Chapter IV
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Writing the Body: A Strategy of Protest

The female body, which itself is the victim of the patriarchal domination, can at times turn into the agency to propagate liberation among women. To some extent this is termed as ‘body protest’. Uninhibited disclosure of female body may seem, at first, provocative to the readers, but its capability to produce a threat to the traditional male domain cannot be overlooked. A feminist study of our great Epics can be helpful to see things in this way. Draupadi and Sita are supposed to be the victim of male oppression and patriarchal indecision. At the same time they are important enough to make the whole fabric of epics spin around them. Women characters like Sita, Draupadi, Satyabati, Ahalya, Amba, Kunti and Gandhari are significantly related to the story by either manipulating or exploring their female sexuality. In *The Ramayana*, the destruction of Lanka is the gravest consequence of the abduction of Sita. But she lost the right of being the wife of Rama following the accusation that her chastity was violated by Ravana. She had to jump into fire to prove her purity; Agni, the God of Fire, was unable to consume her chaste body. Drapaudi, in *The Mahabharata*, sets up an unconventional paradigm being the wife of five persons, when it was a general trend to have more than one wife for a man. She performs well with her bodily attraction and thus the Pandavas keep themselves united until their death. Satyabati, another influential female character, enthralled King Shantanu, the forefather of Kauravas and Pandavas, with her rustic and
wild sexuality and in exchange Shantanu promised to make her the mother of the sons who would become the kings of the great family. Her very female sexuality played a vital role that changed the course of the great *Mahabharata*. Kunti, mother of Pandavas, gave birth to her sons by entering into sexual relationship with other males as her own husband was found impotent. However, she didn’t keep herself dissatisfied like traditional Indian women; rather she used her body to have powerful sons who in the long run provided her shelter and social dignity. She manipulated her own feminine sexuality to achieve the strongest position in the Indian History. Ultimately she became the mother of the Kings of India.

These references from epics help us to contextualize Kamala Das’s efforts at emancipating the woman consciousness. Her poems give a voice to women. Demonstration of sensuality in her poems becomes a strategy to defy the particular socio-cultural boundaries. Her voice is the voice of any other woman in the world. In “Dancehalls, Masquerades, Body Protest and the Law: The Female Body as a Redemptive Tool Against Trinidad and Tobago’s Gender – Biased Laws”, Michele Alexandre says that the term “body protest” refers to the examples of Trinidadian women’s use of their bodies to fight patriarchy:

… to describe women’s use of the female body as a mode of expression and as a tool for liberation and transformation. If we ‘read’ these women’s bodies, we witness an ‘organic feminism’ that should allow us to recognize internalized sexism and limitation in arguing for women’s liberation. (2)
A brief study of Michael Foucault’s concept of “Power” can be helpful to understand this patriarchal domination running parallel to the social structure of ‘power relation’. His notion of ‘power’ goes beyond the traditional concept that power is the prerogative of a group of people or an institution and that it is the sole source of oppression and constraint. Foucault’s work dislocates this concept:

What his work tries to do is move thinking about power beyond this view of power as repression of the powerless by the powerful to an examination of the way that power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions. (Mills 33)

In his influential *The History of Sexuality*, Vol-I, Foucault describes ‘power’ as something which is performed, something more like a strategy than a possession. He clarifies in *Power/ Knowledge*:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain… Power as employed and exercised through a net like organization… Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (qtd. in Mills 35)

So it is obvious from the definition that ‘Power’ does not remain just as a ‘set of relations’ between the oppressor and the oppressed. It pervades all over the system and runs through a chain system. Sara Mills comments upon this:

Thus, his theorising of power forces us to reconceptualise not only power itself but also the role that individuals play in power relation – whether
they are simply subjected to oppression or whether they actively play a role in the form of their relations with others and with institutions. (35)

This concept of power moves from general to particular, from Government to Individual. While it is concerned with the regulation of social phenomenon like birth, death, sickness, disease, health, sexual relations etc, on the other hand, this set of ‘disciplinary power’ aim the human body as an object to be manipulated and trained. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault engages readers to the study of practice of discipline and training associated with this ‘disciplinary power’. The system of punishment in medieval Europe, which involved the brutal mutilation of human bodies and its live display, had changed in modern times. With the ‘birth of prison houses’, there has always been a surveillance going on over their privacy. Discipline, as a social measure, has changed its course and takes up the shape of inherent flow of power relation which does not limit itself to only the system of punishment. Rather it runs through, invisibly, each and every social regulation and control. These disciplinary practices regulate individual conduct keeping him/her under constant watch. So it can be said that, “The key feature of disciplinary power is that it is exercised directly on the body” (“Armstrong”). This ‘body’ is referred to as ‘docile body’ by him in *Discipline and Punish*. Though he is aware of the ‘treatments’ on ‘body’ in classical age, he gives new interpretations to the exercises of power over the ‘body’:

However, there were several new things in these techniques. To begin with, there was the scale of control: it was a question not of treating the body, *en masse*, ‘wholesale’ as if it were an indissociable unity, but of
working it ‘retail’, individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body.

Then there was the object of the control: it was not or was no longer the signifying elements of behaviour or the language of the body, but the economy, the efficiency of movements, their internal organization; constraint bears upon the forces rather than upon the signs; the only truly important ceremony is that of exercise. Lastly, there is the modality: it implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement.

(Foucault 136-137)

These methods which have meticulous controls over the body are called as ‘discipline’ by Foucault. However, in this way a ‘body’ becomes docile to the society:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed
and the efficacy that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. (Foucault 138)

Das’s poems tend to challenge the patriarchal domination forced upon the ‘docile’ female bodies. It is evident that the androcentric power inherently controls female bodies turning them into a submissive one. Das in her poems tries to combat this gender inequality by constructing a contrasting idea of polyandry. In doing this she takes recourse to the idea of ‘desire’. ‘Desire’ is perhaps the most significant element in her poems. Literally or symbolically it controls her urge for living. In the case of Das, ‘desire’ remains in the libidinal level, where sexual instinct pushes her toward life-instinct. Her poems, under the wrapper of love poems, express her deep desire for life. This may be the reason which clarifies the excessive reference of ‘body’ in poems. Very beautifully Anvar Sadhath says in “The Poetics and Politics of Desire: A Study of Kamala Das’s Poetry”, “Her poetry therefore is a poetry of body desire and beyond. Her soul (and poetry) cannot exist without her body and vice versa” (91). In her poems body stands for sexuality which in its turn is synonymous with the textuality of her poems. This mode of writing was afterward theorized by French feminist Helene Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) where she offers her theory of ‘écriture feminine’ (feminine writing). In the outset of this essay she makes it clear that whatever she is going to write, she must speak about the second sex, the weaker sex, the women:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the
same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. (875)

