

structuring principles of femininity and an unquestioned masculinity lays the boundaries for what women may or may not be. Women are depicted in ways, which meet particular forms of male interest, and women readers are encouraged to identify with traditional female gender norms of sensibility, passivity and irrationality.

The second mode of feminist criticism is the study of women as *writers*, and its subjects are the "history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition."[4] Disturbed by the sudden realization that women had invariably been represented in stereotypical ways by a literary heritage that claimed universality, feminist critics turned to women authors for alternative images of women. As all literary theory is text-specific, feminist criticism in order to develop had to identify women's writing as its distinctive text-milieu. Thus the second mode of feminist criticism is concerned with women's writing, specifically with writing as a mode of resistance. In what Showalter terms "gynocritics," the study of woman as writer, women are invited to speak for themselves, even if they continue to do so from within a patriarchal culture. Showalter's "A Literature of Their Own" traces a female literary tradition in the English novel from the Brontes to the present day and demonstrates that the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture. Her book is perhaps the most influential of the accounts of women's writings in its difference from men's. She identifies a female subculture in which fiction by women constitutes a record of their experience. She defines three separate but overlapping phases, feminine, feminist and female. The feminine phase is marked by imitation of prevailing masculine models, though concerns are

distinctively feminine. The feminist phase is one in which formulation of specifically feminist protests and demands become visible. And lastly the female phase is the phase of self-discovery and exploration of an inner space of female experience.

Today gynocriticism assumes that all writing is marked by gender. Although feminist critics recognize that meaning of gender needs to be interpreted within a variety of historical, national, racial and sexual contexts, they maintain that woman writers are not free to renounce or transcend their gender entirely. Women can differentiate their positions from any number of stereotypes of femininity, and define themselves also in terms of being black, lesbian, postcolonial or working class but to deny that they are affected by being women at all is self-delusion or self-hatred.

Gynocritics aim at constructing a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. As Showalter writes, "Gynocritics begins at the point where we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture."[5]

The shift from "feminist critique" to "gynocritics"—as emphasis on woman as reader to emphasis on woman as writer—has helped in developing a feminist criticism that is "genuinely woman-centred, independent, and intellectually coherent." To see women's writing as primary subject forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of theoretical problem before it. It is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference. Theories of women's writing presently make use of four models of difference: biological, linguistic,

psychoanalytic and cultural. As pointed out by Showalter each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of woman writer and woman's text.

Organic or biological criticism is the most extreme statement of gender difference. To some feminists a text is indelibly marked by the body: anatomy is textuality. Radical feminists both in France and the United States, insist and argue that " woman's writing proceeds from the body, that our sexual differentiation is also our source." In "Of Woman Born," Rich explains her belief that "female biology...has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life, we require not only control of our bodies...we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence."[6]

Referring to the body as a concrete object and as a signifier in social discourse of the unconscious Helene Cixous constantly exhorts the women to "write the body."

"By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time."

"Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth."[7]

"Writing the body" is an injunction to liberate the unconscious. Women, alienated from language, have been literally silenced. Unable to sublimate the libido into cultural achievements, woman is physicality incarnate. "More so than men who

are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body. More body, hence more writing" ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 886). Cixous maintains that the female body is also not fragmented, but a whole in which each part is a whole:

"not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that's any more of a star than the others."[8]

Cixous most often focuses upon the vagina and the breast—the source of the "white ink" with which women will write—as roots of her metaphors. Liquid products such as milk and blood abound. When she thinks of woman's body, she says:

"I think in terms of overflow, in terms of an energy which spills over, the flow of which cannot be controlled."[9]

Feminist criticism written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery. This form of criticism which itself tries to be biological, to write from the critic's body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form. The study of biological imagery in women's writing is useful and important since ideas about the body are fundamental to understanding how women conceptualize their situation in society.

Apart from the body concept, feminists (mostly in France) focus on the use of an appropriate female language. This is because they find the dominant mode of discourse as one marked by masculine ideology. According to Carolyn Burke, "when a woman write or speak herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable."[10] The debate over language is one of the most exciting areas in

gynocritics. The concept of 'ecriture feminine', the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text has developed as a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism that aims at systematically deconstructing the "oppressor's language."

Cixous defines a woman's language as closer to the body, to sexual pleasure and asserts that this closeness to the body and to nature could be subversive. She contrasts feminine writing (l' ecriture feminine) with masculine writing (literatur). She has objected to masculine writing and thinking because they are cast in binary oppositions. Man has unnecessarily segmented reality by coupling concepts and terms in pairs of polar opposites, one of which is always privileged over the other. In her essay "Sorties", Cixous listed some of these dichotomous pairs:

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Thought has also worked through opposition,

Speaking/Writing

Parole/Ecriture

High/Low

through dual, hierarchical oppositions.

Superior/Inferior[11]

Cixous has challenged women to write themselves out of the world men have constructed for them by putting into words the unthinking/unthought. The kind of writing Cixous associated with men comprises the bulk of the accummulated

wisdom of humankind. Because these thoughts have been stamped with the official seal of approval, they are no longer permitted to move or change. Contrary wise, the kind of writing that she identified as woman's own-marking, scratching, scribbling, jotting down connotes movements like that of an ever-changing river. Thus, for Cixous, feminine writing is not merely a new style of writing, it is "the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards."[12]

While distinguishing between woman's writing from man's, Cixous draws many connections between male sexuality and masculine writing on the one hand and female sexuality and female writing on the other hand. Like male sexuality, which centers on the penis with all its pointedness and singularity masculine writings is marked by rigidity, repetition and monotony. Men write the same old things with their "little pocket signifier"-the trio of penis/phallus/pen. Contrary wise, feminine writing like female sexuality is open and multiple, varied and rhythmic, full of pleasures and possibilities. "Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours...She lets the other language speak—the language of 1000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death...Her language does not contain, it carries, it does not hold back, it makes possible."[13]

Luce Irigaray, like Cixous, defines masculine discourse as linear, systematic, logical, based on binary opposites. To contradict this discourse, to subvert the masculine, she advocates mimicry; "the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her...in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it

exploits her."[14] Other ways of undoing masculine discourse are "disturbance, excess, simultaneity, fluidity."

Psychoanalytically oriented feminist criticism locates the difference of women's writing in the author's psyche and in the relation of gender to the creative process. Many feminists believe that psychoanalysis could become a powerful tool for literary criticism. But feminists based in Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis must continually struggle with the problem of feminine disadvantage and lack. In Gilbert and Guber's view the nature and "difference" of women's writing lies in its troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity; the women writer experiences her own gender as "a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy." Cixous and Irigaray aim to undo the negative image of women in Lacanian theory, the cultural "repression of the feminine." According to Lacan the position of the 'I', the subject, is the position of men, possessors of the positive symbol of gender, the phallus. Cixous' work that aims at theorizing feminine writing deconstructs the Lacanian position. She asserts, "It is perhaps a *continuum* that is the most visible sign of a feminine libido. 'In my texts there are no chapters, no ordered framework'; 'what takes place is an endless circulation of desire'; feminine texts are 'close to the voice' and close to the unconscious; they seek to liberate what is suppressed by male desire to dominate, to order the world."[15]

According to the American psychoanalyst, Nancy Chodorow because women act as mothers, girls are parented by a person of the same sex "women's sense of self is continuous with others and that they retain capacities for primary identification."[16] Her theory seeks to explain differences in the psychological development of girls and boys. She postulates that the experience of female mothering results in "more

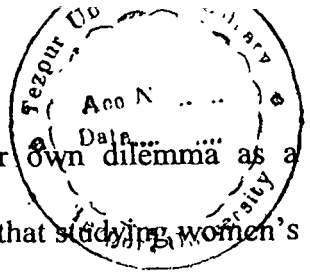
permeable ego boundaries" for women. Girls have to fight less to be different from their mothers, so they experience themselves as less separate than boys. As a result they define themselves more in relation to others, and have greater capacity for empathy with others. Extending Chodorow's ideas to identity theory Gardiner states "female identity is a process," and she proceeds to examine the consequences for writing by women. She proposes that "both writer and reader [of a text written by a woman] can relate to the text as though it were a person with whom one might alternatively be merged empathically or from whom one might be separated and individuated."[17]

Showalter believes that a theory based on a model of women's culture can provide a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women's writing than theories based in biology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis. This is because a theory of culture besides incorporating ideas about women's body, language, and psyche interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. One implication of the cultural model of women's writing is that women's fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a "dominant" and a "muted" story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a "palimpsest." Critics who subscribe to the palimpsest theory believe that there is often a subversive message underlying most feminine writing.

Today the concerns, strategies, and positions associated with feminist readings of female texts are extremely wide-ranging. In general, the most common feature of this kind of reading is that the female reader speaks/reads as a witness in defense of the woman writer. The reader takes the part of the woman writer against patriarchal misreadings that trivialize or distort her work. A principal tenet of

feminist criticism is that a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written. Another feature of feminist reading of women's writing is the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author-the "voice" of another woman. The written text is the doorway to the "mind" of the author and the reader ought to evoke the person who lives at the heart of the text. To read any woman/feminist writer is to hear her voice, to make her live in oneself, and to feel her impressive "personal dimensions". However, it is worth noting here that there is a strong counter-tendency, inspired by French poststructuralism, which privileges the appreciation of textuality over the imaginative recovery of the woman writer as subject of the work. According to Mary Jacobus, "Perhaps the question that feminist critics should be asking is not 'Is there a woman in this text?' but rather: 'Is there a text in this woman?' "[18]. If feminist readings of male texts are motivated by the need to disrupt the process of immasculation, feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need "to connect," to recuperate or to formulate the 'context, the tradition, that would link women writers to their readers. The reader on her part encounters not simply a text, but a "subjectified object": the "heart and mind" of another woman. In other words, in the paradigm of a truly feminist reading of a woman's text, the dialectic of control which shapes feminist readings of male texts gives way to the dialectic of communication. For a feminist reader reading is a matter of "trying to connect" with the existence behind the text.

Though in this thesis I take the feminist perspective to analyse Kamala Das's writings, I should admit that there are various problems for a feminist literary criticism. One tendency is to form a ghetto, to assume that what makes a work



'valuable and interesting is its author's awareness...of her own dilemma as a woman'[19] (Montefiore). A frequent attack on gynocriticism is that studying women's writing is 'separatist,' that is, that it practices a kind of inverse sexism. K.K. Ruthven, for example, claims that gynocriticism repeats the mistake for which feminists take 'male critics to task, namely 'an exclusive preoccupation with the writings of our sex.'[20] Some critics tend to emphasize that women themselves are the best readers of women's texts and men should not be allowed to intervene. According to Annette Kolodny, "However inadvertently, [the male reader] is a *different kind* of reader and,...where women are concerned, he is often an inadequate reader."[21] But in so far as the female aesthetic suggests that only women are qualified to read women's texts, feminist criticism ran another risk of ghettoization.

Another problem is the tendency to refuse to consider the historical and cultural context of the writers. Still another is the tendency to accept a biological essentialism. When feminists talk of women's writing originating from the 'body' there is the risk of returning to crude essentialism by invoking anatomy. As for instance, when feminist critics and writers speak of women's writing flowing from them like their milk the position is no better or different than of those men who equate the pen with the phallus. Finally, one must try to avoid reading a work by any author as simply an expression of unmediated personal experience.

In spite of all these theoretical hazards and entrapment one cannot easily deny the fact that the body of work Kamala Das has produced lends itself particularly well to thematic explication in terms of feminist themes. Therefore, in this thesis my concerns are fundamentally thematic. That is, I am less concerned

with how Kamala Das writes than with what she writes about, for I believe her subjects are, a reflection of the *feminine* condition. It appears that Kamala Das's writings emerge as a fusion of Showalter's *feminist* and *female* stages signaling an osmotic reciprocity between the two distinct yet overlapping phases. The search for autonomy runs parallel to the search for identity and self-realization in all her writings. She takes the woman as the individual not as the 'other' and places her in a social setting, faced with a choice that is private and personal. A recurrent theme in her is the woman's resistance to the efforts of the patriarchal community to force her into a social role at the cost of her own identity.

As a woman poet, she writes most readily about the things she knows "marriage, love, maternity." But quite unlike her contemporaries she uses poetry as a means to explore sensual or sexual matters, and imagines a radical sexual revolution for herself. She addresses the problem of realizing female autonomy in a male-dominated society thereby raising the nature of male-female relationships to the level of conscious critique. The political value of self-scrutiny and self-disclosure is explicitly asserted in almost all of her writings. Her writing is full of verve and indignation, almost spilling over itself in its attempt to expose, chide and deride patriarchal norms and values. While her writings like all other confessional writings cannot attain the goal of total intimacy and authenticity aspired to, they can nevertheless serve to articulate some of the specific problems experienced by women both communally and individually and play a role in the process of identity formation and cultural critique.

Thematic analysis of her work clearly indicates that the "self" which she portrays is assertive but at the same time marked by contradictions, schisms, and

tensions. The conflicts and contradictions she expresses are not only related to the more general problematic of subjectivity, but also to the specific conditions of marginalization and powerlessness that have shaped both her public and private experiences. What makes the thematic approach relevant is that through it we can easily comprehend the strategic use of the confessional tone in her writings. The confessional tone highlights the poetic persona's quest for love and freedom, her dilemma and moral conflicts and also served to articulate some of the specific problems experienced by average Indian women in the patriarchal social set-up with all its pseudo hierarchies of phallocentric norms and values.

However, many critics believe that confession is less concerned with making an explicit political point than in "telling all," with the cathartic release which accompanies speaking about that which has been kept concealed and silent. But in the Indian context Kamala Das's cathartic act serves a political purpose since she had been working on a plane of representation where women's bracketed lives struggle to achieve visibility. The expressiveness of her work and the signifying part of it come through devising a body that actually lives and moves wrapped in its envelope of flesh, working out its sexuality in narrative of promiscuity, incest and other forms of transgression. There is a continual play with taboo and a testing out of passion and profanation. Moreover, Kamala Das's writings clearly show how she plays at representing the world on an 'as if ticket', as if she were an aggrieved child, a betrayed lover, a frustrated wife, a reluctant nymphomaniac, a lesbian, a transvestite, a narcissist. Though all these appear as 'false maturities,' but by testing different skins she hopes to break the mould of social roles assigned to the woman.

In other words, Kamala Das actively revolts against cultural expectations of 'what women should be.' Most of her writings can be re-viewed as literary representations, which depict and subvert stereotypical images of women. An analysis of her autobiography shows that she relegates conventional life and concerns of women to a subordinate place, treating them as sources of constraints and difficulty. An overarching paternalist ideology and authority determined her choices and rewards, but she contrived her own resistance to it.

The feministic emancipatory impulse reflected in all her writing—poetry, autobiography, short stories—constitutes an essential difference between her and other writers of India. Eunice de Souza is perhaps right when she points out that it is a political act to write "explicitly about one's feelings and needs as an individual in a social situation where the individuality of women is subjugated to their social role." (Debonair)

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Chapter Two

The Critical Perspective

In this chapter I propose to reflect on some of the characteristic critical assessments of Kamala Das. Her writings have drawn critical attention of many critics and creative writers both in India and abroad. A common assumption of most Indian critics is that Kamala Das's literary oeuvre is marked by the qualities of boldness and frankness. The exaggerated way in which critics have often extolled these qualities in her writings has led to the projection of the poet as a literary cult figure and this has had impeded any attempt at a truly valid and critical exposition of her work. Moreover, the prevalent criticism mostly distorts Kamala Das's writing by assimilating it to male norms or man-made stereotypes. As such when we deal with the critical writings on her we see a sort of willed ignorance at work, a disregard for an understanding of her writing from a woman's point of view.

Critics who have attempted to reflect on her works are equally divided between her morals and grammar. Critics particularly in India have tried to comment on the themes of love and sexuality in her poetry and her autobiography *My Story* without any failing. A critical look at some of these comments will show the inherent male biases at work. Anisur Rahman, like most other critics, is impressed by the fact that Kamala Das's poetry is remarkable because it "mirrors her life in all its nakedness."[1] This critic finds the outspoken references to sex and the body so impressive that he, as Vrinda Nabar rightly points out, commits the mistake of describing Kamala Das's sexual life in the most ridiculous terms. Farcical statements like the one quoted below is scattered throughout his book on the poet:

"Love in its real form is extremely heart-warming and the bodily organs, namely, mouth, eyes, ears and hands become entirely precious and lovable. The poet is treated with the solitary food of love through a willing participation in the sexual drama with her partner. Her approval to the matters of sex is purely instinctive. She seeks to sanctify the flesh in a bid to establish an emotional liaison with her partner. She is questing for eternal peace through her total surrender to a human form which, in essence, gives a symbolic entity to the persona in her poems, as also to her imagery."[2]

B.K. Das in his essay entitled "*Kamala Das and the Making of the Indian English Idiom*" writes, "Sex and sensuality are a part of life. In order to accept art one has to affirm sensuality, Kamala Das seems to say."[3] Such understanding of the poet is highly questionable. This critic's assertion of Kamala Das's diction as unconventional may sound correct, but the lists of words he gives starting from *breasts* to *pubis* to assert what he thinks is her contribution to Indian English idiom is undeniably absurd.

Even an intelligent fellow-poet and critic like Keki N. Daruwalla has nothing more original to say about Kamala Das's poetry than that "love the lazy animal hungers of the flesh is the warp and woof of her poetic fabric."[4] There is a reluctance to go beyond a mere surface evaluation.

The critic Devindra Kohli, who wrote a monograph on the poet, is of the opinion that for Kamala Das "poetry is a sort of compulsion-neurosis, so intense is her need to find a release from her emotions."[5] According to him, her preoccupation with the recurrent theme of certitude and precariousness of sexual love simply reflects her "temperamental restlessness". He further asserts that the poet herself did not seem to understand her restlessness, though he feels that the

poems in which she explores its self-inclosing depths have a striking vitality of their own and are distinguished by an 'originality of metaphor'. Through this kind of criticism, the critic seems to imply the lack of conscious intellectual involvement on the part of the poet. Asserting originality of expression and then denying the poet's own understanding of her state of mind creates a contradictory picture. But if we are to assess the originality of metaphors in her work can we accept that the words are just magically poured out without any conscious effort on the part of the poet? No doubt, some of her poems are charged with emotionality, but it would be wrong to suggest that emotionality stands in contradiction to intellectual exercise. The haste in drawing binary oppositions to outweigh one element against the other actually reflects the critic, Devindra Kohli's typical conventional stance and his failure to free himself from its grip. The critic's open assertion that in the monograph he attempts to discuss the *strength* and *weakness* of Kamala Das's poetry clearly reflects how from the start he aims at a contrastive picture.

Kohli's bias is also reflected in his emphasis of the point that the directness of Kamala Das's poetic utterance carries with it an "energy that belongs only to *unpremeditated* and *unreflected* emotions."[6] Instead of recognizing the uniqueness of the distinctly feminine voice in her he compares Kamala Das with Dom Moraes and Nissim Ezekiel and asserts that the former had a greater restraint and the latter a brooding detachment--qualities lacking in Das. He props his argument against the poet's certain personal remarks like: "I have read very little poetry. I do not think that I have been influenced by any poet."[7] Taking note of her lack of formal education he concludes, "This conspicuous absence of an overt intellectual or philosophical framework heightens all the more the primitive

energy and emotional directness of her work. No doubt, in her there is little of Ezekiel's studious striving after craftsmanship, or of the breezy comic irony of Ramanujan, or of the conscious lyricism of Lal."[8]

Kamala Das's lack of formal education has not proved a hindrance to the development of her poetic talents. Like Rabindranath Tagore and many other poets of the earlier generations or for that matter, like her own mother she successfully emerged as a self-taught and self trained poet. Moreover, she herself never regrets her lack of formal education, rather seems to take a very negative stance against institutionalized education when she remarks: "I feel formal education here makes mediocrity out of everybody. I don't think any genius can survive caught in the machine of formal education. It works like a bulldozer with which everybody is brought to a low level. They won't tolerate brilliance, they won't tolerate independent thinking. I don't believe that one can be a pundit, great scholar, by digesting what other scholars have written. I think we must find our own conclusions from our experiences."[9]

A close look at her background as is reflected in the autobiography will reveal that there was never any possibility of a conspicuous absence of intellectual framework/involvement in Kamala Das's life as Kohli tries to claim. Kamala Das grew up in an ambience where literary pursuits were nurtured and greatly valued. Her grand-uncle, Narayan Menon, her mother, the poet Balamaniamma are well-known names in Malayalam Literature. As a child Kamala Das along with her elder brother cultivated the habit of reading books and writing poetry and short pieces. They also staged Malayalam adaptations of classics like Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, Kalidas's *Shakuntalam* and Bhashas's *Swapnavasavadattam* regularly at their ancestral home in order to entertain relatives and friends. At quite a young

age Kamala Das began composing verses which her school teacher made good use of especially when some foreign guests paid their visits to the school. But because of her swarthy skin young Kamala was deprived of the opportunity to recite her own creations before the white-skinned guests. The teacher assigned the task of reading out the poems to a pretty little girl of white descent who was the cynosure of the school. Of her first poetic endeavour she writes in the autobiography:

"I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. Each poem of mine made me cry."

Later when Kamala Das asserts that she had read very little poetry it does not point to her lack of training or rigorous intellectual exercise, or pursuit of higher education. To me such utterances bear significance only in the context when we consider the uniqueness of her themes and style of expression. Her poems are marked by radical subversiveness that shakes the foundation of conventional values and acquired sensibility. In this sense she is perhaps right to assert that she has read very little poetry and is not influenced by any poet, for in the contemporary literary scene in India Kamala Das's outspoken, direct and overwhelmingly self-assertive verse is a rare phenomenon. While her fellow poets write in more or less abstract and surrealistic style she expresses her feminine sensibility in a down to earth manner. It is rather difficult to decipher traces of direct influence of any poets on her. Even her mother's poetry that idealizes femininity appears in sharp contrast to what Kamala Das writes. But this lack of any influence on her is regarded by Kohli as a negative aspect perhaps because he himself has imbibed too much of Eliot's theory of tradition and individual talent.

In spite of the fact that her formal education was truncated by her early marriage she kept herself involved with books and writing (a habit she cultivated in her early childhood) and struggled to continue this involvement against all odds all her life.

Kohli is also judgmental when he mentions the lack of a philosophical stance in Kamala Das. He fails to see how the feminine voice in Kamala Das is not only used to critique the tradition-bound, conservative society but also to voice deep-felt philosophical dilemmas and conflicts. Although, Kamala Das's major contribution as a woman writer lies in her radical attempt at rendering the "personal as political", she often tends to go a step beyond this by giving a philosophical twist to her subversive thoughts. This is evident in such confessional and personal poems like "The Old Playhouse", "Composition", "An Introduction", and some chapters of her controversial autobiography. While launching a vociferous attack on the all-pervasive masculine domination and exploitation in a heterosexual relationship she does not hesitate to pause and reflect on the universality of love, as is seen in the poem "The Old Playhouse". In this poem, she questions the perpetual subjugation of the *feminine* self, but paradoxically concludes it with her understanding of love as "Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted/By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last/An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors/To shatter and the kind night to erase the water". To a radical feminist, such romantic yet deeply philosophical insertion may appear to mar the strength of the poem, but I see this as an attempt to go beyond one's physical confinement. This is what makes her capable of

concluding her autobiography--a work resplendent with candid treatment of love and sexuality, in an impersonal and objective note:

"Both happiness and unhappiness are mine to enjoy. I have no end. Nothing has an end. Instead of an end, all that we suffer is a discomposition."

"We are trapped in immortality and our only freedom is the freedom to discompose..."

Quite contrary to any male critic is a woman critic's understanding of Kamala Das. In an interview, the Canadian writer and critic, Merrily Weisbord was asked to give her opinion on Kamala Das's bold attitude to sex. To this she replied:

"Her (Kamala Das) attitude to sex is not so bold. For a well-bred Hindu woman *My Story* was bold. But for me it is not bold. Sexuality is much more explicit in our North American discourses. What I find courageous in her was that she plumbs the depths of human relationships. She doesn't make simply black or white even in her own relationships. She allows all shades of grey..."[10]

Most Indian critics have failed to decipher the shades of grey in her work. This is because they very often take the blatant and directness of expression in Kamala Das's poetry and prose quite literally. In the process the ironic undertone as well as philosophical broodings are altogether missed out. Many of the critical comments and reflections show the typical bent of mind of the Indian critics—their inhibitions, fears and hypocritical stance when it comes to evaluate a woman writer's dealing with taboo subjects like love and sexuality. To this end their critical reflections actually picture the overall impact of the Indian patriarchal values on their own psyches that have shaped their outlook, judgement and critical perspective.

A few critics have gone to the extent of literally excavating the Nair heritage to which Kamala Das belongs, in order to draw possible connections between certain pristine customary practices of this matrilineal community and her candid approach to the delineation of the themes of love and sex. M. Elias in his article, "*Kamala Das and Nayar Heritage*"[11] tries to justify his arguments about the unusualness of Das's poetry by drawing some absurd conclusions based on his assumption of the impact of the cultural heritage on the poet. He refers to Robin Jeffrey's *The Decline of Nayar Dominance* while elaborating on the socio-historical fact of Nayar women's requirement to uncover their breasts before temple deities and caste superiors. In her autobiography, Kamala Das makes a conscious effort to narrate and thereby critique certain characteristic traits of traditional conservative Nair families like: their phobic resilience to sex, the women folks' nurturance on stories of sexual violence and misdeeds of mythological figures like Ravana and Kichaka, and the custom of early marriage of the Nair girl who is usually shocked at the spouse's sexual haste on the wedding-night. As a woman writer, Kamala Das feels the need to bring to light the psychological and physical constraints with which the women in her so-called matrilineal community had had to exist. But, M.Elias generalizes the narration of all these crudities as the cumulative effect of the wholesale sexual humiliation of Nair women on the "mythmaking" consciousness of the poet. Further, he interprets Kamala Das's description of her fiancée's sexual initiation and haste (soon after the engagement) and his sexual exploits of his maidservants and his extra-marital affairs with his cousins as the "Nayar maiden unburdening her collective nightmare." Elias also expresses his reservations about the veracity of such descriptions by adding in the footnote of his article that there is amplification

and fictiveness in Das's narration of sexual exploits of her husband. Perhaps, because of his non-Hindu background, M.Elias could not guess that what Kamala Das says about Nair women's phobic attitude towards sex is also true about Indian women in general. Kamala Das wrote in her autobiography ".... the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia." If sex or the mention of it is the principal phobia of the Nair women, so is the case with the majority of Indian women. Moreover, the mythological stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are routinely narrated to most Hindu women in their childhood and Nair women are no exception in this acculturation. Besides, the custom of early marriage of girls was a prevalent custom and is still so in the major chunk of the Indian population. In spite of legal restrictions most Indian girls used to be and are still married off at a young age and in most cases they inevitably experience sexual shock. Wasn't the bandit queen of India too, a victim of such marital shock, humiliation and exploitation? Did she belong to the Nair community? One need not unnecessarily claim and overemphasize that due to her Nair lineage Kamala Das succeeds in narrating the crudities of her own experience of sex so frankly. Indeed, her early marriage, her shock at the sexual haste of her husband both before and after marriage, her disgust towards this are common to most Indian women. But as a writer of great sensibility she has felt the need to expose her personal truths to highlight and problematize the general plight of Indian women. Instead of recognizing the strength in the feminine voice in Kamala Das, M.Elias deliberately tries to malign it through such parochial and judgmental remarks like:

"Kamala Das echoes the age-old sense of insecurity of Nayar women, condemned to a matrilineal system which did away with formal marriage...The

husband is throughout cast in the mould of the ancient Nayar men who climbed the social ladder from the lowest rung of bodyguards to the highest of rajas while their womenfolk endured the humiliation of baring breasts to satisfy their betters...Thus the mainspring of this author's vociferous assertions of female sexual virility is professedly atavistic. It is related to her awareness that although outwardly she is like the rest of the memsahibs...there are deep differences between her and other school butterflies. She alone carries embers of passion inherited from the Nayar ancestresses who encountered the social sanction against formal marriages for them by cultivating what she imagines to be such an irresistible feminine charm that they were able to maintain veritable male harems and to enjoy the unique distinction of indulging in polyandry."[12]

Nowhere in the autobiography Kamala Das hints that her maternal grandmother(s), her own mother and she herself had to expose their breasts in the public. Therefore, though Nair women in the process of historical consolidation of the community in the past were required to bare their breasts, this itself need not be a direct humiliation to the author. Elias had himself amplified the "breasts baring" custom of the past to show that sexual virility is an atavistic trait that runs deep in the poet's subconscious. His narrow perspective does not allow him to see the strength of the radical and subversive feminine voice in the poet.