While delivering this revolutionary concept, she doesn’t hesitate to accept the ‘past’, the traditional social system, but she is more eager not to repeat this ‘sense of past’ to ‘strengthen’ them, to give them more impetus. Rather she is concerned about this new ‘break’, the new feminine approach which she has acquired from her ancestors like Simone de Beauvoir, or contemporaries like Elaine Showalter, Juliet Mitchell and Luce Irigary who, irrespective of their nationality, are unified for a common cause that is to give space, give freedom to the women. As in “Sorties” Cixous raises questions regarding the women who are not allowed to satisfy their own desire in traditional social system:

How do I experience sexual pleasure? What is feminine sexual pleasure, where does it take place, how is it inscribed at the levels of her body, or her unconscious? And then how is it put into writing? (Lodge 268)

“The Laugh of Medusa” can be cited as an answer to these questions. The single most important cause behind the Feminist Movement is evident in these words, “It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her” (878). She is well aware about the traditional, male-centric approach of literature where it is very rare to find any writing which inscribes femininity. Typical “male writing” maintains the hierarchy of male/female; it is the site where the women are dominated or devoid of any dignity:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or
admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely 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 structures.

(879)

So the entire history of writing is run by phallocentric tradition mirroring the social system that has undermined the women. Cixous finds “writing her self” as apt medium to go beyond this “discrimination” of sex. ‘Writing’ or, more particularly ‘writing with female body’ appears as the exclusive tool to fight a war for women’s liberation, “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (880). She finds writing a significant act:

An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied
the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn:
for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot";
for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for
having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing. . .)
—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and
illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she
must urgently learn to speak . (880)

Cixous very pertinently points out the vulnerable condition of women in this patriarchal
system which is poignantly equal to each and every woman irrespective of any spatial
barrier. As, in the case of Kamala Das we can see the same oppression forced upon by the
patriarchal society. In “An Introduction” she poignantly declares her marginal condition
as a woman. Cixous, in her writing, instructs woman to protest against that system and to
treat their own ‘body’ as an extremely powerful device in this regard, because, “A
woman without a body, dumb, blind can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to
being the servant of the militant male, his shadow” (880). She welcomes a new history.
Feminist movement tends to focus on the new type of thinking which denounces the
traditional history which is unmistakably phallocentric and:

As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several
places. Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that
homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single
battlefield. (882)
Women writers, though writing individually, are united for the single cause. Their main target is to uproot the long-nourished and long-cherished prejudices of male dominated system by challenging them in their writing. So whatever Kamala Das writes, may seem as intimately personal but they are, in wider perspective, the lived experiences of womanhood. Writing by a woman cannot remain detached from her sect: “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (882). So our discussions about Das’s adventures into her paramour’s room or her extra-marital affairs expressed in her poems get validity from Cixous’s clarifications concerning “writing with the body”. These are the experiences that do not limit themselves just to the physical satisfaction of eroticism, but more than that it is the celebration of liberation from the cocooned claustrophobic condition of women in patriarchal society:

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright. (885)

A ‘female body’ has for a long time been the property of males. It is the medium which has kept a woman under control of a man. The sense of so called modesty, the shame attached with it has turned the ‘body’ as a taboo to explore. The modern women’s writing
has subverted that thought and in a deliberate way personal details are revealed and exhibited. Cixous’s ultimate dictum is:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse . . . (886 )

While discussing about the ‘female body’ as being an integral issue for the liberation of women from the clutches of phallocentric society, Simone de Beauvoir’s observation about the ‘body’, which she made much before Cixous, appears relevant in this regard, “. . . if the body is not a thing, it is a situation, . . . it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world . . .” (66). Toril Moi in her book *Sex, Gender and the Body* discusses this idea:

To claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman’s body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom. For Beauvoir, our freedom is not absolute, but situated. Other situations as well as our particular lived experience will influence our projects, which in turn will shape our experiences of the body. In this way, each woman’s experience of her body is bound up with her projects in the world. There are innumerable different ways of living with one’s specific bodily potential as a woman. (65-66)

In *Speaking through the Body: the Eroticized Feminism of Gioconda Belli* Elizabeth Casimir Bruno very pertinently argues:
And because we are situated within a unique body, through which experience the world around us, the body—and literature “of the body”—is a key element in the exploration of the self. (9)

We can locate Kamala Das’s poetry with its insistent focus on female body in this context. It is true that a woman, more than a man, is situated in her body. Our society behaves differently in the observation of a ‘female body’. It becomes an object of gaze, particularly male gaze. The woman becomes the body. But Beauvoir observes that it is the same body which situates the ‘woman’ within the world and helps her to ‘grasp’ everything. Toril Moi has also pointed out that there are innumerable ways of living within this bodily potential into which a woman is born. Judged from this perspective it becomes easier to comprehend Das’s attitude in her poems, specially her poems related to female body. Being an individual she has got a unique way to live and enjoy a privileged condition to use her ‘bodily potential’ to be a representative voice for women suffering the same plight. She tries to give other women an identity in the male dominated society and to transform the traditional image of a woman as something secondary. Women become the speaking–subject in the poems of Das.

II

The concept of ‘love’ has always been the primary focus in the poems of Das. In her works as well as in his life there is a search for true ‘love’ where there is a perfect mutuality between body and soul. As she says in “The Suicide”:

Bereft of soul

My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare. (1-4)

She tries to enjoy every moment of life, her love being a combination of flesh and spirit. While establishing herself as a confessional poet, Das strategically mingles love with lust. A clear tone of ‘physicality’ is present in her poems. When she discloses herself, she never hides intimate details under a mask. It will not be hard to substantiate the experience depicted in the poems with the events happened in her life as narrated in My Story. While she is candid enough in describing the ‘female body’, her poems often express a pronounced disgust for mere physicality. As Kurup says:

The confessional self in her is presented through her shifting moods where apparently contradictory images of the most sublime and the most mundane mingle with one another; the images of deep involvement in the physical act of love mingle with those of physical rotting and disgust.