Not that Elias is unique in tracing the Nayar heritage of Kamala Das, the poet-critic R. Parthasarathy too, reiterates this when he writes: "Traditionally, Nayar women were sexually uninhibited because of the practice of marumakkathyam (matrilineal system of inheritance and succession). And Kamala Das's forthright treatment of sexual relations is an offshoot of her Nayar

background."[13] The superficial level of concern with or understanding of the concept of marumkkathyam is evident in Parthasarathy's comment.

Hari Mohan Prasad too reiterates the same point when he writes "The Nayar heritage acts like a dynamo constantly supplying energy and tumult to her poetry. The Nayar women were condemned to a matrilineal system which did away with marriage...This history of sexual humiliation is written in the circuits of the brain of the sensitive women of this race. Sex was their phobia but their blood carried irresistible germs of polyandry.[14]

Though the Nayar community may appear to be matrilineal in the sense that the daughter inherits the family's property, it is always the brother or the maternal uncle who exercises the supreme power. It would be wrong to generalize that traditionally Nayar women were sexually uninhibited, at least, in the light of Kamala Das's autobiography where she describes in great details all the women of the Nalapat family, who were seen to have led a physically and spiritually cloistered life. In the autobiography we witness four generations – great grandmother and her two sisters, grandmother, mother and daughter and except for the poet herself, all others are portrayed as conventional, reticent and spiritually oriented. Their socialization, culture consciousness, and urge to live up to the *feminine* ideal, all reflect the impact of patriarchy rather than any strong matriarchal culture. Most of them have led some sort of cocooned existence and are never seen as taking the lead in any affair nor exercising supreme authority, though custom wise they are entitled to the right to inherit ancestral properties. As we have seen, when it comes to decision-making, such as arrangement of marriages, it is always the men who take the initiatives. When Kamala Das narrates the arrangement of her mother's marriage and later of her own, it is

always the father and the uncle who are seen to exercise full power and the right to decide the bride-groom. Nobody could raise any question or display discontent or could ever dare to alter their final verdict. The mothers are hardly consulted or given due importance for their independent thinking. Kamala Das writes of her mother being mortally afraid of her father. Through the portrayal of the grand uncle's mother whom Kamala Das called Valiamma she brings to the readers notice how the interference of the uncles in the women's lives shaped their destiny. We are told that this great grandmother's Brahmin husband was thrown out of the house because he fell out of favour with the uncle. Later, the woman was married off to her father's nephew. This woman who never stepped out of the house for thirty years took recourse to silence perhaps to show her deep felt vengeance against the rule of the males in the family. Kamala Das compares her capacity for silence with the "swamps that form themselves during the Malabar monsoons." Similarly, the great grandmother's younger sister, whom Kamala Das called Ammalu is also portrayed as a quite and introvert person. Of her she writes, "She spoke very little and went out only to attend the annual Ekadasi festival of the Guruvayoor temple." None of these women are seen as self-assertive and sexually uninhibited. On the other hand, Kamala Das as a young girl had to bow down before their conservatism. At a tender age she had to take to wearing saris or clothes that hid her legs fully, for the ladies at Nalapat she writes were "conservative, puritanical and orthodox". Had these elderly women been sexually uninhibited themselves, then unwanted illicit pregnancies of maid-servants would not have been dealt with such severity as is reflected in the autobiography. The women of the Nalapat family were all puritans per excellence. Perhaps this is why Kamala Das expressed her feeling of relief when she heard the news of her

grandmother's death although this grandmother was very dear to her. Kamala Das did not want to hurt her loving but conservative grandmother with her unconventional thinking. If we take account of all these facts which are vividly delineated in the autobiography we will come to realize that the critics who have deliberately attempted to link up the Nayar heritage to Kamala Das's candid expression do so without giving due importance to her self writing.

There seems to be various reasons behind some critics' overemphasis on the impact of Nayar heritage on the poet. One definite cause is that the kind of poetry and prose writing, which Kamala Das has evolved with a persistent focus on themes like love and sexuality is quite unconventional in the Indian literary scenario. So, some critics see the need to trace the origin of this, at times disturbing unconventionality, in order to find out some root cause. But some others follow the trail in a deliberate attempt to neutralize the impact and contribution of her radical writings. That some have gone to the extent of linking the "breast baring" custom to her openness of expression shows how the Indian psyche, even in the modernist era, is not yet ready to accept a woman writer's openness to taboo subjects. While we may assume that there are some who fail to recognize the subversiveness in Kamala Das, there are still others who have strategically attempted to deny the uniqueness of the strident feminine voice in her. The later position is quite detrimental to a proper understanding of her work and we ought to deconstruct it from a feminist perspective.

However, it would be erroneous to assert that only male critics are biased in their critical approaches to the poet. Female critics writing in the shadow of malestream critical perspective perpetuate similar ideas. The fact that a critic is female does not guarantee that she would readily accept a woman-writer's dealing

with taboo subjects. As for instance, Vimala Rao believes that Kamala Das's promiscuous self-exposure defames her art and personality. She strongly feels that "Kamala Das finally appears to be a poet of decadence...a victim of the inadequacies of her life, failing to gain control over her art."[15]

Vrinda Nabar's book on Kamala Das "The Endless Female Hunger" borrows its title from one of Kamala Das's poems, "The Looking Glass." Within the context of the poem the words have relevance but as the title of the book it appears impertinent except for the fact that it reflects the critic's interest in establishing the poet as one who is preoccupied with depicting carnal appetite as the core of the confessional outpourings. While comparing Kamala Das with Sylvia Plath, Nabar comments "For Kamala, it is the confession that matters, and sometimes it seems that the poetry is incidental."[16] Here Nabar seems to repeat the same mistake as Kohli, who nearly two decades before her tried to suggest Kamala Das's "originality of metaphor" while emphasising that there is a conspicuous lack of intellectual involvement in her. Nabar by trying to tear apart the content –confession-- and the creative form–poetry-- perhaps intends to suggest (like Kohli) that Kamala Das's intellectual affiliation to her work is not that strong. The suggestion that in Kamala Das's poetry confession as the subject-matter only matters and that poetry is incidental implies that the form and the content in Kamala Das's poetry is not complementary, that the two stand apart. Elucidating her point, Nabar writes, " I do not suggest that the poetry is of no value but only that its confessional core dominates the reader's awareness. Exposing the limitations of the poetry seems to make no difference to Kamala Das's reputation, which means that the overwhelming majority of her Indian readers respond largely to her personality." It is perhaps naïve to generalize or

speculate on the readers' responses to the poet. Moreover, whether the readers respond to her personality or not, is not essentially an important issue. If the confessional core dominates the reader's awareness it does not necessarily suggest that the poetry itself bears no significance, that it is incidental. Critics may take a critical look at her form and style of expression but to suggest that the confession matters while poetry is incidental is ridiculous. On the other hand, one has to recognize that Kamala Das is a very conscious poet deliberately choosing English as the language of poetic expression. She has written novels and many short stories in her mother tongue, Malayalam. But when it comes to writing poetry she expresses herself only in English. To such a self-taught, self-conscious poet poetry can never become incidental. Rather, it serves as a convincing tool to express herself, her fears, and foibles, and her feminine sensibility. She also uses poetry to critique patriarchal biases and social injustices. Reflecting on her decision to write in English, Eunice de Souza writes, "She has spared us what in some circles, nativist and expatriate, is still considered mandatory: the politically, correct 'anguish' of writing in English."[17] Kamala Das is not a self-indulgent confessional poet. In her best poems she speaks for women, especially Indian women as caught up in the quagmire of conjugal ties with all its conventional barriers. She voices pain, inadequacy, despair, longing for freedom, a 'space' of one's own where feminine identity gets its long deserved recognition. As de Souza points out, Kamala Das is capable of handling varied effects: "the brooding intensity of 'The Old Playhouse' which brings together all her major concerns, the search for love, the power politics of relationships, the controlled tenderness of 'Three P.M.' and the acerbity of 'The Proud One' in which the speaker observes her men 'lying nailed to his bed in imitation/of the great crucifixion."[18]

Nabar writes with pursed lips, frequent exclamation marks and an exasperated desire to tidy up what she sees as Das's lazy sentences, tiresome attitude and penchant for role-playing. To her the following lines from "Composition" appear arbitrarily broken up:

Before the red house that had

stood for innocence

crumbled

and the old woman died,

lying for three months,

paralysed,

while the thieving ants climbed her hands

and ate the cuticle

Using her critical license Nabar rewrites the lines in the following way in order to shorten them:

Before the red house that had stood for innocence

crumbled and the old woman died,

lying for three months, paralysed,

while the thieving ants climbed her hands

and ate the cuticle

There can be no objection to Nabar's using her critical license, but in the process she renders the free verses a prosaic quality. In Kamala Das's original writing each of the words 'crumbled' and 'paralysed' stands alone. The inevitable tragic end of the ancestral home and the death and suffering of one of its senior occupants-the paralysed grandmother- is well expressed when the words are

placed in this manner. Nabar's punctuated lines truncate the effect. In this poem Kamala Das recollects her past, days spent at her ancestral abode, the Nalapat home. When the house eventually collapsed the qualities it stood for—love, warmth, innocence--- disappeared too. The process of dilapidation, the grandmother's physical suffering, inaction and death and the poet's nostalgic account of all these are poignantly expressed in the poem. Besides the story of personal loss, Kamala Das has also addressed other associated themes like dilemma, moral conflict, and the urge to outgrow constriction. Under the rubric of 'composition' she literally weaves the tapestry of life signaling the vacillation of the inner mindscape where memories of the bygone days collide with the realities of the present. The poem is long no doubt but is not structurally loose and slipshod as Nabar suggests.

Monika Verma, one of the better women poets of an older generation too criticized Kamala Das for falling into what she believes flat, adolescent and old-fashioned expressions. Bruce King while analysing Kamala Das's poetry compares the opening stanza of Verma's first poem, 'In the Domino Dusk,' of her *Drangonflies Draw Flames* (1962, 1966):

Read Rimbaud in the domino dusk of the stalagmite

Even

When little bats go wheeling

Black into shadows asprawl upon the ground.

While 'domino dusk', 'stalagmite evening' and 'shadows asprawl' show the poet's love of words, they are part of a self-conscious poetic diction with no roots in common speech. Kamala Das's language on the other hand is marked by naturalness and directness as is reflected in the poem 'Word':

...Words are a nuisance, but

They grow on me like leaves on a tree,

They never seem to stop their coming

From a silence, somewhere deep within...

In 'An Apology to Gautama' the naturalness of expression and rhythm is powerful and the scene rapidly created:

...and yet Gautama,

The other own me; while your arms hold

My woman-form, his hurting arms

Hold my very soul.

Even 'woman-form,' though an Indian compound word coinage, sounds so natural to a foreign critic's ears that he acknowledges the naturalness of Kamala Das's language in quite laudatory terms. The directness of speech rhythms and colloquial language is an expression of emotional involvement. Das's language reveals feelings in all their quirkiness and unpredictability. According to Bruce King Kamala Das offers "a range of highly volatile emotions with poems unexpectedly changing direction and gaining effect from their inner contrasts, conflicts, ironies and extremes."[19]

Her poetry and her autobiography attempt to express what has been repressed or censored out by dominant definitions of reality and values. But time and again native critics have misunderstood/misinterpreted the subversiveness, directness and the volatile quality in her and expressed their disparaging views in vilifying terms. On the internet Aditi Chaturvedi writes:

"Her entire life has been devoted to glorifying adultery and the enslavement of self to self gratification. Who else but Bibi Surayya could have been the past author of such "erotic masterpieces" as " the musk of sweat between breasts/The warm shock of menstrual blood should not be hidden from one's beloved" or about how woman should "Stand nude before the glass with him," and allow her lover, "to see her exactly as she is."

Some NRI comments that Kamala Das writes "unadulterated crap." It takes a lot of courage and self-assurance to withstand that sort of barrage from the mainstream. We can conclude that what 'genuine' criticism of Kamala Das's work exists is surprisingly little for so substantial a poet and a writer.

Yet, whatever the critics have to say, it is a fact that Kamala Das has managed to clear a space for herself, and to find a voice of her own. The hardest thing to develop, for any writer, is a voice. To find one's own voice is the thing which most liberates a poet. And to this end Kamala Das as a poet and a writer greatly succeeds in spite of all her oddities. This point will be clear as we proceed to discuss her writings in greater details in the following chapters.

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Chapter Three

Kamala Das's *My Story*: A Critical Perspective

As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* wrote:

"Women do not set themselves up as subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men."[1]

What Simone de Beauvoir said half a century ago is still relevant today especially in India where we have not yet witnessed a proliferation of autobiographies by women writers. Work like Kamala Das's *My Story* which is sensationalized as a best-selling book with the writer's photographs donning the cover to make it more saleable, in a way points out the virtual absence of this form of literature among women writers.

Virginia Woolf, one of the pioneers of feminist literary criticism exhorts every woman who adopts the writer's profession to undertake two enterprises: firstly, to "kill the Angel in the House" and secondly, to "tell the truth about her own experience as a body". In most cultures woman is like the angel in the house because she is represented as "intensely sympathetic, immensely charming and utterly unselfish" and who "never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others." In the Indian context, though the metaphor angel is not in vogue, the word "Nari" and its corollary term "Devi" with all their socio-cultural connotations imply ideas, which are very close to those Woolf exposes in connection with the concept of the 'angel in the house'. Across every culture and country it has been a Herculean task for the feminine self to 'Kill the Angel' and 'Tell the Truth' simultaneously.

With access to modern education and the resultant changes that it brought in the individual and social lives of women both intellectuals as well as common women, who have attempted to narrate their selves in autobiographical writings have achieved the first of the two tasks. Virginia Woolf herself succeeded at the first but admitted that she had failed at the second. "The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet."[2] There is perhaps an unavoidable fear in every woman's mind to face the unpredictable and disastrous consequences of self-disclosure, in all its veritable essence, and Virginia Woolf must have realized it too well to admit.

Yet one must endeavour to take up the challenge and agree with what Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielson assert in their introduction to a collection of Feminist essays published in 1987 :

"Writing plays a vital part in forming our perceptions of our lives as women, in working out our feminist views and in communicating them to others."[3]

Only by writing and taking a participatory role as against passivity can the woman writer succeed in breaking down existing social power structures and carve out a niche for herself in the hostile world of masculine prejudices and hierarchies. Through her own deliberation she has to dismantle the entire structure that has so far rendered her voiceless by always assigning her a marginalised position. But to free herself absolutely from the shackles of patriarchy, she has to wage an external war against all subjugating forces, as well as steer an internal crusade against her own self to cleanse her subconscious mind off all the values

she imbibed under the aegis of the father's rule. This process which involves setting oneself new paradigms of gender egalitarianism is beset with hazards and obstacles. But by writing the self, the woman writer could challenge accepted notions of the female and redraft general opinion on the *feminine mystique*. The feminist writer, Rosalind Brachkenbury, emphasizes this unique role of the woman writer in the following words:

"Nobody writes in a vacuum, away from the political and social structures in which we live. We breathe the air of today's thought, we digest it in everything we read and consider: also, we create it. This is largely the role of women today: to create, present and consider a new world."[4]

In the Indian context, Kamala Das's autobiography, *My Story* is a radical attempt at using the genre to subvert prevalent patriarchal biases. She is one among very few women who has shown an indomitable courage to tell the truth about her experiences as a body thereby killing the "angel in the house" and disclosing the truth of her typically feminine experiences. But very few critics till date have felt the necessity or rather gathered courage to admit the autobiography's subversive and radical approach. Most critics have only felt that Kamala Das, in this book "projects the image of woman incensed with the lust of the body and the desire for varied experiences of love."[5]

My Story is the only attempt of its kind among Indian women autobiographers in English (or for that matter in any other regional languages) to tread the "untrodden path of exploring and sharing the experience of the body."[6] Kamala Das confronts her body with unparalleled candidness and honesty of expression, quite unlike her fellow autobiographers who have tactfully shunned

any explicit reference to their bodies. But before critically assessing *My Story* in the light of feminist criticism, it will be useful to summarize the criticism that has set the standards for judging autobiographies by both men and women.

The critical study of autobiography as a legitimate genre received earnest consideration after World War II when the formal analysis of all types of literature burgeoned. Before then, autobiographies were considered of interest almost exclusively for the information they provided about the lives of their authors. It can be claimed that prior to World War II there was virtually no interest in the style or form of the life studies. Most criticism concentrated on British and Continental autobiographies of famous men whose private lives were a source of curiosity.

During the fifties and sixties, critics of autobiography turned their attention primarily to questions of legitimacy: whether or not autobiography was, indeed, a genuine literary genre or merely a branch of history. A particular concern was to distinguish autobiography from letters, journals, reminiscences, biographies, and the like, that is the forms the critics of the thirties lumped together. Wayne Shumaker was the first to come out clearly on the literary side of the debate, advancing the claim that autobiography was a genre distinct from biography.[7] Barrett John Mandel agrees, arguing that autobiography is a "conscious shaping of the selected events of one's life into a coherent whole."[8]

Georges Gusdorf, the dean of autobiographical studies used the metaphor of 'mirror' in his well-known essay 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (1956) and said, "Autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image". The autobiographical self, which in his view is the self "opposed to

all others" is a highly individualistic self which has a very self-assertive ego. Gusdorf not only theorizes about such a self but also gives examples of such selves. An autobiographer in his view is like great painters Rembrandt or Van Gogh, the proud individuals who fell in love with their Venetian mirror and also with the images the mirror projected so much, that as a result they endlessly multiplied their self-portraits. They held their self images in such an esteem that they preserved those images on the canvas for the generations to come. Like them the autobiographer too "considers himself a great person, worthy of men's remembrance," concludes Gusdorf.

Here I feel the necessity to digress a bit to reflect on the validity of Gusdorf's analogical argument. The analogy Gusdorf draws to prove his point between painters who painted self-portraits and autobiographers is naively superfluous, for today we can very well reflect on the reasons behind an artist like Van Gogh's involvement with his self-portraits. Van Gogh was a poverty-stricken painter of the Post-Impressionist era passionately involved in evolving his own style. His passion for life and art gave way to insanity. But the genius in him was fully at work and with every new portrait he matured his expressionist style and was successful in capturing the undeniable impact of violent swinging moods on his personality and facial expression. Interestingly his passion for life is not only reflected in the portraits but also in all other compositional works, even a pair of old, dirty and soiled *shoes* which delineated the toil of the wearer from the peasantry. It is not his love for himself that had made him draw self-portraits as Gusdorf tries to assert. From his paintings, sketches, writings and his final act of committing suicide we can infer that he was not concerned with petty worldly

ambitions of fame, recognition and immortality. Gusdorf's analogy is not only erroneous but is belittling the great artist's ingenuous attempts at capturing the surrounding world in lines and colours. Moreover, if portraiture is analogous to writing autobiography where is the reference to woman artists, some of who have equally mastered the genre? Does this show Gosdorf's lack of knowledge of visual art or his attempt at cleverly appropriating some well-known names to prove his points?

Apart from the leading critics of the fifties like Shumaker, Mandel and Gusdorf there were critics like Roy Pascal and Robert Sayre in the sixties who were equally enthusiastic about coming up with some formal definitions of autobiography. Pascal in his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) decisively opts for a formal distinction between autobiography and all other self-writings. To him, autobiography is a retrospective, coherent, and holistic shaping, the imposition of an orderly pattern upon the life of the narrating self.[9]

Contrary to these critics who espoused formal definitions, there were some critics who expressed feeling of unease and restriction at the limitations imposed by formal definitions and argued for more flexibility in defining the genre. The poet-critic, Stephen Spender was one among this new band of critics. Spender in "Confessions and Autobiography" (1955), urges the acceptance of subjective revelations, albeit he had some reservations when he recognized that the effort to integrate the public and the private selves sometimes make autobiographies ungainly in form.[10] In this he was no different from his contemporaries and predecessors all of whom equally failed to recognize and foresee women's

autobiographies where the deliberate fusion of the private and the public realms have dramatically altered the very defining contours of the genre.

In *Metaphors of Self* (1972), Olney contends that all autobiography is a process, neither a form nor a content. It is neither fiction nor history, but each man's metaphor of his life—the predetermined self-image that shapes both the content and form of his life and his life study.[11] Olney's claim of autobiography as metaphor of life would have been applicable to woman autobiographer as well had he not remained ignorant of or indifferent to women's autobiographies, despite the women's movement.

In *The Value of the Individual* (1978) Karl Weintraub analyzes autobiographical forms as having evolved from stereotypical personality modes to modern expression of each author's unique personality.[12] Strange enough, though critics of Weintraub's kind talk of author's unique expressions they never made any attempt to interpret women's self-writings from their unique perspective, which they unfailingly reserved only for the exegesis of male writers' works.

Most critics today tend to accept autobiography as a content, not a strictly defined form. There is less concern now with prescriptive definitions of a "true" or "good" autobiography. Interest is shown by and large to the concrete and the personal rather than the philosophical or abstract. It should be noted here that all the existing definitions and expectations of autobiography so far was based on the reading—almost exclusively---of men's autobiographies.

Apart from all the attempts by different critics to define formally the genre, following Georges Gusdorf theorists from Ronald Barthes to James Olney have consistently upheld and maintained the idea of centrally located 'I' as the

precondition for autobiography. "Separate selfhood is the very motive of (autobiographical) creation,"[13] asserted James Olney. Gusdorf who holds almost the same idea is of the opinion that in ancient civilization of the East the genre could not flourish at all due to the adherence to the concept of 'annihilation' of the ego on the metaphysical plane. Under the influence of these critics, there developed a school of critical thinking which valued autobiography as a genre of individualistic self.

It was only with the advent of feminist literary criticism, Gusdorf kind of typical malestream criticism came under the purview of close scrutiny and deliberate re-interpretation. Since the seventies onwards, feminist theorists like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Estelle Jelinek, Shari Banstock, Nancy Chodorow, Sheila Rowbotham, Nancy Friedman and others have started questioning the traditional paradigm of isolate self on the ground that it doesn't take into consideration minority classes. In Friedman's opinion, "self, self-creation and self consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities and many non-Western peoples."[14] Feminist critics vehemently critiqued Gusdorfian theory of centrally located isolate selfhood because they believed it leads to misreading and marginalization of autobiographical texts by minorities. Thus, to their mind, the critical tradition of the genre supports restrictive and unspoken cannon of White Male autobiographers. However, there is no denying the fact that most of the above-mentioned male critics have advanced the understanding of autobiography as a distinct genre. The main hindrance they offered is that through their insistence on individualistic paradigms for the self they have, "obscured the presence and significance of women's autobiography in literary tradition."[15] Surprisingly, many

critics of the purist orientation still feel threatened by the notion of a "woman's autobiographical tradition" because it conjures up a relativism that negates conventional valuation.

Although most autobiographical criticism today still falls into two categories: thematic interpretation and theoretical definition of the genre, feminist critics on their part have tried to trace the history of women's autobiographies by focusing on their subject matter and narrative forms and the self-image that is projected. There is now a massive and sophisticated body of criticism on autobiography from the feminist perspective. More and more critics are devoting their time to carefully investigate how through writing the self is invented, constructed, projected or remains poised on the threshold. Here I shall consider some of the leading feminist critics' views on women's self-writing while simultaneously pointing out the underlying differences in various aspects of content and form between women's and men's autobiographies.

Nancy Chodorow in her book *Psychoanalysis and Sociology of Gender* (1978)[16] examines the psychology of gender socialization and suggests that the concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to women. This is because, woman in her view represents a relational identity and unlike that of men fluid ego boundaries mark their orientation to self. A woman forms her identity in relation to others. The socio-cultural set–up of patriarchy intensifies her traits of relationality and finally she emerges not as an individual but as a person with collective identity constantly aware of the society's prescription for her female self. Indian psychoanalysts like Sudhir Kakar, Indira Parikh and Ashish Nandy's research in women's identity-formation in the Indian context supports the theory

of women's collective selfhood. But instead of hampering their growth such a collective trait of women's personality in these psychoanalysts' view very often strengthens their personality. Of course sometimes it also becomes the root cause of their dual consciousness, which is so intensely portrayed in Kamala Das's autobiography, *My Story*.

When woman, as a person who doesn't possess the proverbial isolate self which resides at the center of the text, takes that unusually radical stance to write her self in any autobiographical form, the product that results inevitably differs both in form and content from that of male self-writings. One can anticipate finding in women's texts a disinterred self defining itself through the age-old feminine strategy of denial of public acclaim, a story of self-denial rather than of self-glorification. Patricia Meyer Spacks highlights this element of women's autobiography in her essay aptly called 'Selves in Hiding' (1980). She discusses five most successful women's autobiographies and shows how these autobiographies are the "stories of unusual female achievement" but nevertheless "the narratives convey singular absence of personal satisfaction in achievement."[17] In their public lives all the five great women--Emmeline Pankhurst, the English suffragist; Dorothy Day, a founder of the radical 'Catholic Workers'; Emma Goldman, the fiery anarchist; Eleanor Roosvelt; and Golda Meir--have accomplished immensely still in their self-writings they place their personal lives before the public realm making the personal definitely sound more important than the public. In Spack's view by doing so these great achiever women "use autobiography, paradoxically as a mode of self-denial." Evading an assertive self

in public in favor of a passive, private self in Spack's view is a narrative strategy, which reflects "both a female dilemma and a female solution."

Because of such a trend in the autobiographies of public women it is generally assumed that as far as a woman's autobiography projects an image of private strength and public passivity it cannot appear to mirror the establishment history of the autobiographers' times. Therefore, the general belief that a good autobiography is always representative of its times and a mirror to the era doesn't hold true in relation to women's life-narratives. Yet, the fact that women's autobiographies from diverse languages and historical time have displayed certain obvious similarities in theme and style of self-negation, self-effacement in a way highlights the effect and undeniable impact of patriarchal values and conventions on their spirits and writings. In this sense they do reflect their social situation and acculturation.

Susan Friedman too launches a useful critique of general theories of autobiography that postulates it as having to do solely with a growth of individualism. She is right in arguing, counter to Gusdorf and others that the form depends on *identification*, *interdependence* and *community* as means of enablement. For Friedman, "Individualistic paradigms of self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities,"[18] and she shows how particularly relevant rationality is in assessing the process of women's self-individuation.

Very often women's autobiographies revolve around personal lives, domestic details, family difficulties and the people (especially men) who have influenced them. The emphasis remains on personal matters---not the

professional, philosophical, or historical events that are more often the subjects of men's autobiographies. This emphasis on the personal, especially on the people rather than on their own selves clearly contradicts the established orientation about the contents of autobiography. Instead of residing at the center, the autobiographical subject in woman's autobiography unhesitatingly and undisguisingly takes up a peripheral position. Woman's autobiography then, while it absorbs and gives back the words, ideas, phrases and rhythms of the language of which it is a part, speaks also with the words, ideas, phrases and rhythms of the margin. Women write, as Steive Smith said, 'on the edge', eccentrically, and their perspective on central culture can thus be said to be slanted.

Likewise, the identity image is similar throughout women's autobiographies. In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image coloured by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders or "other". They feel the need for authentication, to prove their self-worth. Thus while men's autobiography invariably projects a self–image of confidence and determination, the self-image constructed by woman is just the opposite. Paradoxically enough, women project self-confidence and a positive sense of accomplishment in having overcome many obstacles mostly in mundane matters. For men autobiography becomes a well-charted graph of an achiever, a successful success-oriented traveller on the path of life, with a well-defined destination, which shapes his self-narrative into a coherent whole.

Narratologically men's autobiography has linear structure. Unlike women's autobiography it has a distinct focal point which dominates the

narratives. The style of women's autobiographies is integral with their paradoxical self-image: episodic and anecdotal, nonchronological and disjunctive. Christiane Makward, one of the important translators of and commentators on French feminism, describes the female language as:

"open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriental, masterly or 'didactic languages."[19]

Although there are a fair number of exceptions----women writing in typically male progressive and linear narratives and men writing anecdotally and disjunctively, especially in recent decades---the pattern does persist. Jelinek points out that whether or not there is a direct connection between the disjunctive style of women's autobiographies and the fragmentation of their lives may be speculative, but it is a reasonable conjecture. Underlining the distinction between man's and woman's autobiographies and explaining it, Jelinek writes:

"It is not surprising that with men socially conditioned to pursue the single goal of a successful career, we find such harmony and orderliness in their autobiographies.....On the other hand irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women. The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiography."[20]

Shari Benstock endorses the same view when she writes:

"The self that would reside at the center of the texts is disinterred -- often is absent altogether in women's autobiographical texts. The very requirements of

genre are put into question by limits of gender... Gender itself raises questions about genre."[21]

Though feminist criticism especially with the emergence of the second wave feminism in the sixties has taken several directions, the need for the woman writer to express herself is time and again foregrounded by the leading critics. As the emphasis on demystifying the myth of the female and generating a new role for the woman in society became popular more and more women writing began to appear in public. The feeling of social responsibility in reconstructing her social role gave the woman writer courage and confidence. Freudian psychoanalysis where the verbalization of individual experience was considered therapeutic, made the autobiographical mode itself popular. The idea of autobiography as expression became an accepted means for the woman writer to explore her personal identity as well as create a newer and better perception on gender issues. By the very act of writing, the woman writer is construed to be breaking social mores due to the valorization of silence as a desirable "feminine" attribute. More than a negative thing valorizing here acts positively, for through the use of it the woman writer is attempting a breaking up of the power structures of hitherto acceptable patriarchal discourse. Linda Anderson theorizes on this aspect of women's autobiographical discourse. She writes:

"It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden. She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the

place from which she writes, is produced by difference and produces differences."[22]

It is a general assumption that every autobiography is essentially an exercise in transparency. But the idea of transparency works in it with an inherent implication of opposition. It calls for limits and also envisages limitlessness. And closely related to the idea of transparency is the actual delineation of personal and intimate matters. Autobiographers are frequently faulted for excluding the personal and intimate, the very details most readers want to know. This is, perhaps, an unrealistic expectation for reasons expressed by William Matthews:

"Few autobiographers put into their books very much of that private, intimate knowledge of themselves that only they can have. Oftener than not, they shun their own inner peculiarities and fit themselves into patterns of behavior and character suggested by the ideas and ideals of their period and by the fashions in autobiography with which they associate themselves. The laws of literature and the human reluctance to stand individually naked combine to cheat the expectations of readers who hope to find in autobiographies many revelations of men's true selves."[23]

No doubt Matthews' words are implicated to the male writer and his reluctance to reveal all his secrets. But if a woman's sincere self-writing happens to belie or disprove his words, she would still not gain acceptance because her frankness would instantly be recognized as self-indulgence and vulgar display of her femininity and might arouse nothing but outright rejection, suspicion and ostracism. This is what exactly happens to Kamala Das. Her autobiography *My Story* offers a retrospective account of her life which spans the years between

early childhood and adulthood and focuses upon her experiences of sexuality and the search for true love in a heterosexual relationship. Her disclosure of sexuality, amorous extramarital affairs vis-à-vis the conservative set-up of Indian society appears as an act near to strip-teasing herself before the reading public. It has earned her notoriety more than celebration and accolades from the conservative circle. Critics have not failed to express their reservations, while time and again denouncing her autobiographical writings in vilifying terms.

Thus we can see that the very qualities of forthrightness and expressiveness that would have been lauded in a male writer are pinpointed as her drawback. Consequently, the writer who had attempted to define female space by writing her autobiography eventually had to take recourse to a clear exposition stating her situational need to write her life story. She did not have the liberty to plunge into the act of writing as her male counterparts do without any qualm or any need for self-justification. Yet she may not be necessarily diffident about her attempt and her intrinsic worth as some critics tend to construe after reading her self-justifying *preface* to the autobiography. Her deliberate attempt at framing a context to or rather a pretext for narrating her self-story, in a way highlights the constraints and restrictions imposed upon a female writer. In the Preface she writes:

"My Story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death, and besides there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of. I sent a telegram to an editor who had been after me to write such a book to be used as a serial in his journal. He arrived after a day bringing

with him the total remuneration for the serial. He was taking a risk, as I was then very ill and it did not seem that I would be able to write more than a few chapters. And yet, he agreed to the deal, seated near me, holding my hand which had a green, withered look. From that moment the book took hold of me, carrying me back into the past rapidly as though it were a motor boat chug-chugging through the inky waters at night. Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience."[24]

A critical reflection on the autobiography should begin with this prefatorial note itself, for the contrivances a woman writer at times needs to adopt in order to unravel the secrets of her heart is obvious in Kamala Das's autobiography from the very beginning. This is not to say that she writes her autobiography in an utterly fictionalized manner. Though certain hyperbolic interpolations are deliberately inserted into the narrative, the aim is neither to disguise truth nor to camouflage it. Instead the exaggerated facts strategically reveal some intimate personal truths in a veridical manner while simultaneously highlighting the practical difficulties for a woman writer to write her self out as black marks on white paper.

Even a casual perusal of the preface will bring to light the fact that Kamala Das's inner desire to write her autobiography is intense. But the paradox is that she still feels the need to consciously juxtapose her self-revealing act vis-a-vis her acknowledgment of the timely intervention of two male figures – the anonymous doctor and the editor – for having brought that moment in her life when the book

'took hold' of her. Should we then assume that she could never have written her autobiography at all if she had not suffered from serious heart disease, the doctor didn't think that writing would distract her mind, the editor wasn't after her, wasn't unusually cooperative, the fear of death didn't loom large and the purgatory act of telling all truth before saying adieu to life did not haunt her? What does this long litany of self-justification suggest? Certainly, the workings of the chimerical creature called 'feminine consciousness' with all its dualistic proclivity that intervenes with the writer's creative pursuit. But then do we, as readers should feel indebted to the two influential but anonymous figures? Of course, that would depend on our individual response. If we assign them a significant role as people of real life existence with whom the writer had interacted at some point of time we will have to express our gratitude to them for their intervention. On the other hand, we would not be wrong either if we regard them as just necessary figments from the poetic imagination of the writer against the backdrop of which the writer justifies her radical act of wielding the pen to narrativise her own self.

We may even pause and reflect on the probable white lie she gives about hospital bills to be taken care off as if she is overburdened by the expenses. From her autobiography we know that her husband is a Reserve Bank employee. The government of India had always been extra kind in reimbursing all medical expenses of the bank employees, their spouses and children. So does the need really arise to write the autobiography to meet her medical expenses? The answer may be partly yes and partly no. Similarly, the editor's instant arrival (especially if he was the one editing a Malayalam journal down there in Tiruvanathampuram) in

the scene, his display of affection by holding the withered hand of the writer-patient are perhaps dubious facts. We can assume that the pretext to write the autobiography is all but contrived. But it cannot be totally invalidated as untrue and unjustifiable either, for the factual events she narrates-- of the text being serialised and the hostility she confronts -- in the second half of the prefatorial note logically support the entire attempt of self-justification in the preceding section. She writes:

"My recovery was such an anti-climax! The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband. Why I had even confessed that I was chronically falling in love with person of a flamboyant nature. When I went for a short vacation to my home state I received no warmth. In a hurry I escaped back to Bombay. This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say."[25]

The conclusive remark of having no regrets and derivation of pleasure from the writing of the text clearly shows her defiance, self-assertion and celebrative mood against all odds. Yet, paradoxically enough the defiant stance, however genuine in tone, does not underscore the preceding act of self-justification. I don't wish to suggest that Kamala Das's self-justification is a sign of her diffidence. Rather through self-justification she reveals the inner tension and plight of the woman writer when she attempts to write about her own life.

Paradoxically enough it has never been the lot of any male writer to confront such a predicament. Did the genius in Henry Miller ever felt the need to justify his sado-macohistic, voyeuristic, pornographic and indulgent writings on men's endless sexual appetite and colonization of the female body? Certainly not, as a male writer he had the license to plunge into his writerly act and nowhere was he an outcast. Though his texts were once banned in his native puritan America, the bohemian French capital provided the fertile ground. Today world wide he is consumed as a classic author not an eccentric!

Kamala Das has never declared herself a feminist writer, but judged from the subversive way in which she highlights woman-centred issues, most pertinent to the Indian context, her autobiography is undeniably a feminist confessional text. Confession in Kamala Das symbolizes a private assertion of freedom that challenges rather than simply conforms to existing social norms. There is affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity. But as a self-conscious writer who is aware that subjectivity itself is not free as the 'authentic self' is very much a social product, she unhesitatingly delineates ambivalent self-images. Thus throughout the narrative the interpenetration of the subjectivity with the social and ideological domains emerges at a number of levels. She makes it obvious how the social constitution of the inner self manifests itself in the ambivalent self-images, which reveals the powerful psychological mechanism by which gender ideologies are internalised.

Thus in her self-writing the internalized cultural values which define specific identities as marginal, inferior, or deviant has come to the surface in feelings of anxiety and guilt. The assertion of the feminine identity is shown to

generate limitless ambivalent feelings, so that though it can be a source of pride, it can easily give rise to a sense of guilt, fear, shame and self-interrogation. This negative pattern in which attempted self-affirmation reverts back into anxiety and self-castigation is a recurring one in Kamala Das. The ambivalent status of the pursuit of self-identity at times gives rise to inconsistency in the narrative and critics have pointed this as her Achilles' heel, raising doubts whether the confessional writing is an indispensable aspect of a process of self-understanding in her.

My Story provides the sense of factualness, the sense of the personal, the sense of immersion rather than conclusion or analysis or patterning. As a confessional text it appears directly immersed in the author's lived experience; repetitions, contradictions, gaps, and loose ends, which might be viewed as aesthetic flaws in a conventional literary text, here function as indications of the work's authentic status, its concern to communicate the intensity of feeling rather than to strive for aesthetic effects.

The autobiography is revolutionary and subversive at many levels. It challenges traditional notions about the genre of "autobiography" through its form and content. In other words, it subverts conventions of canonized autobiographies. Though there is no daring experiment with structure, *My Story* is unique in the sense that it presents an easy mixture of genres. Poetry is woven into the fabric of the text allowing it to illuminate and introduce prose. This personal history is presented in narrative sequences with the insertion of poems in the later half of the text. Each of the chapter starting from twenty-seven to the second last chapter of forty-nine begins with a poem, which signals the thematic concern of each

chapter. None of the poems appears to be irrelevant in the context of the corresponding chapter; as such there is no sign of any formal inconsistency arising from a careless superimposition. Alladi Uma rightly observes, "The poem is a micro-representation of the rest of the chapter that is to follow or it epigraphically announces the idea that is worked out in the chapter."[26] As for instance, in chapter 39 the poem introduces the incident of the birth of her son Jaisurya, the agony and pain of childbirth giving way to the pleasure and beauty of the child. The rest of the chapter elaborates this wonderful event in detail.

Another unique aspect of the autobiography is that the chapters are arranged in an episodic manner. However, the theme of development of a girl child from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood and middle age binds up the episodes. Every episodic chapter is a self-contained entity with its title and internal coherence, complete in itself and can stand out as a separate and independent entity making the text look disjunctive and episodic. Yet each adds to the final understanding of the text and so does not render the entire work structurally loose and incoherent. In general, *My Story* like other feminist confessional writings seeks to reduce the patterning and organization of experience which characterizes historical narrative; its structure being episodic and fragmented. In spite of a seemingly more cohesive form, this retrospective feminist confession tends to minimize synthesis and linearity in favour of montage. The organizing principle of the text is provided by the associations of the experiencing subject.

In the autobiography there are even instances of parts of poems which have been rendered into prose as the following extracts show:

"There is a hunger in each of us to feed other hungers, the basic one, to crumble and dissolve and to retain in other things the potent fragments of oneself. But ultimately we shall discover that we are immortal and that the only mortal things are systems and arrangements."[27]

"Even our pains shall continue in those who have devoured us. The oft-repeated moves of every scattered cell shall give no power to escape from cages of involvement. We are trapped in immortality and our only freedom is the one to discompose..."[28]

Compare this with the following lines from her poem "Composition":

Ultimately
I will feed only the hunger
to feed other hungers,
that basic one.
to crumble,
to dissolve
and to retain in other things
the potent fragments
of oneself.
the ultimate discovery will be
that we are immortal,
the only things mortal being
systems and arrangements,
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,

my only freedom being

the freedom to

discompose.[29]

But for a few changes and the way in which the words are placed on the page there is no significant difference between the two versions. The following lines will depict the same tendency to paraphrase poetry into prose:

"...While I was being driven home, I saw near the mountain passes, the aged cattle being taken to the slaughter yard. I saw their thin haunches and the vermillion brand on their shoulders.

I wanted to, just for one brief moment, get down from the car and join them. Human beings are never branded with a hot iron. They are only sent home with their electrocardiographs and sedatives."[30]

This appears as the poem "Old Cattle" in the 1980s with only a few words altered. These examples show how the distinctions between prose and poetry are

deliberately blurred so as to show the fluidity of forms. But some critics tend to interpret it as the paucity of the poet's thematic concerns.

While foregrounding the consciousness of the writing self there is an attempt to evoke the illusion of face-to-face intimacy between author and reader which in turn influences the style of narration. The language used is simple and immediate which allow for complexity without being technical. The lively and energetic language stays closer to spoken language. *My Story* tends to avoid self-conscious literary language; in an obvious paradox, it strives for the appearance of spontaneity through a simple and conversational style. There is thus, a conspicuous lack of linguistic display, hardly any attempt to conform to an elevated style. Kamala Das's direct language is a 'tool through which some perceived truth could come alive. There is a search for balance that allows meaning and language to hold each other in a unity in which the weight of each is not visible. The simplicity of the language gives words that much needed space in which they can exist and relate to an actual experience perceived in the writer's individual term. Throughout the autobiography the resonance of a communicating voice can be felt. There is no intellectual acrobatics, no unraveling of mind knots, the surface texture of the work is simple and plane. The ultimate purpose is to aid the discovery of an underlying buried self, implying the question of *truth* of a suppressed feminine self at the threshold of freedom as its sole legitimization.

The main thematic concern of the text, as in all autobiographies, is the question of identity and the presentation of the self, but in this text it is complicated by the problematic of the fragmented identity. The narrative neatly reflects this main theme by relegating the conventional life and concerns of

women to a subordinate place, and treating them as sources of constraint and difficulty. The depiction is rendered realistic through the portrayal of the self as perpetually fluctuating between a position of complete "rejection" of conventional feminine values like: chastity and fidelity, on the one hand and a near-celebration and acceptance of the conventional role of motherhood, on the other. There is tension as time and again she tries to revert to her culturally defined self and then discards it realizing that it is not meant for her, that she cannot live her life in accordance with the cultural prescription. From such vacillation between the traditionally defined role model and her personal yearning to carve out an undefined, independent role for herself springs an apparent inconsistency in her character, for which she has often been blamed.

However, the uncertainty nurtured by this fluctuation originates in her duplicity, a genuine doubleness rather than deliberate deceptions of the conflicts within her own self. As a woman her dual consciousness is an inextricable part of her existence, the inner urge to reject some part of the cultural mores she inherits goes parallel to accepting some other aspects of the same culture. Tensions and frictions naturally arise from such conflicting tendencies and she had to make herself by discovering her inborn talent or urge to creativity in the midst of chaos. She has chiseled out her life and its stories in the vortex of personal dilemma and suffering inflicted upon her by societal norms of conventional Hindu society which traditionally dictates fathers to marry off their daughters as early as possible. In this sense she also possesses a past, a history from which she cannot escape totally and from which she nevertheless constructs a self as a woman and a

writer. She works with the past she inherits: personal, regional and cultural while trying to be radical at the personal level.

The fragmented identity is projected through the treatment of significant subjects like relationship with her parents, relatives and spouse, constrictions of married life, dilemmas of womanhood, triumph over adversity through a contrastive juxtaposition of the physicality of the body against the inevitability of death.

While narrating her childhood Kamala Das frequently mentions the incompatibility of her parents as marriage partners. She writes:

"My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismated. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends. Out of such an arid union were born the first two children, my brother and I, bearing the burden of a swarthy skin and ordinary features."[31]

She mentions her father being always busy with his work and mother vague and nonchalant, spending time lying on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. As children she and her brother grew up almost neglected. Her father was the irrefutable, indisputable sovereign authority whose power was unquestionable, decisions unchangeable. As soon as he got engaged he "stipulated firmly" what clothes and ornaments his wife should wear. Having come under the ideological sway of a much greater patriarch of national stature, Mahatma Gandhi, her father imposed the aesthetics of austerity on his newly wedded wife. She was not to wear anything but kaddar, preferably white or off-white and to remove all the gold ornaments from her person except the 'mangalsutra'. Kamala Das imagines that to her mother "it must have seemed like

taking to widow's weeds". This kind of selective narration of factual events bear significance within the context of the autobiography since through it the writer hints at the insidious power of patriarchy that has seeped into every strata of society and family life. The matrilineal Nair community to which Kamala Das traces her origins too cannot escape from the onslaughts of patriarchy. Thus the narration of her mother's timidity highlights not only a Nair woman's fearful state of mind but the overall predicament of an average Indian woman who is like a puppet in the hands of men whether father, uncle, brother, husband or son. Of her mother's mental state as a would-be-bride in a conventional arranged marriage she writes:

"She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin."[32]

Here a woman's victimization is brought to light through the use of such words like 'plot' and 'conspire'. These are not words normally used to describe a typical Indian father's act of responsibly marrying his daughter off. But if we can convince ourselves to be empathetic towards the young bride, whom the conventional marriage system, an institution that perpetuates the iron-fisted rule of the father, renders completely voiceless, then Kamala Das's decrying of her grandfather's "conspiracy" would sound radical and subversive. Her own experience at the tender age of fifteen when she was compelled by her father to discontinue her education and tie up the nuptial ties with a cousin much older in

age had certainly made her internalize her mother's plight. It also shows how daughters with maturity and experience can internalize or see through the victimization of their own mothers at the hands of patriarchy's exploitative rule. Moreover, the mother's passive role as a wife/mother, her total silence and lack of interference with her husband's final verdict to marry their daughter off must have made Kamala Das realize her timidity in its entirety. Even on the day of the marriage the mother gets up early as usual for her morning prayers—to communicate with some unseen, unheard heavenly Gods, but hardly any healthy interactions takes place between her and the daughter. We know that Kamala Das's mother, Balamani Amma was already an established poet in Kerala, but at home she is portrayed as a meek person cowering down before the monstrous ego of her husband. Though the same menacing threats of patriarchy subjugated the mother and the daughter, they were not kindred spirits to wage a war against it jointly. The rebel in Kamala Das is conspicuously absent in her mother. Not only the autobiography, but a comparison of their writings---the thematic concerns, the style of expression all prove the single fact of the underlying differences between them. The mother's writings represent conformity to traditional ideals of women and domesticity, whereas, Kamala Das represents a rejection of this value system. My intention is not to denigrate Balamani Amma's literary contributions but just to point out the difference in approach between the two women, which perhaps led to a complete absence of rapport and mutual complementareity in their relationship as mother and daughter. This makes Kamala Das even more of a lonely crusader quite unlike some of her contemporary writers on foreign shores. For instance, the Black writer Ama Ata Aidoo, who in the midst of personal crisis,

arising from experience of exploitative forces, post-colonial hangover and cross-cultural influences, looks back to the motherly figure in her grandmother and draws tremendous courage and inspiration from this epitome of feminine stoicism, boldness and self-dignity. Though the insidious and menacing threats of patriarchy's devouring power is felt equally strongly both in the Indian and the African context, women writers in Africa are perhaps fortunate enough to be able to rely on the grandmother and mother whose symbolic presence guides, nurtures and protects the creative persona. Kamala Das relied on her grandmother too but only for affection and unselfish love, never for courage, moral support and inspiration to strengthen and buttress her feminist pursuits. The grandmother was conventional like any other woman and so Kamala Das though emotionally devastated when the old lady died also sensed freedom to pursue her search in life, unfettered and unhindered as is clear from her candid words:

"She was orthodox and puritanical. I did not wish to cause her unhappiness by my unconventional way of thinking. So when I heard that she had died, a part of me rejoiced at my newfound freedom, while another felt only a deep desolation."[33]

Despite the lack of any chance for Kamala Das to extract any moral support from the relationship, it was in the arms of this grandmother that she found sincere love, warmth and security which made her assert openly, "None had loved me as dearly as my grandmother". It was the grandmother who nurtured her back to health and gave her all the post-natal care after she delivered her first and second sons. When she delivered her third son in the hospital, the dirt and squalor of the ward and the feeling of insecurity reminded her of the warmth she and her

newborn babies once received from the grandmother, now dead and gone. No wonder, Kamala Das has immortalised this loving person who always stood by her in hours of pain and grief, in memorable verses.

The grandmother's loving presence in every crucial moment, through all trials and tribulations in the life of the writer, can be juxtaposed against the conspicuous absence of the husband. In the Indian context it is customary for some women to stay at their mothers' residences during the delivery of the first child. But Kamala Das's endless and tiring shuttling from Bombay and Delhi down to the distanced south to her native home in Malabar for the birth of all the three sons, perhaps, highlights the husband's total indifference and lack of concern, joyous involvement as a father. The fact of her dependency on her grandmother for all the care and love clearly indicates the other harsher side of the story---the vacuity in her marital relation. More than her husband and her parents it was the dear old granny who showered her with affection.

As children both she and her elder brother grew up without any obvert display of affection from the parents and Kamala Das did not narrate any incident to show that she received lesser attention as a girl-child. Fortunately, such demarcation was not there in the family. Yet when she grew up she had to accept the proposal for marriage without uttering a single word of dissent whereas, her brother could continue his studies with full family support to become a doctor one day . One can thus very well assume that it was on the occasion of her forced marriage that she realized for the first time the menacing and overpowering threats of parental subjugation in its undisguised form. She describes her feelings with pathos and irony:

"I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed. Not yet, I said. Let me go back to Calcutta to finish my exam...."[34]

Marriage was thrust upon her against all her wish and in the autobiography she represents the ambivalent feeling of the adolescent girl-bride as an observing and watching presence, straining to subdue her will, in a world where she is prohibited from speaking or hearing her inner voice. As revealed in the autobiography, her marriage did not present an attainable ideal of love and coherence of a mutually bound couple. Her married life began with mistrust of the husband's sexual fidelity, for he boasted of "sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar" and openly acted a philanderer per excellence basking in the amorous love with all his young cousins. His sexual haste soon after the engagement and on the night of the wedding left her with a feeling of disgust shattering all her girlhood dreams and feminine utopias. With a heavy heart she writes:

"I had expected him 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..."[35]

When her fiancée left for Bombay after spending a few days with her, Kamala's father expressed satisfaction about the fact that his daughter found her

mate in life. At this she expresses her deep felt anguish, thoughts she could never express before her dominating father are now revealed before the unknown reader:

".....my father told me that he was happy that I had found my mate. The word mate with its earthy connotations made me uneasy. I felt lost and unhappy. I could not tell my father that I had hoped for a more tranquil relationship with a hand on my hair and a voice in my ear, telling me that everything was going to be all right for me. I had no need at all for rough hands riding up my skirts or tearing up my brassiere."[36]

Kamala's dissatisfaction, feeling of loss and helplessness, the inability to express the truth to her father in a way bring to light not only her personal sorrow but an average Indian girl's predicament and inner dilemma who often becomes a victim of a conventional practice like arranged marriage. Such customary practices help to keep the woman folks subservient and voiceless. Though mutual understanding and interaction form a crucial element of such a marriage, which unites two different families, the bride's wishes and predilections are hardly ever taken into consideration. A woman is transformed into a simulacrum of an object – ready for exchange.

At such distressing moments of personal crisis Kamala Das seems to turn towards her girl-friend for consolation. Though the relationship could not mature into one of purely lesbian dependency and friendship, through it Kamala Das hints at the reliability and mutual rapport people of the same gender can share to unburden the secrets of each other's heart and also possibly to combat social evils. Kamala Das's could not strengthen this relationship and ruefully realizes her inability to dream of a different kind of life. Perhaps she felt the powerlessness

within her too poignantly when she further realizes the truth of her handicapped situation:

"My life has been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children. I would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream out for mercy. I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride..."[37]

In the entire literary scenario of India no woman writer has ever displayed such audacity as Kamala Das in describing the general situation and predicament of women and their vain pride in their inherited sense and sensibility with such pathos, irony and self-mockery.