(175)

By mixing ‘the most sublime’ with ‘the most mundane’, Das tries to make a balance in her poems. It might have been possible that if she had given importance only to ‘sublime soul’, then readers could have found Das just another poet repeating the traditional steps of the romantics or she could have ended up as a spiritual counselor. On the other hand, only ‘physical love’ could have turned her into a controversial poet dealing with mere sensuality. Because of her frank treatment of love and sex she has already been dubbed as a decadent poet by critics like Vimala Rao:

The flagrant eroticism loses its strength and becomes a weakness in her art as it is bound to become in life. As a result, Kamala Das appears to be a
poet of decadence, a poet who is a victim of the inadequacies of her life, failing to gain control even over her art. (qtd. In Nair 227)

However this observation is negated by another critic, Jayakrishnan Nair. He says:

The brash manner in which Rao concludes that Kamala Das is a failure both in life and poetry confirms the fact that Rao could not somehow put her proper insight into the universal nature of interpersonal relations, which always remain on a threatening threshold of temptation and withdrawal. (227)

Kamala Das’s preoccupation with body is functional in the sense that through it she registers her protest and makes a sustained endeavour to transcend the barriers of flesh to reach the soul. A perceptive eye can easily trace out the hidden link between the body and the soul in the poems of Das. We may take note of the words of Irshad Gulan Ahmed in this context. He writes:

. . . there is a great deal more in Das’s work than just sex and physical love—an aspect overemphasized by some of her critics. Overexposure of sex is only a literary strategy with her. It is for generating in the reader the desired sense of disgust for the reprehensible aspects of human behavior that she uses overemphasis. (133)

However, the frequent use of ‘female body’ appears as a motif in the works of Das. As it has been mentioned earlier in the case of Kamala Das her accumulated experiences take the shape of ‘collective consciousnesses’ of general womanhood. In her poems she shares the predicament of being a woman. In the traditional patriarchal society her poems appear as a vehement protest against this tradition. As Nair says, “She makes a
desperate attempt to overcome the near extinction of femininity in the male-machinations and exploitations” (229).

In the matrilineal system of the Nayar family the great grandmother played an influential role in Das’s life. But her father held a different outlook. It was her father for whom she had to leave school without finishing her education and was forced to get married at a tender age. Even in his last days he was displeased with her as he thought that Das’ writing had brought ‘shame’ to his family. Das writes:

There was a cloud of tension
Between him and me. I brought him
Shame, they say. He brought me on each
Short visit some banana chips
And harsh words of reproach. I feared
My father. (“My Father’s Death” 38-43)

While discussing the confessional aspects in the poetry of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton, N. Prasantha Kumar in his thesis *Writing the Female: A Comparative Study of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton* points out this distressing side of father-daughter relationship:

The half-yielding, half-rebellious mood of the poets symbolizes their paternal inheritance as well as their love-hate relationships with their fathers. They are confronted with the pain of being daughters. (175)

Her husband, Mr Madhab Das, was another male in her life. Unfortunately this relationship did not prove fruitful. Das found her husband another authoritative figure continuously shattering her dreams. In this respect a reference from a survey can be reasonably cited. Nivedita Menon and Michael P.Johnson in “Patriarchy and Paternalism
in Intimate Partner Violence, A Study of Domestic Violence in Rural India’ try to locate the origin of abuse on women in Indian context through their hypothesis and collected data. In their survey alongside other factors associated with abuse of women, a surprising as well as a common practice is pointed out:

Because marriages are usually endogamous in India, women are very likely to transfer to households similar to their own. If the ideology of the threat of violence was present in her natal family, it is likely that the belief systems of the marital family would be similar. Thus, if the woman experienced physical assault in her natal home, chances would be higher that she would experience physical assault from her husband. (174)

Kamala Das in her poem “A Faded Epaulet on His Shoulder” reminiscences:

. . . even a

Fairskinned maidservant could take him away from me for

Hours. (2-4)

In My Story there are references which show us that in their married life, Das suffered both physically and mentally. Her fragile figure was treated as a machine for the production of sexual pleasure. By torturing her body as well as by neglecting her body (as we have seen in the quoted lines), Mr. Das pushed her womanliness on the verge of nonexistence. Repeatedly she expresses her condition of lovelessness, her loneliness and her identity crisis. And this is the reason that when she turned to poetry writing as through the writing of poems she found out an escape route to freedom.

The representation of female body became an obvious necessity in her poems. As the patriarchal system tries to suppress a female voice, the woman is left only with her
body to make the protest. Body becomes the war–front as well as the tool of protest for Kamala Das. She often talks about failed love. And this ‘failing’ is due to the unsympathetic and uncooperative attitude of her husband. Disclosure of frank sexuality is a direct attack to this ‘lustful’ male ego. Most of her poems having the exposure of female body deal with this protest seeking balance in the biased social order. Dorothy Jones in “Freedom Became My Dancing Shoe: Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Work of Kamala Das” very appropriately says, “Das’s principal achievement has been to define and expose the prison in which a woman finds herself trapped. . .” (195). Body symbolizes this prison. Only frequent references of it can bring Das’s original identity out of its snare. In “Captive” she laments “. . . for years I have run from one/gossamer lane to another, I am / now my own captive” (16-18). She deconstructs her body, exhibits different parts like a cubist painter and enlivens each and every organ to shout in their own voice.

In “Larger than Life was He” Kamala Das reminisces her husband after his death. This poem displays mixed feelings for her husband. Often we have come across such type of recollections with reference to Mr. Das. While she complains that her husband always believed in the carnal pleasure, she also gives credit to him that he is the source of freedom in her life. In interviews she has said that without his permission she could not have written a single line. But ultimately that option went too far and sometimes at the cost of their married life. While she was given her space to express her feelings through writing poems, the husband also took the advantage and chose to enjoy his time at the expense of household responsibilities. Das writes in no uncertain manner:

It was never a husband and wife bond.
We were such a mismatched pair,

........................................

We were quits at every game we played

I could have been Sita to his Rama

had I been given half a chance. (15-16 & 20-22)

The poem speaks of a strained relationship where both of them live like strangers. While she gave birth to three sons at a very tender age, her husband was indifferent to his fatherly duties and responsibilities:

I reared three sons,

he was too busy to watch them grow

but he it was who wore the faded face

that they recognized as their father’s.