The extravaganza, the ostentatious display of wealth in the marriage and the father's beaming pride in it are all described with explicit irony:

"My father beamed with pleasure. Every one talked of it as the most expensive wedding of the year.....All this glut made me feel cheap and uncomfortable. Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent half a lakh on its preparations. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue. There was nothing remotely Gandhian about my wedding."[38]

Earlier in the autobiography Kamala Das informed her readers about the all-pervasive influence of Gandhian austerity on the family. Her father's firm

stipulation on his wife's way of dressing, her grandmother spinning Khadi yarn, the ladies of the Nalapat house donating all their gold jewellery to the Harijan fund, drawing room with Khadi curtains, all suggest the practice and application of Gandhian principle of simplicity to its utmost limit. The vulgar display of wealth in the marriage was paradoxical to the previously claimed austere stance and Kamala Das's ironical reference to it is appropriate for it brings out the underlying hypocrisy. At a deeper level it also shows how men want to assert their masculine presence, virility and prowess through the assertion and appropriation of every convention and prevalent ideology. Through the imposition of Gandhian austerity upon his bride/wife Kamala Das's father maneuvered to display his adherence to national ideology. Likewise, by displaying wealth in his daughter's marriage he showed his goodness as a responsible father, his superior financial status, and his conformist attitude to social customs and conventions. The effect of all these outwardly positive actions was implicitly directed towards himself--earning for himself bravado and society's approval. But in the process it was always the women—wife, daughter--who became the scapegoat, victimised media through which the male ego manifested its assertive power. In pre-independent India, when the spirit of nationalism and the struggle for freedom was in full swing, Kamala Das's father felt no qualms to involve himself in the automobile business of selling Rolls Royce nor did he take to traditional attire. Yet, he felt the need to express his nationalistic sentiments, his fraternity, through the off-white khaddar sari of his wife, her austere unadorned looks and the starched khadi curtains hanging on the doors and windows of his Calcutta flat, all of which symbolically represented the ideological trend of Gandhian austerity. Certainly we

cannot direct our mockery to Kamala Das's father alone, it would be sheer injustice. He, like million others, had been doing only that what appeared natural to him—to control, to dictate, to impose, to demand obeisance from the subordinate members of his family in the greater interest of his own self and the perpetuation of the father's rule. What is laudable here is that Kamala Das has displayed great audacity and anarchist outlook to unravel the truths of the father's hypocritical stance.

On the day of the marriage, as a bride, Kamala Das showed her angst and resistance by openly flouting the image of 'the perfect woman'. She refused to be a traditional bride "looking demure and shy". Through her tomboyish demeanor she showed her nonconformist attitude. Her abhorrence of "the extravaganza" of the wedding is expressed quite openly: "All this glut made me feel cheap and uncomfortable."[39] It was her feminist ego that made her realize that on this ostentatious occasion she was devalued as a person in her own right because "the bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue."[40]

Kamala Das who wished for herself 'a place of human dignity' detested the husband's sexual haste on the wedding night. Referring to her husband's attempt at sexual gratification she writes, "without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the brutality of the attack". She compared this first shocking experience of sex to the brutality of rape. The palpitation of the young bride's heart, the unsuccessful struggle to free herself from the husband's brutal grip, her mental conflicts are juxtaposed against the backdrop of the dull throbbing of the Kathakali drums:

"Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully against our window and the singers sang of Damayanti's plight in the jungle."[41]

While her body resisted physical union the husband basked in the love and amorous gestures of his young cousins. At this Kamala Das realised her insignificant position as a wife, for in reality she was to "become just another of her husband's admires, one more relative to submit to his clumsy fondling."[42] The husband's easy style of seeking sexual gratification outside the legal ambit of marriage raised doubts about her own sexuality and she began to feel herself "cold and frigid". Though she admits that "sex was far from her thoughts" and she "remained a virgin for nearly a fortnight after her marriage", the reference to 'frigidity' reflects her inner tension and psychological trepidation arising from a negative assessment of her own sexuality. The overall picture is thus one of confusion, dejection and depression not of marital bliss. At the end of the month, experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness she said she grew old suddenly, her face changed from a child's to a woman's and her limbs were sore and fatigued. Kamala Das's predicament is not unique to herself. By bringing the personal to the limelight she is in a way commenting on the entire scenario of traditional Indian marriage system which has stood as an altar for the immolation of many young and innocent feminine selves. Thus through the strategic use of feminine confession she seeks to affirm a female experience which has often been repressed and rendered invisible by speaking about it, by writing it into existence.

Kamala Das's feminine ego was wounded by another aspect of her husband's idiosyncratic demeanour-his undeclared but obvert homosexuality. At

first Mr Das informed his wife about his friend at YMCA through a letter. But when on the occasion of her birthday he displayed obvert physical closeness to his friend Kamala Das felt a crushing blow on her womanliness. She describes this incident in vivid terms:

"To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in...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."[43]

Kamala Das has discussed dailiness as the structuring principle of her married life; resulting from her traditional concern with repetitive domestic work and the task of maintaining and repairing emotional relationships. She could feel that marriage had ossified her very being rendering her a dwarfish, cowardly look with the gradual eroding of her will to resist and the faculty of reasoning. The monstrous ego of the husband could not tolerate her assertion of feminine subjectivity and "stopped me from going upto the terrace for rehearsals in the evening. You must remember you are a wife and mother, he said". No doubt, she tried to follow his dictates but to no avail:

"I kept myself busy with dreary house work while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape."[44]

While she tried to free herself from the cast of stereotypes, the mother-in-law's presence proved yet another obstacle and ruled out every possibility to live the life of freedom and spontaneity. The mother-in-law complements the dictatorial instincts in the husband, thereby making the existence of the young mother even more stultifying and oppressive. Through the image of the mother-in-

that time listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to find another who would volunteer to marry me, for I was not conspicuously pretty and besides there was the two-year-old who would have been to the new husband an encumbrance."

"I did not have the educational qualifications which would have got me a job either. I could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I knew that I was frigid and that love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards. I was a misfit everywhere."[45]

None can ever deny any of these reasons that stood as barrier against her desire to take that final drastic step of absconding from her husband. Her words provide the sense of factualness, the sense of the personal, the sense of process, the sense of immersion in a dilemmatic state.

In spite of her dilemma, Kamala Das seems to feel that her refusal to assume the socially defined feminine role was one way of transcending her 'femininity' which is associated with passivity and inferiority. So, when marriage stifled for her all possibility of autonomy, and divorce did not seem possible in a traditional orthodox society like hers, she decided to put an end to her life. It is a different matter that she did not succeed at it but as Iqbal Kaur points out, the very fact of an attempted suicide shows her desire for "flight from womanhood".

Her dissatisfaction at the arrangement of her marriage, her inability to take a stand against it and in the aftermath of the pompous wedding the unpleasant experience of sex with her husband made her repulsive. Thus she made it clear that her destiny was determined by an overarching paternalistic ideology and

authority, yet she contrived her own resistance to it. She grapples self-consciously with her identity as a woman in the patriarchal culture and with her problematic relationship to engendered figures of selfhood. At the personal level she devises her own way to challenge all the negative and exploitative experiences by turning out to be a seeker of true love outside the legal ambit of marriage. She partakes of perversion and a deliberate self-abasement by stepping out of the ambit of *amour propre*. She could not escape her destiny but she displayed tremendous courage in flouting the traditional image of 'the perfect woman'. Here it is worth noting that there may be a juxtaposition of some highly fictionalised account of extra-marital affairs with episodes of factual narrative but the aim is to depict the author's increasing dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships in a polemical manner.

Kamala Das's *My Story* is marked by her overwhelming yearning for intimacy. Her tendency to fall obsessively in love with many men shows her desire for fusion. Describing her state of mind she writes: "Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which only sought for it a receptacle."[46] In spite of such overflowing emotions her excessive investment in personal relations and her reliance upon validation through others did not turn out to be a keystone of her oppression, since she had not allowed herself to be molded according to the desires of each of her lovers. In one sense, her confession documents the failure of love and intimacy. Yet clearly the production of the text itself functions as an attempted compensation for this failure, generating in the relationship between reader and author the mutuality which cannot otherwise be realized.

There remains in her autobiography a tension between the conventional expectations of a woman, and ambitions for something different. There is also

some tension between the autobiographical 'I' and her family and community, and between conventional roles and a less conventional self. The final image is one of a sense of self which is at the threshold of freedom and inner calmness, when the long waged war fought to its limit is almost over.

As a woman with an intense desire for sexual revolution, Kamala Das dreams and constantly works towards the fulfillment of that dream, through her writings in which the unequal boundaries of gender do not exist. She presents the picture of such a state when she writes:

When he

And I were one, we were neither

Male nor female.[47]

In real life situation the concretisation of such a vision of egalitarianism between the sexes is almost impossible. This desire for a feminist utopia entered into a conflict with the traditional image of femininity—a conflict which drove her almost insane. She felt herself a misfit everywhere! In the state of utter desolation and solitude she "brooded long stifling her sobs". But, in spite of the fact that she had to stifle her sobs, she was not prepared to admit defeat. She did not compromise when it came to choosing her career as a creative writer. The urge to annihilate herself finally gave way to sublimation through the act of writing. When every door was closed, she discovered her own way out to carry on with life, giving voice to her previously inaudible whispers and murmuring. She became like the phoenix symbolically rising from its own ash—her doomed state. Creative writing helped her "Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff/Which weighs upon the heart". Her parents, relatives, husband, children all

incarcerated her in her femininity, but her literary involvement enabled her to go beyond the bonds of femininity and to give expression to her individual revolt against sexual politics. In the process she experienced her innate powers as an individual while sensing that her literary pursuits posed threats to some feeble hearted kith and kins. In the closing of the autobiography she openly asserts her individuality both as a woman and a writer:

".....my parents were embarrassed but totally helpless, for 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."[48]

The writing of *My Story* itself was an act of defiance if we situate her in her socio-cultural background. The Nalapat women, as she tells us, were orthodox and puritanical. They showed an unquestioning acceptance of the traditional sex-roles which tend to doom women to immanence. They did not dine along with men and many of them hardly ever stepped out of the house. They lived a life of self-negation and never thought of taking decisions for themselves. Hence, it required exceptional courage to challenge the long established social system and to preach "a new kind of morality" and Kamala Das did display tremendous courage in revolting against the sexual colonialism and providing hope and confidence to young women that they can refuse and reject the victim positions, that they can frustrate the sexist culture's efforts to exploit, passivise and marginalise women.

Kamala Das wrestled with a critique of the existing society. Through her autobiography she is not only seeking to establish the validity of woman's feelings and womanhood in general, but also to overturn the conception and prejudices which have prevailed against them in the Indian culture. But contemporary responses and sales indicate that *My Story* has inspired disgust, irritation, and voyeuristic curiosity in the reader rather than solidarity and sympathy. Few saw the work as a woman's tale of woe, or paid heed to its themes of loneliness and subaltern anguish. Here we can see how by the very act of defining female space, the writer was recognised as a threat to the adherents of patriarchal discourse. Severe critical dissent and adverse publicity followed suit and the writer had to withdraw into herself as a consequence and also to adopt masquerade in the form of conflicting replies to different interviewers. This has further complicated the scene by inseminating confusion, doubt and finally a complete disbelief in the genuineness of the confessions she made in the autobiography.

Thus when we deal with the critical writings on Kamala Das we see a sort of willed ignorance at work, a disregard for an exegesis and understanding of her oeuvre from a woman's point of view. Most male critics in India have failed to consider the potentially liberating effects of self-discovery for woman writers whose needs have traditionally been repressed. Most critics in general are quick in expressing reservations about Kamala Das's thematic concerns. It seems as though the poet has failed to live up to their expectations. They never fail to display particular anxiety about the way Kamala Das represents her femininity. Moreover, readers and critics who are misled by surface impressions tend to think

that Kamala Das does not do justice to her husband. There is thus a temptation to oversimplify the complexity of the text.

She is much discussed by contemporary critics in India, largely because her frankness and expressive boldness regarding sexuality seem to represent something alien to feminine writing in India. She is accused by some as the poet of decadence. But her strength and frankness of expression convey very powerfully the strength and power she acknowledges in women and recognizes in herself. Whether subjectivity is perceived as radical politics or self-indulgent narcissism it at least partly dependent upon the standpoint from which it is being judged and the context in which it occurs. Whereas Kamala Das's concern with subjectivity may be viewed from a male perspective as a degeneration of the public realm into an unseemly obsession with private affairs, its implication from the standpoint of women's history are precisely the opposite.

Before we end let's take a look at some of the Indian critics' (mostly male) judgmental comments on her work, which I believe will make it clear how the Indian psyche in general is resistant to a woman's autobiographical pronouncements. Let us begin this tedious list with some of Kamala Das's contemporary poet-critics' reflections on her work. In the words of R.Parthasarathy, "Traditionally Nayar women were sexually uninhibited because of the practice of marumakkathyam (matrilineal system of inheritance and succession). And Kamala Das's forthright treatment of sexual relations is an offshoot of her Nayar background."[49] M. Elias writes : "Kamala Das echoes the age-old sense of insecurity of Nayar women, condemned to a matrilineal system which did away with formal marriages.... She alone carries embers of passion

inherited from the Nayar ancestresses who encountered the social sanction against formal marriages for them by cultivating what she imagines to be such an irresistible feminine charm that they were able to maintain veritable male harems and to enjoy the unique distinction of indulging in polyandry."[50] Yet another critic writes: "....this is also true that all through her self-portrayal she keeps on justifying her cynicism holding her betrayed honeymoon responsible for anything outrageous that followed. She confesses elaborately of course with a broken heart, her frolickings in sex and also extends sizzling excitement to her readers by referring to 'the musk of sweat' between her big 'breasts', the 'warmth' of 'menstrual blood'., her 'pubis' her private parts as the 'wound of her soul' etc.— all pronouncing with brutal frankness the carvings of her flesh, her flamboyant lust."[51] If male critics pick up words like breasts, menstrual blood, pubis, etc. to prove their claim that the interpolation of these words are meant for titillating the readers it would be a naive but insidious way of ascribing some of Kamala Das's earnest and honest confessional poems a pornographic status. A truly critical exegesis would demand that these words be read and understood within the context of the poems. Moreover, if any male critic asserts that these words are meant to 'extend sizzling excitement to her readers' then female readers have to remind their counterparts that Kamala Das's implied readers are not always men. It can be very well assumed that through the use of judgmental remarks most male critics try to paint a negative picture of the poet, but the sheer haste and fury in which they throw their words ultimately prove their yet immature critical stance.

The typical Indian expectation of a married woman's deportment is well reflected in the words of a female critic: "The role of motherhood reveals a more

redeeming aspect of Kamala Das's personality. As a loving, caring and dedicated mother sitting by the sick beds of her children praying, she appears more appealing than as a wife with unfulfilled cravings."[52] This kind of weighing of two paradoxical images--loving mother as against a frustrated wife—to portray one as better than the other reflects the critic's inability to free herself from conventional stereotypes of "good" and "bad", "appealing" and "non-appealing or rejectionable". The fact that a critic is female does not guarantee that her interpretation will be less phallocentric and free of the patriarchal cultural shadings. This same critic whose expectations of feminine attributes in a woman are undoubtedly much high, points out that there is no intimacy and rapport in the mother-son relation in *My Story*. She writes: "Kamala Das's role as mother in shaping the children's character or the impact of her personality on their individuality are aspects left unmentioned in *My Story*. Kamala Das's children hardly come to life through the pages of the book." A careless browsing of the text may fail to bring to light the intricate mother-son relationship because the more general all-pervasive theme of man-woman relationship in all its physical and psychological complexities dominates the text. At a first glance all the activities appear to revolve round the pivotal figure of the dominating and indifferent husband before whose stately presence the sons seem puny. Nevertheless, the entire process of conceiving and bringing them to life had had an unfailing effect on the personal and creative life of the writer as is proved by references to this in many chapters both in the form of prose and poetry. Bringing them up was also equally challenging and time-consuming to her. Apart from engaging in playful acts with them she also refers to more mature interaction especially with the eldest

son when she tried to cultivate a literary bent of mind in him and all the three in general. Kamala Das wrote her autobiography at the age of forty, but she might not have deliberately included every event till that age. She might even have conceived the idea of writing the book a bit earlier. But ultimately when it was serialised in *The Current Weekly* (Bombay) from January to December 1974 her sons were grown up and so critics may demand her portrayal of them and the relationship she had with them in greater detail as well. But then it would be too much of interfering with a writer's liberty to demarcate her own lines and fix her own focus. Though the text does not explicitly delineate the influential role Kamala Das has had played as a mother in the lives of her children, real life situations do prove her never-failing impact on them. It is a known fact that all her sons more specifically the eldest one takes special interest in literature as his career as the editor of the Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* shows. Today as is acknowledged by artists and art-lovers of Kerala alike, Kamala Das is also the proud mother who can demand her sons to patronize her visual art, if her paintings fail to get the attention of prospective buyers. In the light of all this, any critic's occasional critique of the lack of detail and explicit display of intimacy in mother-son relationship in the autobiographical text can be regarded as some irrelevant objection or digressive remark.

According to Devindra Kohli *My Story* is written in the conventional mode and is brisk in pace. It is "held together more by a narration of incidents rather than by a reflection on them. In a sense, her autobiography is curiously static, and a few incidents seem to (or are shown to) contribute to the organic development of her literary personality."[53] It is difficult to guess what he means to imply by the

word reflection. He perhaps had in mind some autobiographical writings by male authors while analysing Kamala Das's work as he does when he compares her confessional poetry with that of Dom Moraes and suggests that the male poet has greater restraint than her. Kohli comments "for her poetry is a sort of compulsion-neurosis, so intense is her need to find a release from her emotions."[54] It is surprising how an eminent critic misses or purposefully overlooks the significance of the confessional mode of writing for a woman writer. While eulogizing the influence of canonical figures like Eliot and Auden's conscious modelling of poetic style on the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, Kohli deliberately tries to take some clues from one of Kamala Das's sayings, "I have read very little poetry. I do not think that I have been influenced by any poet" to justify his saying "this conspicuous absence of an overt intellectual or philosophical framework heightens all the more the primitive energy and emotional directness of her work." It is interesting to see how such shallow understanding actually carries with it the age-old biases inherent in patriarchal claim to associate rationality and intellectual exercise as typical male attributes and emotionality as a female quality. Kohli's parochial outlook is also transparent when he tries to read Kamala Das's frankness about love and sexuality as display of primitive energy.

Many different critics in many different dailies reviewed *My Story* and some of these reviews reflect typical male way of looking at a woman's text. *The Times of India* review reads "The chapter headings accentuate the "Excitement"...There is enough in it to give...readers the "sizzle" and "spice"....

The World Literature Today review reads "*My Story* describes a life of frolicking in sex...The book has its accent on titillation..."

The binary oppositions engendered by a woman writer's autobiography call for a decentering of the thus far accepted phallocentric schemata. Her hesitant confessions to representations are dubbed subversive and by extension become controversial, creating a mental block in the hither to fore accepting readership. Her "otherness" is exaggerated making her seem an exception rather than a mouthpiece of the female community.

The critical response and the public furore which Kamala Das's controversial autobiography, *My Story* generated clearly brings to light the tendency to exaggerate the "otherness" of the woman writer in the Indian context. In the advertisement printed in the cover pages of the book the publishers referred to it as the compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian Writer. They quoted from *The Times of India* and *World Literature Today* to present the book as one that would appeal to the male gaze and tickle their sensations.

My Story cannot be reduced to the status of a calendar of a semi-nude model as these reviewers try to do. When the publisher purposefully includes these kind of reviews on the back cover of the text his hidden aim is to boost the sale of the book. When a woman gathers up the courage to narrate the experience of the body and her inner desires the text is instantly marketed for financial gains of publishers as a commodity for voyeuristic gaze and consumption. The subversive massage is all together lost. This is an inevitable tragedy against which feminist writers have to wage a war again.

The strategic importance of *My Story* like all other feminist confessional writings as a medium of self-exploration and social criticism can never be denied.

As a confessional text it makes public that which has been private, claiming to avoid filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience.

Feminist writing can be understood as both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them. This dialectic is very much there in Kamala Das's writings as a woman writer. Her explicit self-identification as a member of the oppressed group and her exploration of gender-specific concerns centred around the problem of female identity make her stand out as a feminist writer, rather a distinct voice among the galaxy of writers in contemporary scene. Through her writings she wrestled with a critique of the existing society. She is very much a special case in her own time: other women writers did not write the same sort of autobiography.

My Story is an important autobiographical achievement not for the reason that it turned out to be a bestseller bringing Kamala Das both notoriety and fame but because of the sheer power of its writing and the truth it reveals about various aspects of Indian womanhood especially about women caught up in the quagmire of conventional marital ties. Through her representations of herself and the ways in which she challenges some of the conventions around representations of Woman—that culturally constructed gendered identity, Kamala Das offers some sense of the ways in which women can begin to assert their own identities and their own experience and thus claim themselves.

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Chapter Four

A Re-appraisal of Kamala Das's Poetry

The energetic and vibrant verse of Kamala Das traverses through different terrains. But taken as a whole the primary concern of her poetic output is to map out the world as viewed from a woman's perspective. She charts the world and the relationships that bind it through the lenses of a woman's eyes. Women in her poetry are portrayed in different roles and guises as wife, lover, mother, daughter, grand daughter, and a devotee of Krishna and Allah. Through each of these roles woman's multi-faceted emotions, thoughts, feelings, reactions are brought into light in a manner which is not only subversive as far as it helps question conventional gender related values and prejudices, but also audacious and frank in its use of the confessional tone.

Kamala Das has never declared herself a writer with a radical feminist agenda. It is understandable that such self-claiming would have imposed certain restrictions on the creative persona, delimiting her panoramic vision of life as a whole. Through her writing she has evolved her own distinct voice and declaring herself a feminist writer would mean a mere reiteration or repetition of what she had already been doing or engaging in as a creative person. Moreover, an obvert declaration of a woman writer's ideological stance often involves the perils of ghettoization by critics and readers alike. Being a writer from the third world, Kamala Das's self assertive claim would have also appeared as her conscious

emulation of kindred souls from the advanced West and might have inspired nothing but sheer mockery from the conservative circle.

Nevertheless, to a sympathetic reader Das's thematic concerns and use of language that has a direct appeal undeniably reflect her feminist stance. No wonder she has secured herself a position both in Indian Writing in English and Malayalam Literature that is not easily replaceable. It is the inherent feminist consciousness in her that makes her work so radical, unconventional and subversive to the extent that she stands out among her fellow writers as one of the most controversial authors in contemporary India.

Most of her poems and her autobiography as a whole can be regarded as confessional because together they signal the intention of the author to foreground the most personal and intimate details of her life. As Francis Hart writes: "Confession is personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self."[1] While most critics have categorized Kamala Das as a confessional poet, there are some who have recognized/eulogized the frankness and boldness that marked the confessional tone, while a few others have simply tried to read her poems as mere self–indulgence---lacking objectivity and rationalization. A feminist reading of her work should, however, begin with the recognition of the significance of the confessional tone in her poetry, since it is through this she takes the risk of deliberately confronting and challenging dominant conventions around representations of women and by women. Kamala Das's poetry has brought her closer to articulating her

existence as a woman. It appears that she is neither diffident nor afraid to confront her poetry and the exposure, the possibility of failure or notoriety, infamy or bad reputation that accompany it. Hence the use of the confessional tone is deliberate and self-conscious.

The strategic use of the confessional tone is highly subversive in Das's case and is closely inter-twined with her thematic concerns. While it provides the ground for placing one's own 'self' at the center of tensions and contradictions, it helps in confronting these conflicts from a position that is participatory and self-absorbing. This should not be mistaken as self-indulgent, as most male critics have tried to do while reflecting on Kamala Das's writings on love and sexuality. The confessional tone provides the scope for auto-referenciality and the critiquing of conventional values from the 'within', not from a self-distancing and cool objective positioning which may lead to some intellectual brooding, but not necessarily honest and truthful exposition.

Moreover, a woman writer's self-conscious use of the confessional tone enables her to delineate the personal as the political. Herein lies the subversiveness because a woman writer while trying to portray her personal experience can simultaneously voice the joys, desires, longings, deprivations of her gender as a whole. Most of Das's poems, autobiographical in nature and embodying the confessional tone, voice her unique and personal experiences, at the same time encompass the feminine sensibility that makes the personal stand for the communal. Individual

analysis of some of her poems can very well reflect how her confessional poetic creations work at this double level.

The poem "An Introduction"[2] is a very good example to start with. From the feminist perspective this poem appears to be a strident politically charged personal statement, although, paradoxically enough it starts with the poetic persona's admission of her ignorance of real politics, except for her capability to just name a few politically influential figures. As a political statement, the poem, penned by a woman writer is assertive in tone and unabashedly questions the rights of intruders – critics, friends, visiting cousins to interfere in her personal life and decisions. The feminine self is portrayed as having the audacity to question stifling societal values and conventions, that constantly aim at suppressing her creative and intuitive choice of language and her identity as a whole. Both as a writer and as a woman the creative persona asserts her claim to choose her own language for creative expressions and destine and shape her feminine identity on her own terms. The poem thus starts self-consciously with the personal pronoun 'I' and likewise ends with the assertive 'I'.

The title is appropriate as the poem introduces the poetic persona before the scrutinizing eyes of the readers both as a writer and a woman. In the poem introduction is taking place at different levels. Kamala Das is one of the pioneering poets of the post-Independence /modern era writing in English. Through her bold assertion to use the language of her choice she is in a way making her presence felt, her voice heard in the arena of Indian writing in English. Therefore, introducing herself first and foremost as a

writer is noteworthy. Moreover, the fact that she is a woman-writer makes the act of self-introduction even more radical, giving it a political dimension. From the feminist perspective a woman's conscious and deliberate claim to any language is a political act in itself. The poem, as an introduction of a poet, pertinently begins with the poetic persona's declaration of her national and racial background, and her multilingualism, her capability to use three languages:

.....I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.

This proclamation has relevance in the context of her emphatic claim to write in English. Thereafter she questions those people around her who suggest her not to write in English since it is not her mother-tongue. Far from recognising English as an alien language, she claims it as her own, even its distortions her own like a mother lovingly claiming even her imperfect child:

The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human,

Vrinda Nabar in her analysis of the poem writes, "the real truth about Kamala's poetic stance is irrelevant within the context of the poem."[3] But is it not pertinent for Kamala Das, as a poet to introduce her literary

identity first? How else should she pose before her readers if not as a poet? No doubt, as a woman her struggle is at various fronts. And if she bows down before the dictates of society, then her inner urge to express herself creatively in the language of her choice would be shattered. That would be utterly disastrous, a fatal blow to her aspiring spirit!

Nabar is of the view that the linguistic assertions in the poem are verbose and marked by uncertainty. If at all it is verbose then there may be an inherent need for its justification, for here a woman is taking a stand against all odds and she needs to justify her linguistic choice. There is perhaps an underlying tension of castigation and outright rejection and so the raving self-defense, self-justification of the uniqueness of her own language is a methodical tool to counter this. The justification about the uniqueness of her own language starting with "It is as human as I am human" may appear verbose at the surface level, but at a deeper level it suggests that the poet's choice and use of the language reflect both an inner, deep-felt need and compulsion and a conscious, deliberate and voluntary act which immediately renders her language (the sounds she employs for creative interaction) unique and different from other sounds in nature:

> It voices my joys, my longings, my
> Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
> Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
> Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
> Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
> Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech

Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the

Incoherent mutterings of the blazing

Funeral pyre.

Having successfully introduced herself first and foremost as a writer, the creative persona then moves on to deal with the subtler issue ---- her identity as a woman, and this takes us back to her puberty when society announced her growth.

.....I was a child, later they

Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs

Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.

Here the poem is an introduction of an adolescent girl, her initiation to adulthood and maturity through the attainment of puberty. At this crucial juncture in life when the body undergoes rapid physiological changes, she confronts the harsh dictates of patriarchy, which in a way pointed towards the curtailment of all her freedom. Her adolescent search for love was crushed with sexual exploits of others

and she more or less prostrated as a victim before the victimizer. Das writes:

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.

Who is the 'he' as a manipulator of the scene? Is he the indespicable father figure in her real life who married her off at the age of fifteen and

whose abominable nature forbids the writer to admit him as her father? The unidentified person perhaps symbolically represents the inevitable presence of the iron-fisted father figure in the life of a young girl.

To counter the defamation of innocence and to hinder further exploits on her body and mind, the creative persona takes the masculine guise, but this too is unacceptable by societal norms. The categorizers point their wicked fingers at her once again:

Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in.

Besides demanding her to have a fixed name and a definite role, the vanguards and perpetrators of patriarchal conventions also urged her to conceal all her emotions:

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a

Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when

Jilted in love...

This is a typical Indian ethos which comes as a shocking surprise to almost every young girl, but very few in actuality can internalize the menacing threat of such 'hardcore rules of the father' and face it up with a confrontational gesture. As Kamala Das's orientation is essentially anarchistic; she refused obeisance to any and all authority. She is not feeble, fragile, submissive by nature around whose feet society could fix its shackles. She urges elimination of all social restraints on her as a woman

and a writer. Thus through her we can see the need for a fundamental transvaluation of values.

The indomitable desire to transgress--to fall in love, or rather to recognize it-- resides in her and she strides out, perhaps, to realize fears, foibles, needs and desires in human terms and ultimately to recognize her feminine self in all its depths and veracity. Her transgression brings to light underlying biases in social relations between man and woman. She realizes that both man and woman need each others love, but paradoxically enough it is always the women's lot to cry and bear the burden of shame and destitution that occasionally beget love:

he is every man

Who wants a woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me... the ocean's tireless

Waiting.

A few lines later:

It is I who drink lonely.....

.....it is I who make love

And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying

With a rattle in my throat.

The recognition of emotional needs in both man and woman here reflects a realistic apprehension on the part of the poetic self. But there is a simultaneous realization that the experience of love or emotional need is not always equally justified in both the sexes. Men are socially licensed to seek love in a hasty way, that there hardly exists any fetters to tether or bind

them, but women are passive seekers, tirelessly waiting for their emotional fulfillment. The use of natural symbols like 'river' to depict man's hasty search for love and 'ocean' for woman's passivity shows the natural tendency of this emotional quest in them to merge (as rivers merging with oceans), indicating the complementarity of the man-woman relationship at the altar of love. Contrariwise, these symbols also lyrically delineate the underlying tension arising from gender differences, which makes lovers stand apart as individuals. The river always heads towards the ocean and the ocean always hugs it in its bosom, but prior to this final fusion each is a separate entity. Man's deliberate initiation of the act and woman's deliberation on tireless waiting in a way points at the underlying tension of gender inequality in a patriarchal social set up, more specifically in the Indian context.

Unfortunately, a critic of Vrinda Nabar's stature mistakes the lyrical symbols of river and ocean for soppiness of a movie song. She says, "With a few modifications, the poem would have made a very good song." Her sarcasm doesn't stop there, she insists, "It might even have been a hit in the sixties and seventies when similar themes of loneliness had a strong appeal."[4] It is understandable that Nabar as a critic tries hard to deliberately offer a critique of the poem in a different vein (perhaps, because it has drawn applause and appreciative attention from the critic as well as the average reader ever since it saw the light of the day). But her caustic remarks are self-defeating, since as a woman critic her failure to comprehend the struggle of the feminine self to recognize itself against all

odds, is unpardonable. This is, however, not to generalize or blindly subscribe to the parochial idea that every female critic should blindly eulogize or even empathize with the works of her fellow woman writer and read them from a feminist perspective.

Laying bare the sexual biases and hypocrisy in society and boldly asserting both the strength and weaknesses within her, the poetic persona emerges triumphantly in a defiant manner, emphatically calling herself by the same pronominal address as her male counterpart uses for himself:

I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

There is no retrogression, no looking back, but full apprehension of the confrontational stance against the outside world thereby recognizing the 'feminine' self and its assertive power. The 'self' that gets revealed here is thus feminine and radical to its core, and bears a tendency to overcome the menacing and diabolic fetters of taboos and conventions. The restrictions imposed on the self reflect the suppressive modes in patriarchal society at large, which subjugate the feminine self in different guises. The questions raised in the poem are therefore not only pertinent to the poetic persona at the individual and personal level but also help voice the general plight of every woman.

It is worth noting here that the occasional play of irony in the poem helps to highlight this feminine predicament, as for instance when the

categorizers urge the poetic persona to play the feminine role as a quarreler with servants. Although it is contrary to the feminine ego to be belligerent, there is a general assumption that it is natural for the average woman/housewife to turn out to be a quarreler with the servants. The society as a whole seems to uphold the view that such negative assumptions bear a mark of identity that is typically feminine. Another instance of ironical interpolation is when the poetic persona narrates the encounter with her husband:

He did not beat me

But my sad woman-body felt beaten.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank

Pitifully.

A woman's ego is not necessarily hurt only with physical tortures. Undesired sexual exploits even within the legal ambit of marriage can crush her ego and shatter her dreams, making her shrink in self-pity. The mental conflicts, which arise from undesired physical contact can devastate a woman.

The most remarkable contribution of this poem is the poetic persona's radical claim to use English as the language of her choice in spite of strong opposition from certain quarters. This strong assertion in a way wiped out the dilemma from the hearts of an entire group of emerging and aspiring writers of the post-independent era, who were caught up in the mire of unforgivable guilt and inner conflict while choosing the language of the colonizer for creative expressions:

Don't write in English, they said,

English is not your mother-tongue

Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins.

Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like?

There is no parallel in the entire gamut of Indian Writing in English to such outspoken words—radical questioning. And this radicality is even more astounding when we consider the words as originating from the pen of a woman writer.

The confessional tone is used by Kamala Das in many other poems where she explorevarious themes related to women like: marriage, motherhood, sexuality, bonds between women, and womanhood in general.

In "The Old Playhouse"[5] the title poem in her third volume of poetry, Kamala Das reflects on the theme of ossification of the feminine self in a heterosexual relationship. A woman's natural desire for love and companionship are not celebrated in any male-female relationship whether it is a bond between her and her husband or a relation she shares with a lover. Most often the feminine self is victimized in such a relationship to the extent to which the woman ends up losing all her prowess to will and reason. Like the poem "An Introduction", this poem, too, offers a critique of prevalent gender biases, but with more pathos.

Well-known and established critics, however, have wasted much ink and time in identifying the 'You' in the poem whom the poetic persona

addresses and in a way confronts with defiance. The poetic persona's effort to raise herself from the her doomed state by deliberately questioning and challenging the "monstrous ego" of the partner, who planned to subdue and repress her feminine self, draws no response from these critics, who try to read this 'subversive' poem as yet another attempt by Kamala Das to explore the theme of love.

Kohli presumes the poem is autobiographical and is addressed to the husband. He writes, "The poem is addressed presumably to the husband in the light of what Kamala Das says about her own relationship with her husband.... 'You' is the husband who wants to tame the swallow who is the woman persona...."[6] After nearly two decades, (Kohli published his monograph in 1975 and Nabar's book appeared in 1994), Nabar had nothing new to offer except Christening the 'you' as a lover with whom the poet is involved in an extra-marital relationship, and not the husband. To Nabar the "effectiveness of the poem lies in the fact that it is obviously a poem about an extramarital relationship."[7] However, it is ridiculous the way she picks up words and phrases from the poem to validate her argument. She argues that other than the phrase "you called me wife" there is little evidence to presume for Kohli that the poem is addressed to the husband. Most unwittingly Nabar picks up the word 'planned' from the first line to suggest that the poem is all about an extra-marital affair and that the lover's acts were more deliberate and preconceived. She also thinks that the relationship was a long one and "homes left behind" suggests divided loyalties between the lovers. The poet used the phrase "homes left behind"

while metaphorically comparing the woman, her innate urge to be free with a swallow. Swallow is a migratory bird and captivity is contradictory to its nature—it would perish! The comparison is appropriate, the bird's urge to fly and the woman's inherent need to be free, but "homes left behind" doesn't necessarily suggest 'divided loyalties' in an extra-marital affair as Nabar tries to infer. In the poem the lover is described as being pleased with the woman's body, its "usual shallow/convulsions". This according to Nabar indicates that "he was not her first: *earlier* sexual experiences had confirmed this pattern of bodily response (usual)."[8]

The poem's most significant contribution—a critique of gender-relation and power imbalance in a heterosexual relationship is missed out by these critics. Kohli, informed by the autobiographical details of the writer, sums up the poem as "protests

against the constraint of the married life: the fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort and male domination."[9] However, he never goes beyond this in an attempt to elaborate on it in order to highlight the underlying message. Though Nabar and Kohli sense oppression in the poem, women's oppression as such does not get highlighted in their interpretations since they are more focussed on identifying the oppressor, not the effect of his oppressive acts on the oppressed.

It is thus absolutely futile to argue whether the 'masculine' ego in the poem represents the husband or a lover, what ultimately matters is the poetic persona's ability to voice the exploitative crudities that bind a male-female relationship. Whether it is ones better half or a lover the feminine

self confronts routined subjugation while enacting her role as a partner. Men can hardly ever reject or undo their culturally-oriented ego that places them at a superior or advantageous position from where they can dictate, rule and demand obeisance from the 'feminine' self no matter in what role this self is represented-- as mother, sister, wife or daughter.

At certain point in her life Kamala Das, too must have come under the sway of the devouring masculinist power structure and felt its stifling influence. Her early marriage is an indication of this. As a creative person she could make use of the negative experience, could even outgrow it. But her radical questioning does not remain merely a personal defiance, for it voices certain general truths about women's predicament. How well certain lines from "The Old Playhouse" depict an average Indian woman's cocooned existence:

> You called me wife,
> I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
> To offer at the right moments the vitamins. Cowering
> Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
> Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
> Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.

An average Indian girl is always expected to be extra-loving and caring to her spouse and to bear every pain and sorrow of conjugal life with resilience and quietude. In other words, she has to undo her ego (if at all such a thing exists for her) and cultivate an attitude that is marked by servility, not self-assertion. Neither marriage nor love provides her with a

space where she can exercise her individuality. There is a general fear in the Indian psyche that gender-equality would lead to discordance and breach of harmony in heterosexual relationship. It would create havoc in the sacred precincts of marriage and family life, if a wife instead of being subservient raises her voice to question the omnipotent husband, the "lord of the house"!

Before masculine virility, pride, conceit and physical prowess the feminine self loses its vigor and the capability to counter the heinous and diabolic male ego that had subdued her incessantly, making her lose all her human identity.

Wasn't Kamala Das married off to a cousin of her father's choice at the tender age of fifteen? She did not have then the moral or physical strength to say 'no' to this. It was her father who molded her destiny. Most male critics who attempt to stress Kamala Das's Nayar background while explicating the theme of sexuality in her writings tend to overlook the omnipotence of the father-figure in the otherwise matrilineal set up of the Nayar family, whose decision was the final verdict. Those women in the Nalapat house who chose to resist the all-pervasive threats of patriarchy took recourse to silence as a vindictive tool, not to vociferous articulation of their mutilated ego. They withdrew themselves into an isolated and mummified existence.

Contrariwise, the articulate and vocal poet from this family took recourse to iconoclastic expressions especially while describing sexuality, perhaps, as a tool to subvert conventional stereotypical values. She

expresses in uninhibited terms man's sexual hunger and greed for the female body:

You were pleased

With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow

Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured

Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed

My poor lust with bitter-sweet juices.

The claustrophobic and unsatisfactoriness of married life is vividly expressed in the following lines from the same poem where the mind of the poetic persona is metaphorically compared to an old playhouse with all its lights put out:

'.....The summer

Begins to pall. I remember the ruder breezes

Of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves. Your room is

Always lit by artificial lights, your window always

Shut. Even the air conditioner helps so little,

All persuasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers

In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat.... There is

No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old

Playhouse with all its lights put out.'

The old playhouse which was formerly a center of art, activity, interaction, in short all the vigour that represented life, now has metamorphosed into a barren and desolate place. The metaphor is so evocative that it vividly reflects the absurdity of the poetic persona's

being—her existential crisis. The darkness within her cannot be dissipated with the 'artificial lights' in the husband's room, the suffocating ambience of which is aggravated with the windows being shut against the natural world of smell, sound, and fresh air. The poet exposes a blatant refusal on her partner's part to confront the unknown possibilities of the night and to make direct contact with it. Instead he retires passively immersing himself in his own small world which has become saturated and stagnant with his own 'breath' and 'sweat'. Worst of all he seeks to subdue his wife's 'urge to fly'.

Thus we can see that in this poem, the honest, somewhat painful and absorbing account of her life is powerfully expressed. Here the representative aspects of the author's experience as well as her unique individuality are important. This kind of autobiographical writing which combines authenticity and representativeness plays an important role in the self-definition of feminine subjectivity and its expression through literary forms.

Loss of a woman's freedom in an Indian society becomes one of Kamala Das's major obsessions. In a good number of poems she perpetuates her quest for freedom. She often raises her voice against the male-dominance, the phallocentricism of socially institutionalized bondage called 'marriage.' She feels like a 'cage bird'. She depicts her inner anguish and pangs because of her loss of liberty:

I was sent away to protect a family's

Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some

Abstractions, sent to another city to be

A relative's wife, a hausfrau for his home, and

A mother for his sons, yet another nodding

Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to

Warm his bed at night.

(Collected Poems 59)[10]

Such bold and iconoclastic expression is extremely rare in the contemporary literary scene in India. The directness of language goes parallel with the crudities of the situation. There is no romanticization of marriage as a positive and healthy social institution. Far from it. In the patriarchal social set up of the Indian society marriage is more like an altar to immolate the feminine self. Woman is bartered away, turned into an object for male consumption.

She thus registers her complaint against marriage that perpetually lacerates and ruptures her feminine ego and identity. Ruefully she remarks how the slow degeneration eats away her sense of liberty:

Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog,

Jumping my routing hoops each day, where's my soul,

My spirit, where the muted tongue of my desire? (59)

Her anger and frustration fume up into caustic articulation in "Composition"[11]:

Husbands and wives,

Here is my advice to you.

Obey each other's crazy commands,

Ignore the sane.

Turn your home into a merry

Dog-house,

Marriage is meant to be all this

Anyway,

Being arranged in

Most humorous heaven.

If the ironical tone inherent in these lines is simply glossed over, then the poet would appear to be celebrating marriage and sexuality in a purely hedonistic manner. She would appear to be alluring her readers to a *Rajnish* kind of physical entrapment with the body. But, being herself a victim of patriarchal values and norms, the poet here is ironically refering to the Indian customary belief in marriage as a lasting bond between two persons whose union is predetermined by some divine power—*arranged in humorous heaven.* In India, unlike western culture, marriage is more like some social contract, arranged in accordance with the wish, choice and predilection of the elders of the family. It is a paradox that this socially arranged function in which love, volition and spontaneity of the partners (would-be bride and bride-groom) hardly play a role, is ultimately given the pseudo garb of an irrevocable destiny--- designed by the play of some divine and omnipotent hands. The made-up tale of divine intervention in human nuptial ties is a license or means to justify the 'rule of the father'. But when this belief settled down firmly in the subconscious mind for many

generations, its falsity disappeared, giving way to some veridical truth. Although fathers may have the best intentions to marry their daughters off to a healthy, wealthy family, their role as 'patriarchs' curtails every freedom of their daughters. Kamala Das's marriage was like any other conventional marriage arranged by her father. Having witnessed and experienced the negative aspects of marriage the poet does not hesitate to unravel the crudities that bind it, in utterly condescending and acerbic tone as is witnessed in the above quoted lines.

Further, she unhesitatingly terms the husband as "the ancient settler in the mind," and calls him "old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment." Patriarchal Indian spiritualism dictates woman to worship and adore the husband as God and to prostrate before him all her life. This dictum with its mythic dimensionality has influenced the feminine psyche throughout the history of India starting from the Vedic times down to the present era of science and technology. Mothers instill such ideas in their daughters quite early in life so that there is very little scope to question its validity. Das in a way deconstructs such age-old belief through her subversive, iconoclastic remarks. It is as though she wields her pen to make conventional sensibility walk on its head. Through her direct and provocative language she seems to dismantle the Hindu concepts of *sati-savitri* or the *patibrata* , which has long shaped the pan-Indian psyche since time immemorial. Her myth-breaking poetry has helped readers to see through the oppressive ideology implicit in the cultural construction of the 'Bharatiya Nari', so central a trope in the creation of the image of the

Indian womanhood with all the attributive qualities of chastity and wifely devotion.

Kamala Das's suppressed anger sleeps like a volcano; but when her liberty is lost, her soul's song gets deciphered, she vociferously lodges her complaints. In a good number of poems she depicts a feminine self that would not submit to the forces which thwart its sense of liberty and security to the extent that she even raises her voice against the "skin-communicated thing." In her well-known poem "The Freaks"[12] she shows her disgust for physical sensuality:

'Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers?'

Here the contact of the man with her is shown as superficial, glancing off the skin without stirring any deeper feeling. Correspondingly, the poetic persona's heart too becomes an "empty cistern". A cul-de-sac has been reached with the poet isolated in despair and despondency. But her awareness of the fact that to make contact with her lover, to goad him into real communication she must adopt artificiality, makes her embrace flamboyancy:

'I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.'

According to Anne Brewster what this self-disclosure suggests is that the old structure, whether defining the terms on which the couple relate, or upon which a culture is founded, must crumble and give way to the new.

In the poem "The Corridors", the 'lost lanes of the blinded mind', 'naked walls' and 'strange doorways' represent the various restraints imposed upon the poet, not only by the unavoidable duties as wife and housewife, but also by those implied in the expectations of friends and fans. In the solitude of her depression, the poet feels bereft of spontaneity and assumes that any participation must be self conscious and forced. Having to consciously assume a role makes her feel 'an imposter'.

She derides artificiality, the attempt to beautify oneself in order to fit well into the conventional feminine frame. On the other hand, she intends to come to terms with her own self, for this would give her the taste of liberty. She objects to making any compromise with her husband. Ironically she portrays her own plight:

> It will be alright when I learn
> To paint my mouth like a clown's
> It will be alright if I put up my hair
> Stand near my husband to make a proud pair.
>
> (Substitute)[13]

The self-reflexivity of these lines makes the poetic persona stand apart from the 'stereotypes'. There is no deliberation to join the herd, but to

step aside and take an ironic stance. Role-playing and objectification of the feminine self are satirized here. The evocative repetition of the phrase "It will be all right" heightens the sarcasm and the satirical tone, while also perhaps showing the poet's inner distaste and abhorrence for any kind of artificiality and objectification associated with the representation of the female. Most critics who commented on the poem interpret the repetition of the phrase as a stylistic failure. According to Eunice de Souza, "the repetition of the phrase 'It will be all right, it will be all right' suggests exactly the opposite, in fact: the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life."[14] To Nabar, the lines have a cantatory tone and suggest a sort of self-hypnosis on the part of the poet. A close look at the poem will, however, reveal that the repetition of the line does not suggest any attempt at disguise or self-hypnosis as these critics interpret, rather forcefully indicates the superficiality and resulting boredom arising out of feminine role-playing.

The feminine voice that emerges in most of Kamala Das's poems is self-consciously confessional, self-assertive, strident, and frank. This voice does not remain complacent after disclosing truths about the poetic persona's longings, desires, frustrations, sexuality and radical questioning of conventional values and norms. In other words, Kamala Das does not use this voice only for subversive purposes. When the tumult is over, her defiance is expressed, she employs the same voice to delve deep into the inner recesses of the mind to bring to surface the underlying tensions and conflicts that rule the female consciousness. The voice becomes auto-

referential, standing vis-à-vis with its own being. By reflecting on inner conflicts the poet tries to draw the picture in its entirety.

Freedom is not achieved just through rebellion, for the struggle with ones inner conflict continues in an unabated manner within the poetic persona. There is no immediate salvation for the rebellious feminine self, she has to confront her psychic dilemmas arising from the residual bits and pieces of patriarchy's insidious traces that have settled down firmly inside her under the perpetual "rule of the father". These imprints are not easily erased, discarded, or wiped out clean once and forever. Her mind was a *tabula rasa* once wherein patriarchy's codes got embedded and though she is an emancipatory being today these codes are not easily decodable. There is a true realization of this inexplicable truth in Kamala Das and that is why she most unhesitatingly delineates feminine dilemmas as in the poem "I Shall Some Day"[15]:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. I shall some day take
Wings, fly around, as often petals,
Do when free in air, and you dear one,
Just the sad remnant of a root, must
Lie behind, sans pride, on double-beds
And grieve.

Exactly half of the poem expresses the woman's desire to free herself from the monotony of her conjugal life. The poem is not an ordinary love poem depicting any exhilarating feeling. The tired woman's desire to abandon her lover, in order to free herself from all bonds is not an easily achievable task. Between the actual act and the mind's fantasizing about the undertaking, a deep chasm opens up and the mind balks to recuperate the would-be consequence of derelicting the cocoon -- love's frustrating but sheltered recluse:

But, I shall some day return, losing
Nearly all, hurt by wind, sun and rain,
Too hurt by fierce happiness to want
A further jaunt or a further spell
Of freedom, and I shall some day see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
Just a skeletal thing, then shut my
Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,
Here in your nest of familiar scorn....

The poem reflects the typical Indian woman's dilemma. She would dare not free herself from the claustrophobic situation by walking out on her spouse even if she strongly feels the desire to make her absence felt in his life. This inability to act in accordance with her desire, however, does not necessarily point at her weakness and dependency. To free herself from the fetters of society is not an easy task. Freedom will not come her way without a heavy price even if she so strongly desires the happiness arising

from undoing all bonds. The inevitability of the act of surrendering to the familiar but abominable scorn of her lover/husband reflects the inner conflict within her. In the inability to overcome this dualism within her, lies her defeat. But on the other hand, the poetic persona's ability to recognize this dual state of mind is the mark of her triumph.

Freedom, a condition of living without sanctions and domination is the *sine qua non* of Kamala Das's romantic anarchism, the theme of which she reflects in "The Stone Age."[16] But to an average reader this poem may conjure up the image of the poetic persona as an adulteress or a woman lacking chastity and loyalty. No doubt with the sheer power of imagination Kamala Das in this poem attempts to create a scene that is cinematic in its descriptive power:

When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.
Through peep-holes, the neighbours watch,
They watch me come
And go like rain.

The lines are so cinematic that readers can easily visualize the woman while having a feel of the immediacy of her action. The transgression, whether imaginative in essence or an execution of a real life anecdote is not climactic in itself, what precedes and follows is more significant. The cinematic episode is couched between repulsive and sullen states of mind of the lover and her confrontational soul-searching rhetoric at

the end, when the poetic persona questions the conservative and voyeuristic neighbors who perhaps disdained her maverick and philistine approach. The gestational part of the action begins when under her compelling female ego, she feels the male ego deprives her of her sense of security, serenity, sensual ardor. She feels the husband's indifference and interference loathsome. Her charges against the male ego are infinite and she vociferously registers her complaint:

You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye.

After the initial outburst against the husband, the substance of her reveries and daydreams is explicitly stated. They involve "strong men" who "cast their shadows" and "sink/Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood". The presence of darker subterranean passions and needs is expressed through the image of the "drains" which "flow beneath sacred cities". These are vivid images that bring to light the dual nature of the human mind. When the daydreams are fulfilled, desires consummated Kamala Das in a bold image of the neighbours watching her arrivals and departures, brings alive the feel of such a situation in the Indian context. To a non-Indian reader the subversiveness of the poem may not be easily comprehensible. This poem bears a typical Indian sensibility. In a patriarchal social set-up marriage may very well ossify a woman's heart

and mind, turning her to an insubstantial object. But here the poetic persona realizes this putrefying situation and tries to reverse it.

While transgression is highly dramatized to heighten its effect on the reader's mind and perhaps to show the contrast between reality and the mind's urge to free itself from its menacing clutch, audacity eventually gives way to questioning, to vagueness. The end sums up brilliantly the aura of scandal a liaison would create. The last few lines of the poem symbolically describe the tumult in the lover's mind through the use of graphic images of physical union:

Ask me, everyone, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breast,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price.....

Orgasmic rapture in an extra-marital affair is not what the lover, as a transgressor is seeking here in an insouciant manner, for she is aware the price is too high for any such attempt with society's peering eyes turned towards her. With the powerful dots at the end of the poem the poetic persona compels the reader to confront the situational dilemma and tread along the uncertain and perilous path along with her.

Kohli, who quotes the ending lines, is of the view that "At this point.... The lines suddenly come alive with the energy of questioning, and the theme of winning and losing and the underlying sense of exhaustion assert themselves."[17] Nabar, however, doubts whether one can demarcate the poem in this way, contrasting the "life" in these lines with, by implication, their lack of it earlier. It is true that the tone of the poem changes here from the irritated withdrawal of the earlier section when the husband is singled out for reproach and disdain. But the energy expressed is really the sense of release when the husband is absent in the scene and the poet ventures out for her rendezvous. It is easy, also, to identify the presence of guilt in Kamala Das as a diatribe against her husband. His presence restricts her style; only when he departs is she able to dismiss for the moment the bonds she has pledged herself to observe.

The poem is unique because it did not limit the search of the woman to just finding sexual fufillment in extramarital relationships. The feminine urge to free itself does not represent adultery and perfidy. At one level it challenges the restrictions imposed on the feminine self by social institution like marriage, whereas at a deeper level it casts doubts on the possibility of any defiance. At the personal level the poetic persona cannot display an open challenge, to fulfil her hidden desires she has to act surreptitiously, waiting till her husband departs from home. This shows that there are restrictions imposed on her and she is unable to openly challenge them. At another level, she manages to sneak from home and casts a veil of ignorance over her husband's eyes, but she does not emerge triumphant, for

the outside world now witnesses her actions and keeps its eyes transfixed on her. The tension arising from the overlapping interference of both external and internal facts makes her all the more defiant, but not without sparing herself any feeling of diffidence and guilt. The overall picture is not of flamboyance and exhilaration---the woman driving her blue car against the bluer sea---but of stifling despondency. There is neither any surrender to a servile state, nor is any absolute emancipation. The feminine voice is thus employed by Kamala Das once again to address this contradictory predicament The title, *Stone Age,* appropriately corresponds to the image of the poetic persona being metamorphosed into a granite dove. The metamorphosis as we have seen is not a part of her evolution, rather it was something thrust upon her by her partner. The metaphor aptly reflects her dull and drab existence. With patriarchy taking deeper roots in the social structure the causes leading to her stultifying existence seem to have 'petrified', leaving no chances of dissipation and change. There is an inherent tendency within patriarchy that is resistant tochange which gives it the guise of a stone-age relic. The evils perpetrated through this abominable system can be metaphorically related to stone age too, when we consider them as barbaric, hostile and crude against which the feminine self had to wage endless futile wars.

The theme of love takes a new dimension in Kamala Das's hands. Through the candid treatment of this theme she takes the liberty to expose her inner thoughts, longings and desires. It serves as a foundational platform from where she addresses her feminine self's endless dilemmas,

fluctuations, hesitations, frustrations, regrets and numerous attempts at philosophising. But certain blatant expressions about love and sexuality have led critics to categorize her as a poet of decadence.

Kamala Das realised that in the process of living and loving, the tenderness gets lost-the tenderness of relationship gets bruised. She is in need of care and tenderness. In return she receives an illusory bondage:

Love
I no longer need,
with tenderness I am most content,
I have learnt that friendship
cannot endure,
that blood-ties do not satisfy.