His was the heavy tread

heard on the gravel at dusk

He peered into his office files

till the supper turned cold

and the children got up to sleep. (23-31)
Their relationship was formal to breed intimacy. Being a very young bride Das expected her husband to be more caring and affectionate. But in reality her husband played altogether a different role:

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. (32-39)

Das never found her husband possessing tender emotions that could have tied them up into a happy pair. Mentally they were poles apart. The difference between their age as well as outlook produced nothing but disharmony and disorder which ultimately proved very disheartening for Das. Her husband really performed well when it came to enjoyment of carnal pleasures, “Only a few bedbound chores / executed well, tethered him to me” (40-41). Only the act of physical union provided, though very temporarily, attachment helping Das to continue their married life. As the title suggests this poem epitomizes Mr. Das as a ‘larger than life’ figure in the life of the speaker but the reader would hardly miss the ironic portrayal of her husband. As she could not evade their
marital life till the death of Mr. Madhab Das, she tried to absorb the indifferences, the mental and physical tortures and the boredoms. With the help of her creative self she managed to bear with her husband. This is the reason that in spite of his irresponsibility, his negligence to his wife, he is being missed by the poet after his death:

I miss the brusque voice

sending out the strays

hugging their manuscripts

meekly a unwed mothers did

their illegitimate offspring

I miss his censoring my daily mail

his screening each phone call

and the insulation of his care. (48-55)

Even in her reminiscences she cannot forget the husband-dictator. But at the same time the long nourished Indian socio-cultural tradition forced her to submerge her feminine ego and accept the subordinate position of a wife. She makes it clear to Weisbord:

I liked working for him because he would praise me. I come from a matriarchal society. Matriarchs are expected to look after husbands. And there was some feeling that I was protected. He was giving me some kind of emotional shelter. (15)
The last line of the quotation may sound paradoxical but she explains it afterwards:

Forty-three years of married life with a man I married at fifteen. So you see, it grows on you. I don’t resent, I don’t regret. All the grief inflicted upon me by my husband paid dividends. All the struggles proved useful later. Poetry came oozing out like blood out of injuries. How could I have written so much of poetry if he hadn’t made me cry? All the anguish, you weed something out of it. (16)

This observation helps the readers to understand that the woman in this poem has achieved the “body’s wisdom” by submerging her ‘ego’. In married life Das always tried to keep her own ‘self’ suppressed for the sake of love. Sometime she pretended that she was getting interest in the sexual union which was in actuality a “one way” act. In “In Love” she lays down her mask and declares her “unending lust” a “sad lie” which she weaves to give her husband a sense of satisfaction and authority.

But from Das’s point of view her ‘realization’ of the futility of love makes her depict her husband in a negative way: “. . . his limbs like pale and / Carnivorous plants reaching / Out for me” (4-6). And this is why she can turn away her mind from physical to metaphysical, from the act of love making to “the corpse-bearer’s cry ‘Bol / Hari Bol’” (20-2). She tries to achieve a ‘marriage of true minds’ through bodily love but fails. As P. K. J. Kurup says:

What her feminine self sought was the sexual congress by arousing and surrendering the senses fully in order to forge “the union of true minds” as well as a sense of personal integration. (121)
As we have already seen that her ‘unending lust’ is just a strategy to cover up the mindless physical activity; in such a situation asking for love would have been an impossible demand:

. . . this
Skin-communicated thing
That I dare not yet in his
Presence call our love. (“In Love” 25-28)

Though she didn’t gather enough courage to denounce him at that time, this poem confesses all. The traditional Indian woman must have felt the same experience, but the protest remains a rare thing. Kamala Das has achieved this frankness which allows her to ‘unburden’ her self in her poems. The woman, who feels insecure in conjugal life, finds herself establishing her lost identity. As Patricia Waugh observes:

Much of women’s writing can, in fact, be seen not as an attempt to define an isolated individual ego but to discover a collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity in relationship.

(10)

The same tone can be heard in another small poem “Cat in the Gutter”. Again there is the ‘monstrous ego’ of husband who foolishly thinks that his way of love making can actually penetrate into her soul:

So who would tell him that when he made love,
Grunting, groaning, sighing,
With no soul to overpower me,
Only his limbs and his robust lust . . . (10-13)
The husband, being the representative of the patriarchal society, is unable to differentiate between love and lust, between body and soul. His sense of superiority is enriched by his ‘robust lust’. Though Das knows that ‘It was my desire that made him male/and beautiful’ (“A Relationship” 5-6), loveless lust for the production of temporary gratification pushes the identity of a woman on the verge of nothingness. Das, as a poet, is different from the traditional Indian women. In conjugal life the ‘male ego’ is satisfied when a feminine self is overpowered. In ‘Cat in the Gutter’ she is conscious of this injustice thrust upon women. Directly she denounces his ‘heroism’ as cowardice: ‘Cowardice was his favourite diet” (“Cat in the Gutter” 8) and unlike the poem “The Gulmohur”, in this poem, she does not feel pity for him, instead she writes with pungent irony:

I was just a high breed kitten
Rolling for fun in the gutter. (13-14)

In a sudden blow of ridicule his authority in the married life is relegated to nothing. All the pompous pride of being a ‘man’ and supreme owner of a ‘woman’ is unexpectedly pricked by the mocking tone of ‘fun’.

Man has planned this society in such a way that it has become impossible for a woman to achieve equality in this social structure. We live in a ‘civilized' society where equilibrium is a lost word in ‘man–woman’ relationship. In Indian scriptures women are the goddess of supreme power, but in actual social practice they are not. Virginia Woolf in her influential book A Room of One’s Own rightly observes:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is
all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of husband.