(Composition)

Kamala Das uses the theme of love and sexuality primarily to bring into focus her experiential knowledge and subjective views on these subjects. But these are still like taboo subjects for a female writer's pen and have brought much notoriety to her. Male critics' vilifying remarks on her at times clearly reflect the biases attached to these subjects, especially when expressed by a woman writer. While interpreting her obsessive concern with the themes of love and sexuality, critics have cast upon her many negative appellations. Many of the critics feel that to focus on one's personal feelings or sexual experiences and to fail to "transcend" them as men ostensibly do is to betray a "paucity of experience."[18] It is a "negation of history and a total preoccupation with the self."[19] The argument is that

she is "less an artist than a human-being."[20] Astonishingly, one critic even claims that her frank admissions and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional about them and are perfectly in keeping with the nature and themes of confessional poetry."[21]

According to Eunice de Souza, many of these remarks stem from the lack of a clear sociological perspective. It is generally not customary for women in India to talk about sexual preferences so openly or the inadequacies of the husband or the need for a more satisfying relationship. Given traditional ideas about the role of women, Kamala Das's poems can be seen almost as a betrayal of what the traditionally assigned role of women is. An Indian women making such statements is not the same as an Indian man making statements on her behalf, no matter how intelligent and sensitive he may be. In such a context, a woman writing about her quest for individuality performs a *social act.* De Souza is of the view that whether Kamala Das consciously intends to perform a socially relevant act or not is of no consequence where her impact is concerned. In other words, the significance and impact of the poems arise (the quality of the poems taken as given) from what is being said by a woman in a particular context, in this case a context of Indian society which is largely conservative. Thus Kamala Das's display of lack of hesitations or feeling of inhibition towards describing physical love in vivid terms (perhaps, to delineate a tactile quality to her poems) is a rare phenomenon in the literary scene of India.

Moreover, her inner quest for true love--beyond the mundane and physical involvement, at times dictates the need in her to take an ironic

stance instead of perpetually celebrating love in its physical essence. She is also inclined to 'philosophize' love which some male critics tend to read as 'sublimation' of the feminine ego in her. Critics who read only weakness and negativity in Kamala Das's thematic concerns tend to overlook not only her *diverse* approaches to the theme of love but also the fact that through the use of profane subjects like love and sexuality the poet has successfully asserted that the "personal is political". A close look at some of the poems will reveal how the personal is deliberately brought to the foreground to tear apart the veil of conventional ideals of femininity.

The poem "Drama"[22] juxtaposes real life's absurdity along side an enactment of a theatrical scene in which the poetic persona takes the role of a lover burdened by the sorrow of unrequited love. It depicts in a dramatic manner the difficulty faced by a woman when she makes an attempt at disclosing her emotions and true feelings. The feminine voice meets the brunt of patriarchy's anger, ridicule, censorship and outright negation whenever it expresses and upholds free love and adoration. It is a social norm to dismiss woman as emotional and sentimental. These qualities are usually contrasted with rationality and clear-thinking which are regarded as men's inherent qualities. Rationality, she is incapable to cultivate, and so the question of expressing it never arises. Emotionality, her inherent quality, she is expected to suppress not to express openly.

In the Indian context it is just like a taboo for a married woman to espouse love for another man. She cannot cry her heart out declaring her

concealed emotions, it would be a cause of mockery, a disastrous blow to her relationship with her spouse:

I sip my tea

In sunlit balconies, adore

A married man; and, when I speak

My lines, though his lips do not move,

I hear him laugh, ha ha ha ha ha ha ...

The woman here is not destitute, she is well settled in life with a home and a husband. But emotionally her life is sterile, her husband being intent on ridiculing her deep-felt emotions with his sarcasm and mockery. The monotonous repetition of the onomatopoeic word 'ha' at the closing of the poem suggests the dispirited effect it had on the poet. There is no end to this, the clumsy dots imply the continuance of the irritating impact of her husband's guffaw on the woman. Stylistically the word 'ha' and the dots may show the poet's lack of craftsmanship, but this is intentional so far it helps to draw the picture of monotony, stagnation, and confinement of the poetic persona's state of mind.

Kamala Das is bold enough not to deny or conceal physical love as a part of any heterosexual relationship. Sexual congress, for her, is an act where the full arousal and surrender to the senses can forge' the union of true minds' as well as a sense of personal integration. But she does not adopt an affectatious stance in her poetry to show it as an harmonious element in life. In other words, she does not romantise love as an essential bond between man and woman because real life experience always falls

short of this. Behind the veil of human love she sees the raw hunger for the feminine flesh in men and the bondage it imposes upon women. Such realization makes her demean the act of lovemaking in excruciating terms reducing it to a spectacle of grotesquerie, an artificial theatrical performance:

Where

Is room, excuse or even

Need for love, for, isn't each

Embrace a complete thing, a

Finished jigsaw, when mouth on

Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor

Moody mind, while pleasure

With deliberate gaity

Trumpets harshly into the

Silence of the room.....

(In Love)[23]

In yet another poem she poses a question to herself after the rapturous moment is just over:

.....what is the bloody use?

This hacking at each other's parts

Like convicts hacking, breaking clods

At noon.

(The Convicts)[24]

The entire poem describes the physical union in a heterosexual relationship. The merging is so complete that the distinct identities of the two persons, their maleness and femaleness disappears:

When he

And I were one, we were neither

Male nor female.

Yet the poetic persona decries the pleasures of physical union and compares it with the repetitive monotony and drabness of prisoners working in captivity. Kamala Das has never limited herself to mere celebration of sexual love in all its physicality. Though she vividly describes physical love without any qualms or inhibition, ultimately she goes beyond it either by taking a philosophical stance or by using it as a platform from where she addresses sexual exploitation of the female gender.

To show male carnal desires and the devouring nature to consume the female body, Kamala Das uses words that suggest strange, eerie qualities: "his mouth, a dark/Cavern, where stalactites of/Uneven teeth gleam", "his limbs like pale and/ Carnivorous plants reaching/Out for me", ".....his hand sways like a hooded snake/Before it clasps my pubis". The overall effect of such images is disturbing.

In discussing personal and intimate issues mostly those related to love, Kamala Das has been vulnerable to misinterpretation and blamed for offense and exposure. Critics who regard her merely as a priestess of love fail to see that she goes beyond this 'skin-communicated thing'. Besides unraveling social biases through the theme of love, there is an attempt at

philosophising on love itself. This gives the poems an unusual twist or flavour, but it seems soothing to the poetic sensibility enabling it to meander with ease through diverse thematic concerns: love, sexuality, exploitation, philosophicalcontemplation. In "The Old Playhouse" after exposing the stultifying effects of an unsatisfactory marriage on the feminine psyche, Kamala Das sums up her ideas about love:

.....love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

Similarly, in the poem "In Love" the intensity of physical ardour is contrasted with the mind's recognition of the futility of the act of lovemaking. The tension arising from this conflict between mind and body is well captured in the poem. Here when the blazing sun reminds the poetic self of her compulsive involvement with her lover/husband the corpse-bearers cry 'Bol Hari Bol' vibrates simultaneously in her ears. The juxtaposition of love (in all its sensual connotations) and death shows the lack of intention in the poet to celebrate sexual union, the momentary pleasures derived from it. Her search is deeper and she is frustrated with mere physical involvement:

.....while I walk
The verandah sleepless, a
Million questions awake in
Me, and all about him, and

This skin-communicated

Thing that I dare not yet in

His presence call our love.

In some of her love poems Kamala Das assumes an inexplicably candid tone which is rare both in theme and style. This is a conscious attempt perhaps to garb the poetic self in a near masculinist guise to make its presence felt more emphatically. There is an overwhelming urge to tear apart the veil of feminine decorum, coyness and humility. In "The Looking Glass"[25] where the appropriation of the masculine stance is more obvert, Kamala Das openly urges every married woman to:

Notice the perfection

Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under

Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,

Dropping towels, and the jerky way he

Urinates. All the fond details that make

Him male and your only man. Gift him all,

Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of

Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,

The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your

Endless female hungers.

Not only the persuasive change in tone, the 'female' gaze too, has abruptly replaced the all-pervasive 'male' gaze, at times even sounding 'voyeuristic' as at the beginning of the poem. The detailed explicit sexuality in these lines is unique in Indian English poetry, especially that

written by women. It is doubtful whether the tone is "both patronizing and indulgent", as Kohli would have us believe. I would rather agree with Nabar that there is a disarming frankness along with an ability to depict details which in love, assume a kind of sublimity. The image of menstrual blood is especially brilliant because of all its social taboos, its undesirable ramifications for both the Indian and the Western mind.

Many Indian critics have found Kamala Das's love poems very bold. But this kind of interpretation differs from person to person and culture to culture. What may be bold to an average Indian may not be so to a Western reader. When the Canadian writer, Meerily Weisbord was asked to comment on whether Kamala Das is a bold writer in regard to her attitude to sex, she replied: "Her (Kamala Das) attitude to sex is not so bold. For a well bred Hindu woman *My Story* was bold. But for me it is not bold. Sexuality is much more explicit in our American discourses. What I find courageous in her was that she plumbs the depths of human relations. She doesn't make simply black and white even in her own relationships. She allows all the shades of grey. So you know, I find her autobiography sexually discreet. She only hints and suggests. She is not explicit. I find it courageous or bold in the human truths she reveals."[26]

What Meeriily Weisbord says about Kamala Das's autobiography can very well be applied to some of her poems, especially those inwhich she espouses love. In her long poem "Composition", which is also her favourite, Kamala Das writes:

I tell myself

And all of you

Who scan the mirror for that white

gleam in the hair,

fall in love,

fall in love with an unsuitable

person,

fling yourself on him

like a moth on flame.

Ann Brewster is of the opinion that Kamala Das in the vein of a true confessional poet, is committed to raw-nerve experience and employs a frank, conversational tone and works through the various layers of neurosis to pare it down to its most painful and naked psychological causes:

Let there be despair in every move.

Excavate

Deep, deep pain.

To be frank,

I have failed.

I feel my age and my

Uselessness.

If these lines are taken literally the poet may sound a priestess of love and adultery. But the poet is trying to delve deep into the psychological state of her own mind as it confronts the aging body. What she struggles at the personal level may hold true to other women of her age. Though love and emotional dependency naturally do not follow any age

bar, the Indian cultural ethos tend to conceptualize maturity and agedness as a de-sexualized state-of-being. Whereas men can easily escape this cultural trap, women usually fall a victim to it. Eventually it is the female body, which turns into the paradigmatic representation of the entire cultural expectations. But for a woman the acceptance and internalization of her aging as a desexualized condition is not an easy process, for the feeling of waste and uselessness of her own body looms behind her. The tenacity of the poet's inner urge and her exhortation to other women who are bored and fearful of old age, to deliberately *fall in love* should be understood in conjunction with the practical impossibility of the fulfillment of the desire. This then would help us to justify her willingness to portray the traumatic effect of aging on the mind in a purely sadistic term, the poet urging other aging women to extract the pain of love, to take the plunge, although at the end she candidly admits her own failed attempt.

While Kamala Das urges every woman to surrender completely to her lover, she never fails to exhort her to seek freedom simultaneously:

> Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
> Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive,
> The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame.[27]

This is not a hollow exhortation, Kamala Das has set the example by freeing herself from the constraints of married life and taking a participatory role in the outside world. Though married off at the age of fifteen against her wish, she could pull herself up by her bootstraps through her involvement with creative writing. She wielded her pen to critique

many prevalent social evils, especially those affecting women's inner urge to be free.

In the poem "Stock Taking",[28] written after the demise of her husband, Kamala Das once again brings forth with full gusto her subversive mood. The poem is radical if we consider it in the context of the poetic persona's state-of-being -- her widowhood.

The poem is not like her earlier love poems, full of jest for life, here the mood is one of resignation and withdrawal. Yet, the attempt to subvert conventional values attached to "widowhood" is very poignantly felt from the very beginning. Again this should be understood from the Hindu Indian sensibility, otherwise the subversiveness will be totally missed out. Looked at from this angle, the poem may even appear sacrilegious, for a widowed woman talking of love is conventionally quite unacceptable and even shocking. In India widowhood epitomizes negative qualities like: penance, sacrifice, self-negation and detachment from worldly life. The woman's moral strength, courage and perseverance through which she faces up the situation are never celebrated or taken into consideration. On the contrary, most often she faces hostility, contempt, and ostracism.

In the patriarchal social set-up of the Indian society the death-of-the-husband is regarded as the most unfortunate incident in a woman's life. But the death-of-a-wife, though mournful (this could be for various reasons—the caring of the children falls on the man's shoulder, Kamala Das beautifully narrates this dilemma in her short story "Nei-Payasam" (Rice Pudding) is not necessarily the most hapless event in a married man's

life and a second marriage – quite an uncommon thing (though legally permissible) in a widowed woman's life is commonly acceptable by most men without any hesitation.

In "Stock Taking" Kamala Das juxtaposes the promises of "immortal love", "self-realization", "beauty" against the backdrop of the pallor of the dead/death giving the poem an uncelebrative, pessimistic look. This, however, does not reduce the sensuousness of all the promises. The poem dismantles the conventional stoic posture a widow is expected to take. Kamala Das leaves open the options that a widow too, may at certain point of time confront promises of love and other earthly pleasures though she may not react positively. The socially imposed veil of detachment is lifted, the widow's self-imposed serenity is questioned. The strength of the poetic persona lies in her urge to question tradition even while being in the state of sorrow – arising from the death of her spouse:

> 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

Widowhood is not mystified in this poem nor is the society's attempt to dehumanise the state of widowhood left unquestioned. The "impenetrable" aura which tradition tries to create around a widow's life is

de-constructed. The dictates of the scriptures—the fountainhead of patriarchy's defensive mechanisms and exploitative codes for dominating the feminine gender are nullified by the assertion of the poetic persona's physical/sexual involvement with her spouse. The words of celibate sages are vacuous, meaningless and irrelevant to the ears of a worldly woman who has lived her life in all its entirety, passing through different phases ---- wifehood, motherhood, widowhood.

Another poem, "Larger Than Life Was He"[29] was also composed after the death of her husband. The emotions expressed in this poem are complex and multi-faceted, at times even self-contradictory. Widowhood has made the poetic persona confront the past – her married life. While reconsidering her past she discovers her lack of desire for physical involvement with her husband, perhaps because hersexual needs were saturated due to the mechanical bondage. But when her husband is dead and gone she is not set free either, for she is now living with some guilt.

Surprisingly, her sense of guilt for having tried to wean her husband off desire stands in contradiction to her own 'lack' of sexual appetite. This is yet another instance of typical feminine dilemma, especially in the Indian context. Our cultural experience shows that married women are always expected to act according to her husband's wishes and desires. Most women try to live upto the social expectations and if anyone dares to project her own wishes and even succeeds in achieving the desired goal, still she is not totally free and emancipated. Some lingering doubts and guilt follow her like shadows, which are reflections of her inner

conflicts. Though at the conscious level she tries to do away with conventional values, she cannot purge her subconscious mind of all the traces of social dictates fed into it during the course of her upbringing. Perhaps the poetic persona realizes that her lack of desire did not correspond with her husband's need for sexual involvement. But why this guilt:

> In twenty weeks
> my grief gave way to faint stirrings
> of guilt
> In the gauzy sleep of dawn
> I had not lain against him
> for fifteen years or more
> I had tried as satiated wives did
> to wean him off desire
> My celibacy flowed like a river in spate
> between the twin beds in our room

She could not shrug off those layers of guilt that kept her in a doomed state. It is perhaps difficult for the poetic persona to overcome the feeling of guilt. She can never rationalize the guilt even when she realizes that her married life was futile, there was no emotional sharing--interactions were purely mechanical:

> I cannot recollect a film
> a play or a concert he took us to
> or a joke which together we shared

He was like a bank locker

Steely cold and shut

Or a filing cabinet that

Only its owner could unlock

Not for a moment did I own him.

Here the poetic persona is certainly not lodging any complaints, she is only nostalgically reflecting on the futility of her married life. This is a typical scene in a conventional marriage where the give-and-take process between husband and wife as individuals hardly takes place. The woman is always in a subservient position limiting her role to being a "good" wife and a mother. There is usually no outlet for entertainment except for deciphering some eerie meaning, pleasure and complacency in the endless service she gives to her husband, children and the entire family. There is no escape from the drudgery because the fulfillment of her emotional needs is completely sidelined in a conventional marriage:

Only a few bedbound chores

executed well, tethered him to me

Emotion was never a topic

brought up in our home

although for long it remained

as grist for the tales that the night

and I, combined, produced.

The word 'produce' shows how mechanical the relationship is. But still the poetic persona misses her dead husband:

Do I miss him?

Of course, I do, for larger than life

was he.....

I miss his censoring my daily mail

his screening each phone call

and the insulation of his care.

But her nostalgia is not a straight-forward longing for her dead husband. The husband's death sets her free, but this new found freedom reminds her of the previous stultifying existence she was bound to lead as his wife.

Kamala Das seizes every occasion to contextualize the feminine consciousness and the inherent dilemmas that rule it. Even through the eyes of a widow she looks at the constrictions on a woman's life in a conventional marriage. Here the widow is not wallowing in the sorrow caused by the inevitability of death. Nor is she cursing her widowhood—her fateful destiny. She is using the occasion to reflect on deeper issues that touch upon the lives of countless other women who are caught up in similar situations.

Kamala Das has not only dealt with the themes of love and sexuality in human terms, she also gives a mythic dimension to them by relating her emotional attachment to male Gods like Krishna and Allah. This however,

does not transform her poems into devotional psalms, for her approach is more anthropomorphic, i.e. she addresses these mythic figures purely on human terms. Some critics tend to read her Krishna poems as distinct expressions of the 'sublimation' of her feminine ego. But like her love poems where she critiques many underlying biases of heterosexual relationship, here too she reflects on the theme of feminine bondage through the use of mythological figures. Whether it is an ordinary love poem, a Krishna poem or a poem addressed to Allah the purpose is the same, to investigate the chimerical creature—the *female consciousness*, in all its paradoxes and complexities and the effects on it of all the external forces of patriarchal control. Her poetry thus assumes a primal function as a vital tool for the close scrutiny and exegesis of the interaction of the consciousness and the external world of *phenomena* (not the natural ones but the ones created by patriarchy), that surrounds, shapes and delimits it.

Taken literally the following lines may show the poetic persona's intense love for the immortal lover Krishna:

> 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.[30]

But at a deeper level these lines do not express moments of rapture, joy and sublimity. Words like prison, blind, shut out suggest the state of incarceration, which is certainly not blissful. The failure to find true love in human relations directs the poet to find solace in some divine arms. This is

in a sense inevitable because she has failed as a wife and a lover to achieve what she looked for in a relationship and is now seeking surrogate lovers in Krishna and Allah. This turning towards male Gods can be seen both as a weakness and as an inner strength of her character. From the radical feminist perspective it is futile to turn to any male God for love and solace. Radical feminists vehemently deny the idealization of male deities, because it leads to a trapped situation from which the feminine psyche cannot free itself. Looked at from a more neutral viewpoint, Kamala Das's appropriation of mythical figures shows the tendency in her to continue her search for a true essence. With the inner urge not to give up her search, there is also manifest her capability to address and invoke diverse cultural icons with equal ease and equilibrium, reflecting the fluidity of her urge, which follows no religio-cultural bounds and orthodoxy. Essentially, Suraiyya (the new name she adopted after her conversion to Islam) seems the same Kamala Das, in an eternal quest for love, sublimating it, fearlessly taking it past social conventions, as she did in her autobiography, *My Story*, and in most of her poems. In other words, she is capable of upholding her secular spirit as a creative person. More than anything else what is most significant is that she is using these iconic symbols to focus on the entrapment of the feminine consciousness. Referring to Krishna she writes:

> But at each turn when I near you
>
> Like a spectral flame you vanish.[31]

The quest goes on without any achievement or fulfillment of the desired goal--the bliss of true love. She shows the vulnerable and guileless

mind grappling endlessly with the hard facts of reality as they accumulate in random and overwhelming succession. Though the poetic persona may appear to be momentarily enraptured in Ghanashyam's ove there isl no subliminal merging of the feminine self with the divine self:

Shyam,O Ghanashyam

You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows

Of my mind

And towards you my thoughts today

Must race like enchanted fish.....[32]

The metaphors in these lines do not suggest total sublimation of the feminine ego as Niranjan Mohanty tries to argue in one of his essays. He says, "She is enraptured in Ghanashyam's love. She lost her egoistic attitude. Das comes full circle with the sublimation of her ego, when she totally surrenders herself at the altar of Krishna's love."[33]

Both in the ordinary love poems where Kamala Das reflects on man-woman relationship and the Krishna poems where she addresses the divine being the feminine self is portrayed as the receiver of all actions. The body of the lover/husband as well as the body of the God is the prison for the poetic persona. In the case of the human relationship there is an obvert wish to escape from the snare:

As the convict studies

His prison's geography

I study the trappings

Of your body, dear love,

For I must some day find

An escape from its snare.

(The Prisoner)[34]

In the case of the divine love there is no expressed desire to escape. This is because an individual can be divorced, abandoned or forsaken, but a mental concept cannot be as easily extracted from the mind and cast off. The concept of Krishna as a divine lover and Allah as a divine saviour has strong grip on the minds of the respective devotees. As religio-cultural icons their influence is deep and wide, hence the question of escape does not arise. But the entrapment is well expressed via the metaphor of a fisherman's net in the lines quoted above. The net being cast there is no option for escape and the poetic persona's thoughts 'must' race like an enchanted fish. If the divine allurement works like a compulsive force (as the word *must* suggests) where is the freedom? Can any sublimation exists in a state of control and captivity?

Despite being entrapped the poetic persona eventually frees herself and gains back her identity, her total freedom when she realizes that ultimately her clinging to the divine lover is her own mental formation which arises due to her inner urge to share her love:

The only truth that matters is

That all this *love is mine to give*.....

Loving this one, I

Seek but another way to know

Him who has no more a body

To offer and whose blue face is

A phantom lotus on the waters of my dream.[35]

After her conversion to Islam she began composing poems on Allah. In the poem "Ya Allah"[36], she seems to be communicating with Allah on a purely personal and intimate level. She places the onus on the Almighty one to bring her back to the right path if she had gone astray. Before surrendering to and placing her faith on Allah she tactfully points at the Prophet's radical stance:

Who but Mohammad would dare

To embrace a sinner and call her

Mother?

Here she indirectly challenges puritanical ideas in any religion, which regards women's sexual involvement as grave sins. While acknowledging Mohammad's daring and courage she also attempts to legitimatize her own transgressions and further hints at Allah's claiming and acceptance of her as justifiable. Since Allah was benign enough to accept the prophet's socially digressive act, there is the possibility that her appeal as a tired pilgrim will also receive the divine sanction and approval. This poem is not just confessional, it is more like a pastiche forming a collage of the marked events from the life of the poetic self, which lay scattered in many other poems composed at an earlier stage. There is reference to her newly acquired freedom after her marriage:

When I got married

My husband said,

You may have freedom,

As much as you want.

My soul balked at this diet of ash.

Freedom became my dancing shoe,

How well I danced,

And danced without any rest,

Until the shoes turned grimy on my feet

And I began to have doubts

(Composition)[37]

The singer has not lost her voice as she claims in this first poem written after her conversion. She is just claiming a new voice to sing. Her feet are not tired, but dancing to a new rhythm that is shaking the orthodoxy to its roots.

By embracing Islam and openly declaring her conversion in the public, Kamala Das places herself at the centre of the crossroad from where she would address the issues she had already espoused in her earlier works, in a new and fresh tone. Kamala Das has never practised the art of distancing herself from her work. She doesn't stand on the periphery to address gender issues. Instead she takes her entire life--her marriage, her involvements and diverse relationships, and her religious affiliation to address woman's issues. She deliberately uses the confessional tone and the first person singular pronoun. Though this has made her very controversial, especially in the conservative circle, she nevertheless, emerges as a radical

poet who fearlessly voices the personal to critique the general evils of the outside world that have a demoralising effect on women as a whole.

Though she has composed many poems on her love for God—Krishna and Allah--- it would be naïve to interpret them as reflections of her piety and religious attitude. Her poems on Krishna and Allah are free from any spiritualism. They are rather coloured by sensuousness and tactile feeling which makes the communication between the poetic self and God sound very personal and intimate. But when Kamala Das takes an objective stance she realizes that every religion voices nothing but the father's lunacy:

> This then was our only inheritance, this ancient
> Virus that we nurtured in the soul so
> That when at sundown, the Muezzin's high wail sounded from
> The mosque, the chapel-bells announced the angelus, and
> From the temple rose the Brahmin's assonant chant, we
> Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a hate, illogical,
> And chose not to believe---what we perhaps vaguely sensed---
> That it was only our fathers' lunacy speaking,
> In three different tones, babbling: Slay them who do not
> Believe, or better still, disembowel their young ones
> And scatter on the streets the meagre innards. Oh God,
> Blessed be your fair name, blessed be the religion
> Purified in the unbelievers' blood, blessed be
> Our sacred city, blessed be its incarnadined glory.....

(The Inheritance)[38]

This is a protest poem—bitter and ironical, bristling with the irrationality of religious intolerance and hatred, emotions that are both powerful and all-pervading. The poem is sombre, restrained and unpretentious. The invocation to God, which ends the poem is deliberately ironic, for the statement the poem makes is that the true purpose of belief in Him has been long forgotten. The muezzin, the brahmin, the angelus all represent the male voice, the all-pervasive megalomaniac male ego that stresses its presence through customary ritualistic tone and that is ever alert to demarcate its own sphere or realm. The words 'father's lunacy speaking' reflect the poetic persona's objective outlook on religious practices and her abhorrence towards the fanaticism that such beliefs harbour.

Another very mature poem is "The Fancy Dress Show"[39]. There is a similar concern with the essential unreality of the conventionally virtuous:

Every virtue requires today
A fancy dress; the cassock is
The Priests' main virtue, the clever
Politician dons a saint's mean
Apparel. The holy ash is
On the legitimate forehead,
And the holy water is in
The right container. Confessions
Are mumbled regularly in the dark.
The patriots have survived their

Long fasts; the children of the poor

Have not been so lucky, we hear.

A pity. The city morgues are

Full of unclaimed cadavers, yes,

God is in his heaven and all

Is right with this stinking world.

There is a similar blend of irreverance and gravity in the poem "Nani"[40] where Kamala Das ironically uncovers the hypocritical stance most elders can take while attempting to cover up factual matters related to illicit love involving unmarried girls. In this poem Kamala Das narrates the story of her maid-servant who committed suicide in order to avoid the consequences of an undesired, unwanted pregnancy. This is not an unheard of story in India where an unmarried girl's pregnancy can be an utterly disgraceful act affecting her and her family alike. Usually the man's involvement or complicity in the act is overlooked and he escapes unhurt, the entire blame, responsibility falling lopsidedly upon the woman. Most often a woman caught up in such a situation of shame, disgrace, self-pity, dilemma, confusion having to face the brunt of social injustices, chooses to take away her own life. As a child Kamala Das was unaware of all these harsh realities and when her maidservant, Nani committed suicide she asked her grandmother one day if she had remembered the girl, but:

.....Grandmother

Shifted the reading glasses on her nose

And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?

No doubt as a child the poet was astonished and unable to decipher the underlying message in her grandmother's response--designed deafness--and it was much later in life she comprehended the 'truth' and realised:

With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends thus with a query. It is this designed
Deafness that turns mortality into
Immortality, the definite into
The soft indefinite. They are lucky
Who ask questions and move on before
The answers come, those wise ones who reside
In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubts
For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
In life, like music in the Koel's egg,
Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree.....

There is irony when she says,' They are lucky ...', but the ironical twist is wrapped up in a lyrical tone with reference to nature—koel, blood, tree. Still the underlying message and strength of the poem is not lost all together and though the poet thinks that people who do notwait for answers to their queries are wiser, for they can escape from the harshness of bitter truths, she doesn't really count herself among these people. Had it been so she would have never kept the 'unanswered' question of her childhood alive in her to pose it again at a later stage before her readers.

Kamala Das's poetry is essentially about "womanhood", even when the theme appears highly personal. "Jaisurya"[41] is about the primal hunger of the womb --- a state which most women will readily respond to. In this wonderful poem the poetic talent of Kamala Das comes to its full bloom with the imaginative handling of the monsoon and the delivery of her son, Jaisurya. The first labour pains and the gathering crescendo as the contractions become more frequent are admirably linked to the slanting rain. The symbol of rain is used to suggest a sustained connection between her labour and fecundity in Nature: "For a while I too was earth". Woven into the experience of delivery is a digression on the universal female hunger for a child, described in relation to herself, but in a manner which does not confine it to the narrow personal level. The poet expresses the sense of detachment a woman experiences during her pregnancy: wrapped up in the changes taking place within her, in her growing womb and its secrets, she acquires self-sufficiency even in respect to her lover---the man who sired the child:

> Love is not important that makes the blood
> Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his
> Lust, but is shed as slough at end of each
> Embrace. Only that matters which forms as
> Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft
> Stir in womb, the foetus growing, for
> Only the treasures matter that were washed
> Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them

In.

According to Vrinda Nabar the poem is successful because Kamala Das uses rhythm to echo the rise and ebb of the womb's contractions, creating the feel of a wave-like motion at work. Words, images, phrases are all tautened as the womb passes through the last stages of labour.

On a somewhat similar theme is another poem "The White Flowers"[42]. In this poem Kohli observes, "The newly born child is set against the background of 'war', 'bloodshed and despair'."[43] It is a far cry from the sun-drenched golden day of birth seen in "Jaisurya", for implicit in this second poem is the motherly wish that her child will never actively know the horrors of war, and live a long life.

Kamala Das's feminine sensibility is also reflected in her poems on her grandmother. The poems depict how bonds between two women in spite of generational gap can help create an ambience where mutual dependency unites and strengthens their ties. Caught up in the quagmire of man-woman relationship which brings only guilt, loss of faith and innocence, the poetic persona turns nostalgic and reveals the truth of her solitariness:

> The only secrets I always
> withhold
> are that I am so alone
> and that I miss my grandmother.[44]

The memory of the grandmother, the love she showered upon the poet as a child, is the only source of moral strength and solace for the love'lorn, grief-stricken poet. Time and again she recuperates in this loving figure's memory. The grandmother's house is the symbolic fortress of love and security towards which her thoughts turn when she confronts harsh realities of unrequited and pretentious love. In the poem "My grandmother's house" Das celebrates the kind of love she had received from her granny. Das's woes multiply as she is driven away from the grandmother's house "where she received love" :

There is a house now far away where once
I received love.....That woman died,
.....you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved.....I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?[45]

In "Millionaires at Marine Drive"[46] Das recapitulates the loss of her grandmother. She feels within the heaviness of mounting years of aging. But the grandmother still remains the source of comfort for her. She is haunted by the white absence of the grandmother and hence the hurt, the wound:

Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death;
I wonder why the ache still persists. Was
She buried, bones and all, in the loose red

Soil of my heart? All through the sun-singing

Day, all through the moon-wailing night, I think

Of her, of the warmth that she took away,

Wrapped in funerary white, a fire that

Stayed lit while her blood cooled and there was no

More of it for me, for, no longer was

There someone to put an arm around my

Shoulders without a purpose, ...

And, contrasted with her,

.....all the hands

The great brown thieving hands groped beneath my

Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist's,

Warmth was not their aim, they burnt my cities

Down.....

All she wanted was tenderness, and 'an identity that was lovable', but instead her circumstances have brought her the pain of growing old with 'a freedom I never once had asked for.' Therefore, she misses the company of her grandmother whose memory serves to her as a window through which she can recollect the vistas of the past and can relate herself to the lost innocence of her childhood as a mode of redemption from the present complexity of being alone. She recollects those nights when her grandmother would be waiting for her with a dim lantern burning on the window sill of her four hundred-year-old house:

We shall talk, she said

Darling,

We shall talk all night

and,

in the evening,

she kept a lighted lantern

on the window-sill,

and sat up waiting for me[47]

In "Captive"[48] she celebrates her love for the grandmother. In her loneliness, the sweet memories of the grandmother alleviates her feeling of ennui and a sense of insecurity in terms of the purest kind of love:

My grandmother's---she was

The first I loved----trunks, when opened after

She died, contained only dolls.

Kohli is of the opinion that it is perhaps in keeping with the matrilineal tradition to which Kamala Das traces her ancestry and with her general criticism of the male character for its failure to give her tenderness and warmth, that the only figure whom she presents as an ideal is her great grandmother. More than that Kamala Das's love for her grandmother shows the feeling of security, which a woman feels in the company of another woman. This arises from a sense of reliability that leads to true communication binding the relationship with unbreakable ties.

Apart from the grandmother there was none with whom the poet could develop a consistent rapport. Though she dedicated some touching lines to her father when he passed away, the emotions expressed here are more of love evolving from dependency than one from heart to heart relation. She mourns the death of her father pathetically and expresses the kind of helpless plight she had encountered:

We are tongue-tied, humbled and quiet

Although within we wept for you

And more for ourselves, now without a guardian.[49]

The present loss reminds her of the care her father used to take for his children and she metaphorically expresses her dependency:

Who would send us money to bail us out of jail.

Who would come when we land as junk at the city hospitals.

Though Kamala Das declared "I loved you father, I loved / you all my life", he is not the one on whom she could depend for emotional support in moments of betrayal and solitude. His personality as delineated in her autobiography shows him in the light of a typical conventional Indian father figure whose responsibility and loyalty towards his girl-child resides and ends in the social act of proudly marrying her off with the display of wealth and pompousness. Hence though his absence made her realize and declare the love she secretly cherished for him, his presence was not necessarily a source of inspiration and solace.

Apart from her grandmother, it was the sea that plays a vital role as a redeemer of Das's pain, suffering, fear of aging, isolation and death. Das has not only attached a symbolic significance to the sea but has personified it in human terms. To her the sea symbolizes liberty, timelessness, eternity, the ultimate redeemer of pangs, the infinite ideal lover. In the personality of the sea, she discovers a compassionate companion whom she can confide and open out her heart's unspeakable grief. Intensity and intimacy mark her tone when she is conversing with the sea and she expresses her feeling that loving the sea is easier than loving a man. In The Suicide"[50] she exquisitely uses the human metaphor for the sea:

Holding you is easy
Clutching at moving water,
I tell you, sea,
This is easy,
But to hold him for half a day
Was a difficult task.
It required drinks
To hold him down.
To make him love.

While meditating on the pros and cons of the game of life, Kamala Das realizes that she has been a failure, that she has achieved nothing, and that all bondage are futile. At this moment of nihilism she longs for identifying herself with the sea:

All I want now

Is to take a long walk

Into the sea

And lie there,, resting

Completely uninvolved.[51]

Kamala Das's poems do, in fact, tell all kinds of things about herself. She reveals and expresses herself through the context in which she puts herself in each poem. It is the context which changes and represents all kinds of different things: her obsessions, her dislikes, her feminine claims, the events that have scarred and marked her, the crucial relationships, the way in which she is located culturally. These are the real subjects of her self-portrayal: feelings, identity and the body. She is primarily concerned with these things which construct an identity, an individual subjectivity.

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Chapter Five

Filling in the Silences: Kamala Das's Short Stories

Kamala Das has published several short stories in Malayalam, under the pen name Madhavikutty. Some of these are now available in translation. *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, 1977 and *Padmavati, the Harlot*, 1992 are two collections of short stories published in English. Though Kamala Das is a well-known poet in English her short stories deserve equal attention as her poetry because they are poignant tales of feminine suffering, dilemma, resistance and rectitude. In the blurb of one of her short story collections it is mentioned, "Kamala Das's stories are a re-affirmation of woman, woman reclaimed of body and spirit. But it is woman, above all, always on the side of life, never betraying it by antagonising man through mean acts of getting even, or scoring points."

Women are the protagonists of all the stories which offer a myriad of different female characters. The stories present all variations on the feminine stereotypes in radically subverted form. Like in her poems and her autobiography in most of the stories there is a serious questioning of the existing basis of male-female relations and a more or less sustained refusal to the values of a male-dominated society get expressed.

In this chapter, we have analysed some of her short stories from the women-centred perspective. In "The Princess of Avanti," Kamala Das focuses on the theme of sexual perversion in men. This is a pathetic story of an old woman

being raped by three young men. The old woman was under the delusion that she was the princess of Avanti, so when in the park she encountered three young men who flattered her, she lost her sensibility and fell a victim to their sexual perversion. The three megalomaniac men declared themselves as king of Vangarajya, Kalinga and Kerala. Together they lured the old woman with false promises of her nuptial celebration in the park by saying, "We have come to ask of you a favour. This evening you must not go home.

Remain hidden behind a bush. After the park is locked we shall celebrate your wedding quietly inside this beautiful park." Being a myopic person she disregarded her age, physical frailty and the time factor and failed to comprehend the unctuousness in the proposal of the pseudo rajas. They are self-proclaimed monarchs and their cowardice is revealed in their intention to act surreptitiously in the dark. Yet, the old lady waited for them without any fear, hesitation and suspicion. When darkness engulfed the place her hope of celebrating her marriage was shattered with the three bully men physically over-powering her making her gasp and pant for her last breaths. "The young men removed her dress. She had no undergarments. One took a long look at the sagging breasts and guffawed."

The story may appear contrived when we think of the reference to historical names, but such references help to hint at self-asserted male superiority, the inherent megalomaniac attitude of most men and the perpetual

physical enslavement of women throughout history and across diverse cultures. Here through the age difference between the victim and the victimizers and the clever juxtaposition of contrastive qualities like ignorance as against deceit, self-deception against gregarious masquerade/complicity and feminine frailty against masculine virility, the crudities of such female exploitation like rape and molestation are poignantly delineated. Certain aspects of the old woman's idiosyncratic demeaneour appear to be highly dramatized and exaggerated, for instance, her desire for revelry in the company of young men, her readiness in accepting the strangers'request/proposal, her willingness to place her faith on them, their false claims and promises and her obvert joy at the strangers' flattering words and compliments. All these give a hyperbolic twist to the tale, but then can we assert that old age desires no juvenile companies, cherishes no fond dreams and is all sterile and void of pleasure? Perhaps through the graphic description of the old woman the writer wants to depict the state of psychological dependency and vulnerability of old age when people in spite of physical frailty dream of appearing young, vibrant and juvenile and struggle to rejuvenate life with renewed interests, vigour, love and energy. There is certainly no harm in cherishing such dreams, but the prize a woman has to pay to fulfil such desires and longings is too enormous and it involves the perils of being stripped off one's dignity, shame, emotions and life itself in the process. The woman in this story symbolically stands for senility, dependency, and vulnerability. Though her ignorance and error of judgement are pardonable, the

three men's gregarious attempt at physically assaulting and humiliating a woman of their mother's age is as heinous as unforgivable an act in any legal ambit.

To a reader who disbelieves the tale—a toothless old hag with sagging breasts being lured and raped by young men--my suggestion would be that the story can very well be interpreted as an implicit reference to the victimization of women by the all-pervasive male gaze. It would not be a far-sighted conjecture to guess that, perhaps, Kamala Das in this story metaphorically suggests the victimization of women by the "male" gaze, which follows no age restriction in the gazer nor the gazed in any society, and undeniably in the stifling patriarchal social set-up of the Kerala society with all its intellectual sophistry and proclivity towards Marxian idealism that has left the least trace/mark in the men-women relationship and prevalent gender biases. But then can we ever claim that old women are never physically molested and raped by young men and that the writer has never heard such a tale?

"Padmavati, the Harlot" is written in a similar vein. Here the female protagonist, a middle-aged harlot, herself a victim of sexual prejudices at the end of the story is seen walking away in a coy but triumphant gait with the men who previously abused her and impeded her spiritual quest literally prostrating at her feet, asking for her benison. Padmavati's fears and foibles, her struggle in life and her unshakable devotion towards God are all portrayed by Kamala Das

from a purely humanist perspective and she emerges as a woman who successfully resists male seduction and flirtatious advances with full determination. In this sense, she is like any other woman who has not entered the white slavery but nevertheless has to struggle against patriarchal nuisances. Kamala Das's feminine sensibility allows her to sympathise and commiserate with the harlot's predicament and audaciously portray her as a symbol of resistance, forbearance and spiritual quest. When confronted by a gang of loafers loitering around the temple, Padmavati narrates her doleful tale of having been disowned, abandoned and ditched by her family. She who struggled to financially support her mother, brothers and sister was abandoned by all because of her lowly profession. Having been forsaken by humans she now turns towards the Lord whose holy shrine she had long desired to visit. To the loafers she said, "I have been waiting to come here for the past thirty-three years but something or the other has kept me busy all the time. At first I had to tend my ailing mother who lay paralysed for seven years before she died one day, turning her face away from me in disgust. Then I had the responsibility of educating my brothers who got good jobs in other cities and forgot me. I had also to marry off my sister to a man who was willing to do it for a big dowry. After marriage she has not once written to me." Thus having enacted all her filial and sisterly duties she now focuses on God, but with some measure of doubt and scepticism for she feels, "Only the Lord, *perhaps,* has any feeling for me. But, He may have *forgotten* too." Eventually, she arrives at her desired

destination; but only to find herself to be too late—the temple door was shut, the priest had left, darkness loomed large all over the place while some hooligans purposefully attempted to hinder her. They began to verbally assault her while deriving sadistic pleasure by tormenting her with obscene words, "You are not young, but you are charming enough for one evening or two. Your breasts are still firm. Your haunches set our loins on fire. Won't you be kind enough to grant us your favours?" Even at the threshold of the lord there was no respite for Padmavati. The avaricious loafers also robbed her of the fruits she intended to offer at the altar of the Lord. With tears in her eyes and in an utterly perplexed state of mind she could not decide where to proceed and what to do. The loafers then followed her incessantly demanding sexual pleasure, "Keep us company this night, O' Padmavati... Tomorrow you can worship the Lord."

But though a harlot Padmavati was not a nymphomaniac craving for physical pleasure so she proved no easy prey to the brutes' sexual appetite. Turning a deaf ear to their lascivious words and lecherous gestures she hurried up the stone steps leading to the temple yard. At last she did achieve her goal and the poet describes her sublime state of mind, her communion with the lord with a touch of sensuousness. Kamala Das's poetic imagination colours the merging of the human spirit with the divine in vivid terms as if Padmavati's spiritual quest ends in an ecstatic rapture with the experiencing of the divine presence within her in all its physicality and sublime touch.

In the ordinary parlance and social discourses a prostitute is regarded as a degraded person, a notorious symbol of promiscuity, carnal desire and indulgence. Here in this story Kamala Das reverses this conventional understanding and attempts to erase the malign image of this marginalised and exploited woman. In other words, she challenges us to suspend some of the assumptions we have culturally derived about prostitutes as an immoral and socially aberrant class. The story is thus subversive at many levels. The prostitute is shown as a sincere, caring, devoted and determined person. Paradoxically enough, the loafers she confronts in the vicinity of the temple though not gigolos by profession are shown as slaves of carnal desire, greed and malevolence. Padmavati has ascended from a lowly state of existence to a higher realm of experiential realization through her pursuits of the divine touch, whereas, the men descended from a normal life to a lower stratum of sensuality and malice. Padmavati's armour is her sense of shame and resistance to indulgence. Contrariwise, the men's crudities of thought and action render them naked and shameless. Padmavati's devotion stretches over time (thirty-three years of waiting for the spiritual retreat) and distance, but the hooligans even while dwelling in the precincts of the temple fail to pursue the right path.

Many writers have written on prostitutes but few could portray them in a positive light endowing them with normal feminine attributes. Very often we see prostitutes as victims of social prejudices and discrimination and not as rebels and pilgrims. In her short story, "The Offspring", the noted Assamese

novelist, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, narrates the tale of a young and beautiful Brahmin prostitute who sells her flesh but hesitates to conceive a child for a low caste 'mahajan.' In Assamese society, as in the rest of India childlessness is an anathema to married couples. It is a strong belief that conjugal life should be blessed with procreation of a new generation-progeny to keep the lineage going. Pitambar, the rich but childless trader was blinded by his craving for a child (son) of his own and so he approached the Brahmin widow (following the initiation and secret advice of the Brahmin priest, Krishnakanta) to bear him a son as his bed-ridden wife lay barren and childless. Damayanti, the harlot, initially agreed to the deal, but when vain pride in caste superiority takes hold of her senses she decides to abort the foetus. Her benefactor was from a lower caste and she abhorred the thought of conceiving and nurturing his child. Though an outcast by profession and leading a life of penury and ostracism, Damayanti took excessive pride in her caste superiority.

Here in this story the prostitute is not a symbol of resistance to patriarchal hierarchies but instead remains a medium for the perpetuation of caste stratification and conventional values. The story ends in climactic pathos with the man grubbing and rummaging the soil to trace and dig up the discarded piece of flesh—a part of his own being—in the darkness of the night, panting, sobbing for a touch of the unborn child. Though the author here aims at critiquing casteism and its sinuous grip on Hindu society, female readers would expect the harlot to stand for a more just cause than acting as a mere medium

for perpetuating caste-related sentiments and prejudices. The story lacks a feminist edge since the harlot is not resisting the idea of being used as a receptacle by the rich man who tries to bargain and buy all her services with the sheer power of money. Had the child been born the ties between the mother and the child would have been abruptly and inevitably snapped off since the possibility of the father's intervention to give a new name, a different identity to the child cannot be ruled out, there being no assurance of the uplift in the mother's life and status once the child was born. Moreover, the man enters the deal without the notice of the outside world, he slips into the ramshackle hut in the dark aiming to fulfil his own appetite. His moral flaw is also evident in his heedlessness and negligence of his bed-ridden wife, his lack of concern for her physical and mental health and his perfidious behaviour as is seen in his intention to keep her in the dark about his new plan to procure a child. Yet, Damayanti, the harlot is not seen to address and resist any of these vital issues, rather she narcissistically clings to her caste. "The Offspring" is a well-written story, there is no doubt about it and it has drawn the critical attention of native as well as non- Assamese writers and critics alike. Yet when placed side by side with "Padmavati, the Harlot" it appears to be fragile since the feminine resisting voice is pathetically missing in it.

Kamala Das's "A Doll for the Child Prostitute" is a poignant story of brothel life in an urban city like Mumbai. Life in the red-light street is infested

with death, decay and endless suffering especially if the victims happen to be young girls in their pre-pubertal stage. In this story Kamala Das narrates the untold misery of two teenage girls, Sita and Rukmini. Young Rukmini was bartered away by her own mother to Ayee, the head of the brothel in exchange for a meagre amount of money. At home there is not only poverty and acute hunger but also the sexual harassment from the stepfather who had raped the little girl. The child Rukmini was not unhappy about leaving her home for she realized, "The man who had moved into her home some months ago, after her father had disappeared, was a monster. He not only beat up her mother every night but squeezed her own little breasts, hurting her dreadfully when she was alone in the house. And, last week he had pierced her body until she bled all over the floor." To the helpless mother the brothel seemed the only safe haven for her daughter where she could procure two square meals a day and some shelter. It was in a dilemma, perhaps, when the need to protect her daughter from the clutches of her second husband arose the mother with a guilty-conscience changes her daughter into an object of mass consumption. It was not that she as a woman was unaware of the evils of brothel life, but that she had to decide and choose between two equally vicious situations indicates the existential crisis the mother and daughter had to go through.

Sita, whom Rukmini meets at the brothel, is a victim of hapless circumstances too. The cholera epidemic created havoc in her life; she lost her parents and all her three brothers and was forced to end up in the brothel for

survival's sake. Being victims of similar plight and predicament the two girls felt a feeling of warmth and rapport from their first meeting. Sita being more experienced initiated innocent Rukmini into the mysteries of brothel life, its nocturnal visitors and entertainment-seekers and exhorted her to "Obey them or else Ayee will starve you to death. Do whatever they want you to do. Men are real dogs." In their pre-pubertal days when life seemed all fun---carefree and joyful—they hardly knew the significance of the sexual act. For them it came as an occasional punition meted out for some obscure reasons, which made them resent the frequent interruptions during their game of hopscotch. While the coarse men, old enough to be their grandfathers, took the pleasure off their young bodies, the two girls' minds were far away, hopping in the large squares of chalked diagram on the floor of the porch. They were suffering for no fault of their own and Kamala Das rightly points out "their only mistake was that they were born as girls in a society that regarded the female as burden, a liability."

Sita's unexpected pregnancy, forced abortion and painful death left a shocking and debilitating effect on young Rukmini's mind. Loss of her only friend and confidante brought relentless agony to her already distressed and cloistered existence. Her first heinous rendezvous at the brothel with the old police inspector left her nauseated too. This man of her father's age tried to lure her with promises of expensive gifts—a red frock, frilly panties and an imported doll. Being satiated with women this ugly man keeps his lecherous eyes

transfixed on Rukmini and plans to make a deal with Ayee to avail Rukmini's service solely to himself.

Besides Rukmini and Sita all the other occupants of the brothel are also portrayed in sufficient details. Ayee, the caretaker is shown as caring but also demanding at times. Her repeated assurance of availability of nutritious meals at the brothel for the girls sounds more boastful and exaggerated than her real concerns for their health. Yet, she is not as cruel and wicked as her rival, Koushalya, who whips her girls to make them docile and obeisant. The scandalmonger, Sindhuthai, with her accursed tongue is portrayed as a devilish woman. Her gnarled hands with their dirty talons frightened little Rukmini when she first stepped into the brothel. When the hag stared at her, she had felt that a woodpecker was pecking at her skin. "What an odious creature," she murmured to Sita who too abhorred her. The brothels used Sindhuthai's service (unskilled expertise) to abort unwanted pregnancies and to malign each other's reputation. In exchange she gets some food, money for her liquor, pan and bidi and occasional shelter. Her life is like a stray bitch. Radha and Saraswati are shown as fully preoccupied with their art of alluring and enticing the visitors and to give them optimum satisfaction. They are nonchalant yet professional, having no regrets and distractions like the young and beautiful Marathai who cherishes the dream of having her own sweet home and her family. She did make an unsuccessful attempt to elope with her student lover but soon realized that the outside world is antagonistic towards prostitutes and men's phantasmal

promises are short-lived mechanisms for their own gratification. She thus realized that the brothel is the only abode for women like her where they can be safe and secure.

None of these women are immaculate and free of guilt and vices, yet all their accumulated evil deeds would not outweigh the old policeman's insidious actions--his brutality, shrewdness and endless sexual appetite and pedophilic hunger. In him the degeneration of his entire clan is well reflected. With his complicit support the subterranean brothel culture flourishes, unperturbed and unassailed. He uses his power and position to manipulate facts and figures that becomes handy for the brothel-runners and in exchange he extracts his weekly ransom and quenches his sexual thirst free of charge while pre-pubertal girls like Rukmini and Sita are victimized for no fault of theirs. When Sita died he rendered his loyal service to Ayee by calling in a doctor to produce a fake medical certificate that reported the death as caused by appendix rupture and not by forced abortion and excess bleeding.

Yet Kamala Das ends this tragic and crude story of women's suffering and exploitation with a positive note as she seems to lay open the possibility of change and internal reformation through the power of female strength emanating from innocence, guiltlessness and virtuosity. As the story progresses we witness a gradual transformation in the police inspector's attitude towards Rukmini. When Rukmini confided the truth that he resembles her own father and later when Sita died she broke down before him hiding her sobbing face on

his chest, realization sparked off with lust and lasciviousness retreating making way for fatherly affection and caring. Ayee, a hedonist too displays great changes in attitude and her overall outlook. She expresses her desire to retire from the worldly life and dreams of going on a pilgrimage to Benaras, the holy city. Her virulent and abominable feeling towards Sindhuthai dissipates and gives way to love and compassion as she wishes to take her to Benaras as her company. Ayee's partial feeling too gives way to impartial judgement as she decides to marry off innocent Rukmini to her son instead of the ingrate Mirathai whom she earlier desired as her daughter-in-law for her beauty and literacy. As realization dawns on him, Ayee's son too regrets his mistakes and begins to accept the fact that every profession has its own code of manner and that he ought not to feel ashamed of his own mother. After ten years of silence he decides to return home. Thus there is a gradual change in the individual stance of some of the characters and we witness hatred giving way to love, attachment to detachment, dereliction to homecoming, delusion to rational consideration and self-realization, partial judgement to impartial reflection, indulgence to restraint and self-aggrandizement to self-effacement. Still the writer has not painted a totally idealistic picture by showing the abolition of the sex trade. Since in real life social aberration and uncontrolled promiscuity always exist, there will also be some one like Saraswati to continue the trade with unabashed professionalism. There is no moral conflict, no shamefulness, nor distraction from the chosen path in her and she paddles on. However, the presence of

Saraswati and the deviant ones whose demand she fulfils cannot smudge the positive picture the writer aims at creating of feminine strength. This brings us back to the question of woman, her role whether implicit or explicit, deliberate or inadvertent in bringing changes in society as well as in individual life. Thus though Rukmini is the victim her innocence proved a vital weapon for bringing unprecedented change to a person no less a monster.

While Kamala Das portrays a harlot in a positive light by highlighting her willingness to perform all her filial and sisterly duties and obligations diligently in spite of her involvement in a lowly profession, the theme of man's ungratefulness towards their parents and their overall attitude of negligence and filial ingratitude do not slip her creative mind. This gets focussed in "The Tattered Blanket". Here in this story the old mother is seen as painstakingly waiting for her son for too long a time until her memories, longing and present thoughts all collide and transform into an amorphous form percolating as a fragmented residue in some dark recesses of her senile mind. Though bits and pieces of past memories remain intact and fresh, the past hardly coincides with the living present and so she mistakes her son, Gopi for a stranger when one evening he unexpectedly knocks at her door. The mother speaks as if in delirium, unable to recognize her son standing beside her but narrates some accurate details about him--his job, promotion, salary, placement as well as a red blanket, now tattered and frayed, that once he gifted her while he was a student in Madras. To the selfish and ungrateful son who pays this one last visit

(as part of his official itinerary) to claim his share of the ancestral property the mother's failure to recognize him becomes his alibi to overlook his own absence, filial ingratitude and negligence. The widowed sister tries to intervene hoping to revive the mother's memory but amnesia spreads like a thick veil and she simply cannot relate the past with the living present and the son remained for her a total stranger. The sister interrogates the brother in the hope that he might realize his mistakes, but he conceals all his guilt and shame in a shroud of reticence avoiding the obvert display of emotions, attachment and feeling of contrition.