*(Selected 590)*

Woolf is straightforward in pointing out the discrimination. Man’s superiority has denigrated woman to a marginalized entity. He has domesticated her by his self-proclaimed morals, attitude and dogmas which are nothing but the traps to keep them under the illusory praise of being ‘a good-natured woman’. It is not only that by neglecting ‘female’, the patriarchal society violets the rules laid down by nature, but at the same time it keeps the man in privileged position by denouncing the place given to a woman by civilization’s natural law of equality. A patriarchal power structure predominates in our society. Das’s poems, while seeking equality for women are also an effort to create a woman’s space to be recognized by the society:

From this angle, she does not bargain for a mere equality of sexes; she wants that there should be a wide and proper recognition of the superiority of woman in the state of nature. (Nair 81)

In her own married life, Das suffered from a crisis of identity which otherwise would have given her a chance to claim proper respect from her husband. In her poems, there are the frequent references to female body. And it ceases to be just an object of carnal pleasure; she uses the body as a strategy to unravel the female psyche. As K. Sachidanandan says:
Reference to swelling limbs, growing hairs, the pitiful weight of breasts and womb and the sad woman body emphasize the corporeal ground of woman’s experience, *female physicality often identified with female textuality*. (emphasis added 13)

And Das says in “Loud Posters”,

I’ve stretched my two-dimensional

Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies

Quarterlies . . . (9-11)

Throughout her whole life she is always inquisitive about her own self. That is why she continuously unmask herself in poems in a bid to reach the innermost core of her being.

‘The Old Playhouse’ is an example of positioning ‘female body’ as a revolt against the male hegemony. This poem describes in detail the naked reality of a traditional conjugal life where the wife pricks the balloon of an apparently happy life. She goes to the bottom of the relationship and in a woman’s voice, challenges the social structure. This poem has a direct reference to her married life. She narrates her gruesome experience to Weisbord, “He would leave at seven in the morning, come home at eleven when I was asleep, and call me up for my duty” (84). Das continues:

Every night this digging went on and on, and I almost thought he was burying a body every night. No tenderness there was. No preliminaries, nothing. Probably he couldn’t love me. At the moment of sexual intercourse with him, I wished he would gather me in his arms after the act. Had he caressed my face or touched my belly, I would not have felt the intense rejection I felt after each union. Then again he would want.
After about fifteen minutes the man gets up again. Bury. Shovel. I felt rotten, like a corpse was within. When I felt his semen in me, I just wanted to wash it out. (84)

And the consequence of these attacks led to physical injuries, “My cervix was so broken down, they had to operate. I had to have the mouth of the cervix cut and I bled. My God, what a way to bleed” (83). Das’s lady doctor told her the cause of the problem, “The surgery is caused by the husband’s penis…It will hurt this girl all her life” (83).

Several times in her memoir she mentions about the ‘brutality of sex’ which fell on her unexpectedly. Conjugal life depressed her and in her writings she often uses the ‘female body’ to protest against such institutions which encourage brutal subjugation of the female body at the cost of her psychic needs. ‘Marital’ rape is not uncommon in Indian society. But in most of the cases, it is the insecurity which prevents woman from making it public. At the same time other social institutions like police station, court, media etc are generally male-dominated, the victim is not confident enough to report against a man in these male-occupied domains. There are ample number of cases where the raped women are harassed and humiliated when they try to voice their plight out of their private sphere. They remain the ‘weaker section of society’. And when they are helpless, hopeless and betrayed by social justice, they use their own body as the vital weapon to protest.

Das in her poems exhibits female body to generate a violent shock to our age old social system. In “The Old Playhouse” she talks about domestication of a woman in the mask of a wife: “You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her / In the long summer of your love. . . ” (1-2).
The poet-persona directly accuses her husband (You), the representative of patriarchal society, for turning a woman into the property of a man. The man ‘tames’ the woman under the disguise of ‘love’. The irony in the use of the word ‘planned’ is humiliating to a ‘woman’. The poet, courageously, brings forward those issues which average Indian women are not allowed to question and disrobes the hypocrisy of a man’s love underneath which runs the conspiracy of granting his woman only a submissive role:

. . . so that she would forget

Not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind, but

Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless

Pathways of the sky . . . (2-5)

At first her freedom is brutally taken away. Her home and the world cease to exit. Her ‘endless pathways of the sky’ is brought down within the limit of perpetual confinement. This poem is based on personal experiences. When Das got married, her husband found his bride innocent in both mind and body. So it was expected that she would be engrossed with herself, with her own imaginary and romantic world. As she says in this poem, she was trying to learn “what I was”. Being unaware of the ways of traditional male-dominated society, the woman at that very tender age was in search of her “identity” which she thought she could achieve in that new relationship. Her expectation was belied and the overwhelming male ego swallowed her timid and fragile “I”, “. . . but every lesson you gave was about yourself” (8). “The Old Playhouse” is a detailed poetic description of the early years of Das’s marital life. She writes in My Story:

I was at that time deeply in love with him and would have undergone any torture to be able to please him, but my body was immature and not ready
for lovemaking. For him such a body was an embarrassment, veteran that he was in the rowdy ways of sex which he had practiced with the maids who worked for his family. (73)

In “The Old Playhouse” her confessions of those days appear shocking. She walks bare in the poem. She is vituperative in presenting her naked body and its parts. It is as if she has put life into each and every organ of her female body to organize a powerful protest against her husband. The stark honesty with which she describes her conjugal life where physicality was always prioritized by her consort is a conscious strategic manoeuvre to voice her strong disapproval. Vrinda Nabar observes in this connection:

One of her chief strength had been her ability to write of love honestly, not in order to romanticize or soften, but to describe even what had conventionally been hardly mentioned. (63)

Critics like Nabar finds this poem as a description of her extramarital relationship, where as Devindra Kohli takes it as autobiographical, “Kamala Das says about her own relationship with her husband” (qtd. in Nabar 64). And as this poem is steeped in personal elements, it is obvious for Kohli to conclude that this poem:

. . . protests against the constraint of married life; the fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort and male domination which Kamala Das asserts that she has known and found abominable in her life. ‘You’ is presumably, the husband who wants to tame the swallow who is the woman persona (qtd. in Nabar 64).

In “The Bison at the Water’s Edge”, Das repeats the same chain of events of marital life. She describes a couple like:
Two dissimilar co-tenants

In one cramped room

One the kind side of blade

The other the cutting edge

Yes, the other was indeed hard. (3-7)

She doesn’t lament now rather she finds out a strategic escape route by using her body in the name of making love, “Each day his lust renewed me / Each day he rent my virgin loins. . . (29-30)”. She did not submit to the brutal demands on her body made by her husband. By choosing someone as her lover, she ‘physically’ challenges her husband whose ‘lust’ used to dampen her spirit. The reader feels that the speaker has been able to take a sweet revenge on her male partner. The politics of ‘female body’ becomes a strategy here with which she challenges the role of a woman as a dutiful, traditional Indian ‘wife’. In a very small poem “A Losing Battle”, Das differentiates between ‘lust’ and ‘love’:

How can my love hold him when the other

 Flaunts a gaudy lust and is lioness

To his Beast? Men are worthless, to trap them

Use the cheapest bait of all, but never

Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood. (1-6)

As the title suggests, she knows that in actuality the woman has already lost the uneven duel with her man. The man’s physical strength and social position keep him far away from the woman’s reach. Her ‘meek’ love cannot touch the periphery of his ‘gaudy’ lust. But Das reminds women that it is the ‘female body’ which is the ultimate ‘ammunition’ left in their hand and women should use them to ‘trap’ them. So in these poems Das very ironically establishes the ‘role’ of a ‘female body’. While it is tortured it can also be a means to stop that torture. It is the victim but on the other hand, it is also a means to punish the victimizer. In “A Phone Call in the Morning”, Das describes “this body” as “the player and the toy” (5-7). In “The Old Playhouse” Das narrates how her husband was happy with only her body:

You were pleased

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

Convulsions. (8-10)

In this respect we can remember Das’s first day meeting with her future –husband from My Story:

Before I left for Calcutta, my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. Don’t you love me, he asked me, don’t you like my touching you? I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was “good bye”. (67)
According to Das her body played a vital role in their marital life. When she felt brutally “hurt and humiliated”, it was paradoxically the body which acted like a shield preventing her husband to penetrate beyond the layer of flesh and to reach the abode of love, the soul. The whole thing might have happened unconsciously. In these poems ‘female body’ stands for resistance, that power which the women ultimately master following a life of prolonged domination and suppression. In a poem entitled “Nani” the central figure Nani is a maid who became pregnant and committed suicide by hanging herself. Until the police came, she was hanging there. This episode had an impact on Das’ tender mind. In My Story, there is a reference of a ‘kitchen maid’ Kunhukutty who became pregnant. Although she did not take her life like Nani, she did not have the courage to protest against the male atrocity. She took the blame on herself and aborted the baby:

One or two months later I woke from my sleep in the morning hearing a commotion downstairs. Change your clothes and get out this minute, shouted my grandmother at Kunhukutty who stood in a pool of blood outside her dingy room. I looked around. The walls were spattered with blood . . . Later the cook told me that she was only an immoral woman and that she had conducted on herself an abortion .(27)

The irony is although Das’s family is matrilineal the women in the family never protested against the male domination and turned a blind eye to incidents of promiscuity indulged in by the males of the family. The death of Nani was shamelessly forgotten:

Another

Year or two, and I asked my grandmother
One day, don’t you remember Nani, the dark
Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And stared at me. Nani, she asked who is she? (12-17)

In Das’s family the issues like pre-marital motherhood were considered as taboo and were handled with brutal restrictions. From very early age Das had a voice of protest against this system. But being a woman she had to be a part of this tradition. She didn’t forget the accident and the ‘overwhelming silence’ over the issue seemed to her a ‘designed deafness’. As K. V. Surendran says in “Suffering and Humiliation in Kamala Das’ Poetry”, “She moves from a world of innocence to a narrow, conservative way of life which prefers to suppress what is unpleasant and ‘unexposable’” (131-132). Suffering of a woman makes Das conscious of gender discrimination. After many years she discloses that episode of “Nani” in her poem to dig out the truth which cannot be suppressed, cannot be wiped out.

The concept of “feminism” did not bother her much. The issues related to the psycho-social condition of women which recur in her writings were her very own experiences. The love, which she eventually lost in her life, came back in myriad forms in the poems. Sometime it was in the form of extra-marital relationship or in the mystical love of Radha-Krishna. She got solace in the embrace of a paramour or there was the meditative devotion for the ideal lover, Krishna. Her poems cannot hide the pangs of humiliation and torture, rather through her confessions the hidden thoughts of a
suppressed woman are made wide open and her body is displayed in a way that the scars and the signs of torture take the shape of a poem. She doesn’t display her body rather herself becomes the ‘body’ in her poems. She knows that:

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. (“Words” 11-14)

Das makes her journey from ‘failure in love’ to a ‘search for true love’ and the body is used deliberately to achieve her objective.

T. N. Dhar in his “Eros Denied: Love in the Poetry of Kamala Das” has shown that in Das’s poem love degenerates into the brutality of lust:

Kamala Das’s love poetry derives its substance and form mostly from the tension in the mind of the protagonist (always a female) who is denied the place she craves for, and, as a consequence of this, love invariably degenerate into lust, and features so largely in her poems. (24)

Often ‘love’ is described in her poems in terms of lust. As she has no control over her wishes in the conjugal life, it is her husband’s desire that dominates the situation. In “Convicts” she says:

That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other’s parts

Like convicts hacking, breaking clods

At noon. (1-4)

“The Looking Glass” is an example where the urge for ‘love’ is being subdued by the presence of ‘lust’. The poet wants to say that in a marital relationship the woman searches for pure ‘love’ in husband whereas the husband finds his wife as an object of bodily pleasure. But her advice to a woman is to be honest about her being a ‘woman’. In that case she may easily get her man to love her:

Getting a man to love you is easy

Only be honest about your wants as

Woman. (1-3)

Though what the woman takes as ‘love’, is nothing but the carnal pleasure her husband tries to get out of her. However, it is the female body which helps the bond to remain intact. Das tells about every woman suffering the same fate. According to her “womanliness” consists in being a stereotype, playing the traditional role of a wife, mother or sister. She is supposed to be submissive, docile, timid and obedient who must follow the rules laid down by patriarchal social system. So whether it is love or lust, the one and only rule is that she has to be a ‘woman’. In “An Introduction” she tells about the demands made on her by the patriarchs – ‘fitting into the category’. She has to put on those feminine features which will at least satisfy the male desire, male ego:
Stand nude before the glass with him

So that he sees himself the stronger one

And believes it so, and you so much more

Softer, younger, lovelier . . . (2-5)

The control of the female body is in the hands of the male partner. It is extremely humiliating, but still the woman lets herself remain in that pose. And it is for the sake of achieving love:

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. (12-16)

Das is frank enough to confess about her own ‘hunger’. But when the wife uses the ‘hunger’ to attract her husband, it is the same physical ‘hunger’ which her husband enjoys to curb the freedom of the woman. ‘The female body’ is captured, controlled and maltreated in a heartless manner. This poem is successful in exposing that dehumanizing condition of women in general. A. N. Dwivedi rightly observes about the poem:

A sharp feminine sensibility is at work here. As a full-blooded woman, Kamala Das makes an honest confession of her wants for her sexual
gratification. The poem is decidedly a psychic striptease. It powerfully evokes the image of a lustful relationship between the two sexes. Nothing is, in truth, concealed from the reader, not even the ugly and the forbidden. There is a subtle psychological analysis of the male mentality in the first part of the poem, just as the second part is totally pervaded by a feminine consciousness. The cumulative effect of the poem is one of sterility and futility of sexual love. (107)

The same tone of dejection in love is beautifully portrayed in “Substitute”:

Life is quite simple now-

Love, blackmail and sorrow.