While in this story the selfish and impertinent son tactfully remains silent and laconic, the married daughter in the story "Grandfather" is rendered quiet/silent/voiceless due to overwhelming emotions and her constricted state of existence. This story brings to our attention the psychological trauma most women undergo when they confront situations of inner conflict in which they are incapable of taking any drastic steps to resolve dilemmas, that eat up their morale and that which arise not for any fault of their own, but due to the stranglehold of distorted patriarchal values and conventions. Very often marriage in a patriarchal society thrush upon women such dilemmas and psychological conflicts especially when they are forced to make a choice between loyalty towards the spouses and in-laws, on the one hand, and their parents and siblings, on the other. In India, the two usually do not go hand in hand and a married woman (daughter-in-law) is expected to be extra loyal to her

husband and his family in a manner, which may at times demand complete deafness/blindness towards the need of her own parents, brothers and sisters.

Love and emotions, which naturally do not tend to remain confined within any demarcated boundaries if truncated abruptly bring untold miseries to the bearer. This is exactly what happens to Thankam in the story "Grandfather", when the father in his dotage begs her to take him to Bombay and the husband intervenes in a rude and imperious manner to stop her from doing that. Thankam feels devastated for not being able to respond positively to her father's desperate need and wish to spend the last days of his life in her company. His emotionally charged questions, "Have you stopped needing me, Thankam?" "Doesn't anyone want old people?" "Have I become unwanted?" "Won't you allow me to die in your own home?" pierced her heart and mind like poison-laded arrows and in utter helplessness she replied, "I don't know what to do, what I should do." Seeing her perplexity the husband steps forward to manipulate the situation. While inner conflict and a sense of enormous guilt torment the wife, the husband does not hesitate to put forth his arguments and excuses with an air of insouciance. The way Kamala Das portrays the couple's dealing with the old man's request in a way highlights the inherent differences between men and women's approach to emotional matters and their subjective and objective views. In this story the man is able to distance himself from the crux of the matter without any hesitation, contrition and obvert display of emotion, whereas the woman remains submerged in the situation as if she is

drawn towards the vortex of a whirlpool, helpless and speechless. This difference, however, does not prove that men are by nature emotionally stronger and stabler than women—a common assumption that is not only erroneous and baseless but also pernicious. Patriarchal values and conventions have long nurtured the idea that it is man's birthright to dominate his wife. Notion of self-declared supremacy over one's spouse has coloured the thoughts of man and has guided all his actions. Woman's socialization, on the other hand, has taught her to be less self-assertive which is why her vengeance and helplessness at times get expressed through tears and emotional outburst that in the common parlance get interpreted as her inherent weakness and instability.

In this story, Kamala Das very sensitively presents the insinuated ways men usually present their arguments. When Thankam's father desperately requests her to take him along with her to her home in the city, the husband intervenes to show that the old man's words were not meant to be taken seriously and he asserts, "Father doesn't mean what he says. He was merely joking. You (Thankam) took him seriously." When heedlessness did not work and the old man remained stubborn the young man makes an excuse of not having the flight ticket for him. He tried to guise his alibi with a vague promise so as to make it sound real. He said, "When we return from here in June we shall take you with us. This time we have not bought a ticket for you." Still the old man continued to resist the son-in-law's dissuasion and placing the entire matter of decision taking at his daughter's hands he said, "I have told her of my

desire to live with her. Now it is up to her to decide what to do." At this point when all the arguments did not seem to work the son-in-law directed his anger at his grief-stricken and confused wife, "What kind of madness is this? If you take him to Bombay at his age you will have to face the consequence of your action." His angry words came as a threat and exhortation, but Thankam made one last attempt by making a moral as well as an emotional statement, "But he is my father." At this the husband replied with his razor sharp tongue, "Did I not have a father too?" Before the husband's domineering nature and asperity of manner, Thankam had neither the will nor the strength to take up the cudgels and follow her own course of action. Instead, she hid her face with trembling hands and sobbed. Through the portrayal of Thamkam, Kamala Das has brought to light the life of a typical Indian housewife whose married life is absolutely constricted and whose existence as a whole is ruined by perpetual spousal intervention, threat and domination. Confronted with situational dilemma she takes recourse to silence, sobbing, emotional outbursts and complete inaction.

It is to be noted here that Kamala Das has not painted only one-sided picture of women as sentimental, soppy, introvert and silent victims of patriarchal prejudices. She has painted a multi-dimensional canvas--a mosaic of different hues and shades--wherein women have postured in different moods and attitudes exuding varied feminine qualities. In "A Little Kitten", the woman is depicted as capable of transgression after initially suffering from ennui, suspicion, and frustration due to her husband's infidelity. It is the same old story

of the boss falling in love with his secretary and the frustrated wife grows restive, feeling ditched and betrayed. The lonesome wife desires to have a kitten to keep her company while her husband is away busily engaged with his routine office work. As days passed by the newly wedded wife sulked and lost her bridal beauty thinking unkind thoughts incessantly. Life in the city was not a bed of roses for her and she wished to bid adieu to her husband. When she packs up her belongings and decides to depart, the husband dissuades her by one loaded question: "What will your parents say?" This same man's conscience did not even prick once when he philandered with his secretary and he never stopped to ask himself, "What will my wife think if...?"

In the Indian society conservatism still pervades and it is not customary for married women to disclose bitter truths and events from her conjugal life to her parents. That is because after marriage she is regarded as another's possession over which the parents have no claim and the doors of the parental home are literally shut on her. She cannot expect her parents to be considerate, reliable and friendly when it comes to disclosing and sharing her painful secrets. Her marriage is symbolic of severing of the umbilical cord that united her with her mother at her birth. When ditched by her husband she has nowhere to go. The woman in the story realized this and so she balked hearing the husband's words. However, she decides to stay back not as a loyal and subdued person but one who adventures to seek out her own kitty all by herself. The act of transgression is metaphorically referred to as a scratch from the playful kitten.

Kamala Das balances the lopsided picture of conjugal relationship by implicitly showing the woman's capability to deviate from the culturally prescribed role of a wife that demands her to prostrate before her husband with joined palms, closed eyes and blind faith. Here the woman is not indulging in illicit love affairs, she is not carried away by paroxysms of joy arising from consummated love and new found freedom. Yet the fact that she has taken a giant leap by stepping outside of the legal ambit of marriage, its constricted ambience is worth taking note of. Kamala Das has not intended to show her as an adulteress. Rather, she is shown as a woman who is simply capable of finding her own solution to the problem created by her better/worse half though her horizon remains shrouded, engulfed in an amorphous smoky form indicating a blurred vision.

In the story "Iqbal" the woman is portrayed as confused by her husband's queer behaviour towards his poet-friend, Iqbal. Being innocent and ignorant she did not suspect the two men's relationship instantly. It was not until much later when Iqbal was lying asleep in the hospital bed and she closely scrutinized the contours of his feature--its feminine grace that the past got revived and in a fast track flashback she seems to recall her honeymoon days and her first meeting with Iqbal at the station. All this while she had been wondering what her husband had found in his friend's poetry that made him rave over it. She now realized why her husband during their honeymoon talked

passionately about his YMCA days spent in the company of his friend and why he was so excited to recite the love poems composed by his friend. At the hospital she also recalled how she felt stabs of jealousy when her query about Iqbal's possible love affair with any girl was unanswered by her husband. She recalled her husband's sullen moods when Iqbal refused to come for Sunday lunches and his panic-stricken face when he returned home one day to inform her about Iqbal's suicidal attempt. She came to realize why from the beginning Iqbal was not friendly with her, never looked at her nor ever smiled. Yet when eventually suspicion took roots in the young woman's heart she neither had the time nor the need to grow jealous, frustrated, sullen and revengeful since she was already heavy with her child. Pregnancy brought pride, joy and confidence to her and rendered her husband's homosexuality redundant and impertinent. She sensed that Iqbal was perhaps jealous of her, her ability to conceive and that might have finally led him to commit suicide. She felt no sympathy towards him and in the hospital she proudly displayed the bulging convexity of her belly and derived great satisfaction and happiness even though Iqbal grew agitated and screamed at her. All his abuses and loud words got drowned in the repercussions of her laughter.

The story is not about the conflict between heterosexuality and homosexuality or about the triumph of the former over the latter. Multiple sexual allegiances are shown here—the husband is bisexual, the conventional wife, confirmed heterosexual and on the periphery of their relationship stood the

homosexual friend. We can assume that the husband's bisexuality gradually wanes off with the coming of the child and he became passionately attached to his pregnant wife. Under this circumstance, it was natural for Iqbal to grow lonely, jealous and frustrated and his suicidal attempt points at his psychological instability. The wife felt betrayed and appeared a scapegoat. Yet among all the three she is perhaps the strongest for she could face the husband's infidelity, his swinging moods and remain impervious, resilient and stoic as she learns to look at her own changing body and celebrates its nurturing and procreative powers. Her pregnant state becomes a symbolic gesture of her self-assertive power and individuality and she learns to extract immense joy, bliss and fulfillment from it during moments of personal crisis.

"The Sea Lounge" is a story about two lovers' final rendezvous, but it is not a conventional love story. Through the portrayal of the lovers Kamala Das once again brings out the differences in man and woman's outlook, changing attitude towards love and relationship. The boy in this story is grateful to his girlfriend for all the love she had showered upon him, but he still feels that she is not the right person for him to marry. So in their final meeting he decides to disclose the truth that he had no intention to marry her.

Kamala Das has not named the two characters in this very short story. Yet, in their anonymity they project the pervading changes gripping our society and culture today, the radical transformation in modern men and women's attitude towards love, marriage, relationship and free choice. The man is

portrayed as being unable to free himself fully from certain characteristic conservatism and traits of conventional value orientation. However, one positive aspect of him is that he begins to accept sophistication (like high education) quite unlike his predecessors who preferred conventionality and traditional outlook as positive marks of woman and womanhood. Yet, when it comes to admiring a woman and accepting her as a life partner, he displays predilection for stereotypical feminine qualities. Masculine and feminine qualities are not universally defined concepts, they are culture-specific and bear different and sometimes opposing connotative meanings and values to people from diverse cultural backgrounds and affiliations. In the Indian context feminine characteristics imply an obvert display of grace, humbleness and self-effacement. Boldness and assertion of one's self and individuality are regarded as deviation from a truly feminine character and are regarded as threats by most men. The matrimonial columns in newspapers clearly bring out the average Indian man's appreciation, expectation and demand of the qualities in his would-be bride. If on the one hand, sophistication which implies high educational qualifications, economic independence and career orientation are appreciated and adulated, on the other hand, there is a pervading demand for such qualities like fairness of complexion, good height, slenderness, grace, amiability and sobriety. Even highly educated families in order to extract a big dowry throw such demands through the mass media (especially newspaper ads) for their foreign-degreed, high salaried sons.

In this story the man is shown as trapped in such conventionality. His admiration for women who are *feminine* distanced him from his present lover. The woman on the other hand, is shown as a modern girl who has her own individuality, self-determination and confidence. She is not the sentimental type who drowns herself in tears and remorse when the lover departs and betrays her.

When the man discloses his intention not to marry her, she accepts the reality with stoicism. Her openness and broadmindedness are expressed when she urged the man to have no guilt-conscience about her. When the lover in order to appear sympathetic asked her about parental pressures on her to tie the nuptial ties soon, she replied with confidence and maturity, "I will marry my old beau, the one who has been crazy about me for years. Let us not worry about it now. Tell me about your new job." She did not have to wallow in self-pity since she realized her own beauty and her own worth. The man entranced by her presence wanted to woo her again regretting that now she would go away from his life without any promise of letter and future meeting. But she did not show any intention to look back with any anticipation of love and admiration. And when the man asked her, "May I give you lift, I can drop you wherever you want to go..." she boldly refused and expressed her desire to take a long walk alone.

In this story Kamala Das has portrayed the young woman as individualistic in character. She captures the confident mood of the modern

woman who learns to adjust herself to changing time and circumstances and who offers resistance to conventional values..

In another very touching story entitled 'Neipayasam' (Rice Pudding) Kamala Das brings to light with equal admixture of pathos and sarcasm the stereotypical image of woman as wife and mother. In this story the young woman, mother of three children (sons) dies in the course of her routine household chores. She collapsed while sweeping and the husband was shell-shocked to spot her "lying near the broom with her mouth half-open, her pale limbs flung out in absolute disarray."

Though the couple had a love marriage (a rare phenomenon in a conventional society like India where arranged marriage is still the norm), and the husband showed enough concern and love, even taking pride in the wife's physical beauty, the woman's life is not one of unusual happiness and marital bliss. Drudgery of household work--cooking, cleaning, sweeping, washing--all sapped her energy. Kamala Das graphically describes the kitchen, the utensils hanging in the right place, the cooked food that remain covered, in order to show how the woman diligently fulfilled the stereotypical role as a wife and a mother. The woman had not failed to cook a full supper for her family even before dying. The children not knowing that their mother is dead relished the payasam uttering: "Our Amma cooks the best payasam, this is wonderful...she is the best cook in the world."

In this story the husband's internalization of the dominant cultural discourses about womanhood is seen in his failure to express any genuine feeling of despair and loss at the moment when the doctor at the hospital declared that his wife was dead. Though he loved her dearly, her 'untimely demise' is not regarded as a matter of great personal loss and bereavement. Instead, an irrational feeling crossed his mind as he wallowed in self-pity thinking that he is now "saddled with the young children..." "How would he bathe the children? How would he cook their lunches and send them to school? How would he be able to nurse them back to health when they fell ill? No, it was not possible for him to bring them up alone."

A married woman especially in the patriarchal social set up of India is regarded as one on whom the husband and all her children depend for all kinds of help and support. A woman's socialization teaches her to accept this role and she perceives them as totally dependent on her and needing her in order to survive and flourish. There is thus a gradual and perpetual loss of a woman's individuality once she is married. She comes to be regarded not as an individual in her own right but as a 'great' cook, a 'great' caretaker of the entire household and happiness is entwined and inextricably linked with the endless service she renders to her husband and children. If this woman happens to die early the vacuity her demise creates in the life of the dependants who outlive her is condoled not for her physical absence but for the shifting of the onus of the drudgery of domestic work on the dependants' shoulders. This harsh reality that

arises from gender biases in a patriarchal society is reflected in the story. Here the death of the wife is not mourned as a personal loss by the husband rather it is regarded as an accursed event because in the wife's absence he is overburdened with the household responsibilities that he is diffident to undertake. Perhaps this is why in our society re-marriage of widowers is more common and readily acceptable than that of widows'.

As we have seen women are the protagonists of all the stories that offer a myriad of different female characters. Kamala Das's stories present all variations on the feminine stereotype in radically subverted form. The cultural image of the feminine ideal is not encapsulated in any of the characters. She does not write the conventional story of woman, with its romantic and domestic plot centred on a man and marriage and motherhood as fulfillment. Instead, she explicitly contests all these. Moreover, Kamala Das aims at problematizing the reproduction of gendered binary of sexual dominance-submission in her stories by questioning the active/passive dichotomy in heterosexuality. Therefore, though men are portrayed as dominant, women do not necessarily appear submissive and docile. Even a harlot becomes a symbol of resistance. Moreover, by depicting women caught up and influenced by society's double standards for women, Kamala Das as a female writer has been able to subvert even the most stereotypical images of women.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Feminist writing can be understood as both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them. This dialectic is very much there in Kamala Das's writings as a woman writer. Though she is not a self-declared feminist writer her work still expresses a critique of existing society. As is clear from the preceding chapters (3,4,5) Kamala Das's work is often concerned with a woman's search to find her identity. From its inception, her work has shown a deeply sympathetic, abiding interest in the experience of women especially through a reflection on her own situation. As such she is very much a special case in her own time; other Indian women writer did not write the same sort of autobiography or poetry.

Her autobiography *My Story* is an important achievement. In it Kamala Das offers a retrospective and thus more clearly synthetic account of her life history from the standpoint of the writing present. She notes down carefully her daily experiences as she struggles with problems of self-identity in relation to issues of gender. There is a detailed account of unsuccessful sexual relationship and the author's growing disillusionment with the ideology of romantic love and her struggles to come to terms with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The text directly emerges from the author's lived experience, its main concern being the communication of the intensity of feeling. Issues of social conformity, parental authority, individual rebellion, moral choice, sexual transgression, emotional drama

all together illustrate inner conflict and tensions vividly in her autobiography. In it she relegates conventional life and concerns of women to a subordinate place, treating them as sources of constraint and difficulty. She grapples self-consciously with her identity as a woman in a patriarchal culture and with her problematic relationship to engendered figures of self-hood. *My Story* is an important autobiographical achievement not because it turned out to be a bestseller, bringing her both notoriety and fame, but because of the sheer power of its writing and the truth it reveals about various aspects of womanhood (especially Indian womanhood)as caught up in the quagmire of conventional marital ties.

Kamala Das can very well be compared with more conscious feminist autobiographers like Kate Millett (*Flying)* and Lorde (*Cancer Journals)* all of whose confessional writings continually refer to the question of truth about feminine identity as the ultimate legitimization. Kamala Das continually refers back to the perceptions of the female subject as her source and authority. The formal features of *My Story* like most other consciously feminist confession, typically includes an unrelativized first-person narrative perspective to lend authenticity to the thematic reliance upon feelings and personal relationships. It also includes a frequent reliance upon a simple, unpretentious style, which establishes a relationship of intimacy between the author and the reader, and a tendency to de-emphasize the aesthetic and fictive dimensions of the text in order to give the appearance of authentic self-expression.

Yet in writing about self it is possible to fictionalize in many ways, consciously or unconsciously by either exaggerating or underestimating events

and feelings. But the process of fictionalizing, which is inherent to autobiography, has been liberated for women by the women's movement. The idea is that women recreate themselves into being, or create images of themselves and their lives with and through words and imagination. As some feminist critics emphasize, through writing the self is invented, constructed and projected. *My Story* is no exception in this sense and sometimes the boundaries between fiction and autobiography become difficult to demarcate. There seems to exist certain hyperbolic interpolations especially those related to imaginative enactment of transgressive acts of stepping out of the legal ambit of marriage. However, such insertion of fictionalized acts into the body of the text/mind of the reader does not render the garb of falsity to the self-writing. No doubt critics have warned the unwary readers to be on their guard and not to be swept away by the elemental force of her utterances. There is a temptation to oversimplify the complexity of her autobiography without giving due attention to the fact that Kamala Das has exercised her artistic freedom, poetic license to create an "autobiographical world," by freely mingling facts and fiction not in order to escape reality and sensationalize her work for popularity and financial gains but to voice certain feminine dilemmas, conflicts and quests.

In the autobiography Kamala Das is also in touch with what is sensuous, her own sexuality, which in a way, enabled her to use her own self as a measure of and sometimes a judgement upon, the present. In the autobiography she remarks:

"Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality."[1]

There is no concealing or denying the fact that as a writer Kamala Das uses her personal experience for creative work. The autobiography and some of her confessional poems clearly indicate that the relationship between the poet's experience, her role as a daughter, wife, mother and friend and her views of self all contribute to the literary construction of self as subject. She places her experiences in such a way that from within the perspective of her experiences—marriage, quest for love, longing for freedom, moral conflict, dilemma, urge to speak the truth-- one can grasp the collective reality of women's condition.

Though she is a confessional poet it seems that she at times successfully invests the experience of the other with her own emotional realities. She herself admits of such assimilation when she replies to a question in an interview with Iqbal Kaur regarding the play of imagination in writing *My Story*. Her frank reply is worth taking note of:

"Whether something happened to me or to another woman is immaterial. What really matters is the experience, the incident. It may have happened to another woman who is probably too timid to write about it. I wanted to chronicle the times we lived in and I had to write about the experience."[2]

Kamala Das's kind of autobiographical writing, which combines authenticity and representations, plays an important role in the self-definition of

feminine subjectivity and its expression through literary forms. Her confessional writing proceeds from the subjective experience of problems and contradictions as encountered in the realm of everyday life. At the same time, it selects out those aspects of experience, which are perceived to possess a representative significance in relation to the audience of women it wishes to reach. As for instance, she writes:

"In the year 1963 I won the P.E.N.'s Asian Poetry Prize, and had for the first time in my life a bank account of mine from which in two days time I withdrew almost half the amount for outfitting myself. I have always ignored fashions, being fully aware of their disability to help me look chic, but I have wanted to dress aesthetically."[3]

Kamala Das here narrates the true incident of receiving an award—her first professional success. To this factual event she adds the tale of her enjoying a shopping spree. Whether she really had her first bank account in her late 20s when she actually received the award, or whether she really spent half of the cash on buying new clothes are insignificant utterances, perhaps, not factual narration either. However, what draws our attention is that she adroitly uses a real fact as the base upon which she weaves tales of desires to voice certain feminine truths. Here the truth is that a middle-class woman or housewife may have strong desire to live, act, dress according to her own choice and predilection even if she is not the bread-earner, financially depending on her spouse's income. If such desires remain suppressed for any reasons, known or unknown, there is the possibility of

rapturous outbreak at any point of time if the cause for which it was repressed suddenly becomes visible/attainable.

Kamala Das's confessional poetic creations are also concerned with the questions of identity and wholeness. Though poetry at first was more like a bye-product of her life gradually it changed to be a centre with her constant involvement and struggle for its creation. She was not likely to put her marriage before her creativity. As she clearly stated in her autobiography, "I had become a truth-addict and that I loved my writing more than I loved them (her parents) 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."[4]

She seems to have invested her life in writing, living through life's ordeal through creativity. Had she not involved herself with creative writing her life would have been eclipsed/obscured by the shadow of her early marriage. She assumed responsibility for the children and the household, writing at night or between the chores. Her husband was more or less indifferent to her writings. But once the venture into the familiar world of writing poetry began Kamala Das had never allowed herself to move out of poetry. Poetry was there to alter her condition, to satisfy her instinct as a reasonable being. The dedication to her craft and striving for an "ideal" love together enable her to speak out of a complex framework of memory, experience and relationship, as part of the "oppressed" group.

Her poems reflect aspects of her experience as a woman—motherhood, sexuality, love, identity, widowhood, spiritual devotion. It seems for her poetry is a way of seeing, of making sense out of chaos. She is deeply interested in exploring the politics of personal relationship. She writes about her relationship with men, probably her own husband and other male friends. These relationships have been problematic and at times ambivalent and the poems are correspondingly ambiguous, aggressive and subjective. As for instance, in the poem " Composition" and "The Old Playhouse" the poet questions stalemated power-struggle in a married life.

Thematic repetition is a hallmark of her as the image of a husband/lover and wife/beloved/ stalks through much of her writings. She has also shown through her writings that woman is made into a drudge of the household in marriage. From her autobiography we learn that marriage in her case remained an issue of forced social conformity and parental/paternal authority. In her father's decision to marry her off at the tender age of fifteen to a much older cousin, there lurked an unspoken anxiety about the future –but no intervention on the part of Kamala could have been acceptable. She remained the passive "object of exchange." Marriage is certainly a crucial event in a woman's life but an obligatory marriage is nothing more than an event that intensifies the setting of boundaries and imposition of socially determined roles. Kamala Das addresses this personal issue in many of her poems where she offer a strong, at times blasphemous, critique of the social institution of marriage. In a forced, loveless

marriage the woman is usually turned into an object of consumption. Her individuality, personal choices, likes and dislikes are all sacrificed and she appears to be a 'granite dove', 'an old playhouse', 'a circus dog'.

In some of her poems which turn on the experience of sexuality, love, motherhood, childbirth are remarkable Kamala Das writes herself fully, as a woman letting the body be heard. "Jaisurya," for instance, opens up the immense and mysterious happiness that birth of a child brings to a woman's life.

Most of her earlier poems rely on the tactic of embracing contradiction and ambiguity as a way of life. Kamala Das's orientation is essentially anarchistic; she refused obeisance to any and all authority. In her poem "An Introduction," she urges elimination of all social restraints on her as a woman, and as a writer. In other words, she outrageously protests against masculine pronouncements on women's proper sphere. The poem invites both personal and social introspection, a comparison of ideologies, which in the poem's terms at least offer an overwhelming condemnation of the values of the patriarchal social set-up.

As feminist fictions, Kamala Das's short stories serve an important purpose by articulating women's discovery of their oppression. The cultural image of the feminine ideal is not encapsulated in any of her stories. She does not write the conventional story of woman, with its romantic and domestic plot centred on a man and marriage and motherhood as fulfillment. Instead, she explicitly contests all these stereotypical and conventional ideas and expectations. In some of her stories of woman's exploitation she depicts male sexuality as

predatory, insatiable, and aggressive. Male pleasure is shown as inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, and exploiting. But though she foregrounds women's victimization she does not portray women as totally submissive, powerless and docile. Her women characters strive for freedom and individuality and are nearly liberated individuals.

Thus through her writing Kamala Das is not only seeking to establish the validity of women and womanhood, but to overturn the conception and prejudice which have prevailed against them. In the traditional social set-up of the Indian society it is only likely that sex, children and institutionalized marriage are locked in an indissoluble trinity. The expression of female sexuality outside of marriage is not only unacceptable but also scandalous. A high value is placed on female chastity—brides are associated with virginity and wife with faithfulness. Kamala Das as a writer attempts at devalorizing such societal norms or expectations regarding female sexuality. Her outspoken views on sexuality have won her a notorious reputation. Nevertheless, she did articulate a romantic, ultimately anarchistic view on love and sexuality. But it would be wrong to call her an adulteress as some critics have tried to label her. Her main concern is that woman be free of all restrictions, particularly any restraints on her freedom to love. In other words, she believes in the importance of the ability of the individual "soul" to grow untrammeled by authority of any kind. Glorifying her version of self and love enabled her as the autobiographer to epitomize a complex system of values and assumptions.

Kamala Das has evolved a poetic that is in many ways at once trangressive and imagistically direct, a poetic that is in effect, transgressive through its directness. Her poetry works powerfully to deconstruct male discourse and to write beyond its boundaries. In other words, her poetry attempts to express what has been repressed or censored out by dominant definitions of reality and value. Her great gift is for veracity and integrity, for remaining in direct contact with experience and thus with common language. Refusing to live by presuppositions, suspicious of prejudice she leaves herself open in her work to the readers' scrutinizing eyes.

Very often her poems come out of a sense of loss or longing for true love and intimacy: the discrepancy between life as it is lived and its possibilities. The emotive outbursts of language serves as a record of the self's quest for something more meaningful. Whether writing poetry about love, marriage, religion, or poetry itself, Kamala das tends to form her arguments in terms of confinement and liberation. The uncompromising assertion of feeling/longing for love that she went in for and the sometimes hasty manner of its expression exposed her to charges of a superficiality.

Writing poetry may be the most innocent of occupations, but in Kamala Das's case it is highly subversive. This is because in most of her poems she sets her personal experience against the collective representations of things, confirming her existence in the world in her own terms. In some of her poems we glimpse the possibility of a poet—ecstatic, dionysian, sweeping away limits and restrictions, re-defining herself and her work by defiance. Yet there is nothing of

the doctrinaire in Kamala Das; but as the most truthful, radical and subversive of writers, contemporary women's writing in India has reasons to be proud of her. Kamala Das's explicit self-identification as a member of the oppressed group and her exploration of gender-specific concerns centred around the problem of female identity make her stand out as a feminist writer, rather a distinct voice among the galaxy of writers in contemporary India.

While assessing the contribution of Kamala Das as an Indian poet writing in English C.P. Sivadas admits of being reminded of K.R. Srinivas Iyengar's hopeful words:

"Indian writing in English...with its own individual vision and voice...will grow like other literatures of contemporary India from strength to greater strength."[5]

I agree with Sivadas that the work of poets like Kamala Das has, no doubt, fulfilled this prophecy.

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