It will be all right when I learn

To paint my mouth like a clown’s

It will be all right if I put up my hair,

Stand near my husband to make a proud pair.

It will be all right if I join clubs

And flirt a little over telephone.

It will be all right, it will be all right

I am the type that endures.

It will be all right, it will be all right
It will be all right, between the world and me. (13-24)

If the gap between the body and the soul remains, then the immediate result is, “Our bodies after love-making/Turned away, rejecting (65)”. The husband in Das’ own life as well as the persona in the poem is well aware of the pure physicality of the relationship. That is why the sensitive woman is unable to carry on with the mere façade of the loveless union of body and wants to be free:

It is a physical thing, he said suddenly,

End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free. (35-36)

In search of freedom, she takes an unconventional turn. She engages herself into some extra-marital affairs. The more she faces indifference on her husband’s part, the more she finds herself comfortable in the lovers’ arm. In “The Seashore” she discloses:

How often I wish, while you rest

In my arm that I could give you time, that this great,

All enveloping thing I offer you, calling

It meekly, love, can take us to worlds where life is

Evergreen, and you, just at those moments raise your

Red eyes at me and smile, perhaps at the folly

Of my thoughts. (8-14)
In “Love” she tells:

Now that I love you,

Curled like an old mongrel

My life lies, content

In you . . . (5-8)

And in “Autumn Leaves” she passionately describes her ‘secret’:

This is a secret:

Once through his shirt

I saw his chest

And all that hair

And, on that very night in my dream

The autumn-winds blew down

From the trees

All their leaves

And I lay on them,

I lay on those smoke-scented leaves. (1-10)
It should be kept in mind that Kamala Das does not reject the body altogether. Love without body is not what she clamours for; her protest is against the indulgence in mere carnality in the name of love. In her poetry eros leads to agape – love must transcend the body and aspire towards a spiritual union. In many poems she talks about her physical proximity with her lover which ultimately gives her the satisfaction of true love. In her memoirs we find ample evidence of her affairs which she boldly announces. After the death of her grandmother she felt a void in life. At that time she fell in love with a man:

None had loved me as deeply as my grandmother. But within a week after her death, I fell in love with an extremely handsome young man who walked with me from the Khar gymkhana where I had gone in the evening to play tennis. The evening’s Sun lit up his grey eyes. The gloss of his skin and the beauty of his smile made me feel all of a sudden so awestruck, so humble . . . . (My Story 90)

Das came very close to this man and her life changed for the time being:

Who was he to me? During that summer while the Gulmohurs burnt the edged of the sky, he dressed my hair with scented white flowers, plucking them from beneath my windows. What did he want from me? Once or twice standing near him with his arms around my shoulders I whispered, I am yours, do with me as you will, make love to me . . . but he said, no, in my eyes you are a goddess, I shall not dishonour your body . . . (92)
Then she had another relationship with a person called Carlo:

One day when I opened the door, there stood like a short-statured God a stranger dressed in off-white linen and wearing a flat Italian collar. I am Carlo he said. I am your pen-friend . . . (95)

This time Das went much deeper into the relationship with him. He ceased to be just “pen-friend”. The loneliness in Das’ life was gradually overridden by the arrival of Carlo, “You can marry me, said Carlo. You can forget your grey-eyed friend, leave your indifferent husband and come with me to my country” (97). Another instance took place in 1962 when there was a Seanza Course for the Bankers in Bombay and delegates came from several countries. One of them, claiming to have some Spanish blood in his veins, approached Das, “. . . I was kissed gently on my cheeks. I rose from the chair immediately. Don’t you love me at all, he asked, lowering his voice” (114). Her husband knew this, but he did not take them seriously as the man was old enough to be her father. However while she was in Calcutta she used to receive approaches from dozens of men who felt deep infatuation for her. But she grew an aversion for them; she wanted to escape from Calcutta. But coincidentally she had another affair with a visitor from Bombay. She confesses in My Story:

He was intelligent and well-read. There was nothing I liked better than talking about books, and so sitting near him I was relaxed and happy when suddenly his hand moved closer to my thigh and rested touching it lightly. (118)
This was surprising to her and she writes:

Although I had had men falling in love with me, none of them had shown sexual desire. I was loved as a young sister is loved. This man’s movements surprised me. He cultivated the habit of stroking my legs during conversation and caressing my long hair. I nearly fell in love with him. (118)

However, this long list of extra-marital relationships and their sexual innuendos are confessed by Das in her poems. As in “Gino”:

He walked one step ahead of me, the west wind leaking

Through his hair. And, I thought, if I could only want

Really, really want his love, we shall ride happiness,

Great white steed, trampler or unscared laws,

If I could only dislodge the inherited

Memory of a touch, I shall serve my self in

Bedroom-mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter,

While he lies watching, fair conqueror of another’s

Country, I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes. (8-16)

The amorous adventures described in My Story could have been regarded as fictional but as evidenced by Das herself these incidents are not merely romantic aberration of a
depressed soul. When Merrily Weisbord asked Das about the occurrence of ‘love and sex’ in her life and wanted to know if there is any difference between her love affair and sexual desire, Das clarified herself:

At least for me. Sex gets thrown into it sometimes, probably when I was young and someone was actually impatient, like a bribe. In those days, I traded sex for love. By presenting the body, I thought I might get the mind as well. I wanted emotion to ride in him. Emotion that suits mine, because I had such a rush of emotion. (40)

When Weisbord asked her pointblank, “Did you ever enjoy sex with anybody?” Das felt unnerved. Weisbord writes:

The question visibly unnerves her. I seem to have asked something coarse, or dangerous. She hesitates uncertainly and looks upset. Finally she says, “Maybe once or twice. (41)

In many of her poems Das expresses her bodily desire that go beyond the traditional social norm. Her desires to be with her lover somehow challenge the social institutions like marriage which treats a woman as nothing but a possession. In “A Souvenir of Bone” she expresses about the vulnerabilities of “marital relationship”. It is an act of ‘pretence’ which keeps the ties of the “home” intact:

My desires

Were many, if granted freedom I knew they would burn
Down like tongues of flame, the monastic peace of my home.

The ancient lusts are blinded in the mind, they stagger

Through the light of day as mad men stumble on sidewalks

At noon. (19-24)

As a wife she was an integral part of patriarchal system which has inherently injected into her the typical sense of morality and modesty of an Indian wife. But as a poet she breaks away from those boundaries and has the courage and honesty to confess about her true nature:

I told you my nature was fire; it was

Greed and ingratitude. If I am a sinner, please

Forgive my sins. If I am innocent, forgive my

Innocence. (33-36)

She has realized the futility of conjugal relationship where there is no mutual respect for each other:

In his wild arms where I rest today

There will once be the gross aim, nothing else. They will

Burn me then as a log and pick for each grieving son

A souvenir of bone. (37-40)
She was well aware about the reactions of readers which were quite violent after the publication of *My Story*. She earned ill repute that afterwards termed her “love queen”. However, inspite of the harsh criticisms that continuously maligned her, she didn’t want to get rid of the “thirst for desire”:

Rob me, destiny, if you must

Rob me of my sustenance, but do not, I beg

Of you, do not take away my thirst . . . (40-42)

This “thirst for desire” is actually the ‘thirst’ for life, for a creative life which Das aspires for more than anything in life. In her poem “Flotsam” she describes how she had to fight the clumsy lust of her partner to finally establish the superiority of her body:

We were the homeless, he and I, floating ones

Who recognize swiftly another of the tribe

By that certain hunger in the eye, a slight

Narrowing, for, although brimming with a desert sun,

It fancies it sees an oasis; the mirage

Greenly reflected in each lonely cornea,

And, so together we stumbled so clumsily

Into lust, But pushing his urgent limbs away
I fought to regain my body’s poise till he cried

I love you; you’ve no need to be afraid of me. (1-10)

In “The End of Spring” Das writes about her doubts about responding to the invitation of love from her partner:

While I wait for your phone call, I do not

Know whom to believe. You, who say you love

Or the voice that tells me no, no, no . . . (1-3)

She is dubious about the relationship. There remains a sense of ‘fear’ as this kind of love outside marital relationship is not acknowledged by the society:

I journey while alone just

Backwards, taking secret steps inwards and

Choosing roads none has walked before. (“The End of Spring” 11-13)

In an unprecedented manner she moves on in search of true love, an ideal lover. In “The Ferry” she requests her paramour to take her away to such a place where she can find rest and peace:

Will your slim body ferry me to that noiseless shore

Where I can lie featureless

As a planet blanched by the day? (1-3)
Here ‘body’ is a means of journey beyond the physical. She is aware of the
conventionality of her ‘blood’ or the traditional moral values inherently present in her.
But at the same time she is certain that a new tomorrow is in the offing when the society
must acknowledge the equal status of women with men:

   My blood is salty with the tears of prophets

   But tomorrow must erupt from between a barren woman’s

   Thighs . . . (3-5)

The new tomorrow will be governed by women as it will be born out of a new female
consciousness. The last line may appear paradoxical as how can tomorrow erupt from a
‘barren’ woman. But the word ‘barren’ here is not used in the literal sense; the patriarchal
society associates woman with everything negative but a new time is about to come when
women will be the guiding force of the society. The reference to “woman’s thighs” may
appear grossly physical but it moves to the metaphysical level where a new dawn is
awaiting the women.

   Even her poem dealing with Radha-Krishna myth is replete with the references to
female body. These are supposed to provide a sense of transcendence into the life of Das.
Her search for ideal lover ends in Krishna. And ‘Krishna’, the epitome of eternal love,
pervades her life from the very childhood:

   The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with

   God. My mate is he. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many

   shapes shall I surrender to his desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be
betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. (*My Story* 148)

When her marital relation proved futile she found her ultimate shelter in Krishna. But, the manner in which she expresses her deep attraction toward Krishna is not religious. It reminds one of Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” where the poet describes in a sensuous language his relationship with God. In a similar vein Das uses the Radha-Krishna myth. Her use of the myth is not in any religious or devotional sense. Devindra Kohli confirms this:

. . . her use of the Radha-Krishna motif is mythological rather than religious; the mystic union is not assumed or subsumed in a rarefied devotional sense but portrayed in sexual terms . . . (205)

And in the same vein P. K. J. Kurup says:

. . . while the poet is seeking to provide a mythical framework to her quest of love outside marriage, she does not exaggerate its spiritual aspect because her feminine sensibility has inculcated in her that a woman cannot establish a true contact except through the entrances of the body. By identifying herself with Radha and Mira she is subconsciously finding a justification for her quest for love outside marriage. (160)

Kurup’s observation finds vindication in Kamala Das’s poem “Vrindaban” where the poet writes about the woman’s extra marital affairs under the mythic garb of Vrindaban:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind
and the flute luring her
from home and her husband
who later asks her of the long scratch
on the brown aureola of her breast
and she shyly replies
hiding flushed cheeks, it was so dark
outside, I tripped over the brambles in the woods . . . (1-8)

Referring to the above lines C. D. Narasimhaiah observes, “. . . the Radha Krishna relationship gets diluted in many another poems and predictably the poetry is flawed and borders on the merely sensational” (12).

Taking cue from the analysis of Kurup and Narasimhaiah, we can say that Das in these poems uses the Radha-Krishna myth to suit her personal agenda. She tries to establish a new version of mythology where the characters are portrayed as nothing but ideal human beings. She assumes the role of Radha to satisfy her deep desire for love through her union with Krishna. She validates this in her interview with Eunice de Souza:

My grandmother would say Krishna is your greatest friend. I thought nobody would be as good as Krishna. I believed that until ten years ago, until I realized Krishna too could be a myth. I’ve moved away from temples and religions. No edifice can contain God. Religions have an expiry date, if you move away from religion, you go closer to God. The myths are like costumes. You don’t need them. Religion is not relevant. I love the character Radha. I’ve written plenty about her in my stories in
Malayalam as well. I always think of her waiting for him who never came back. I don’t think any love is completely reciprocated. In one of my stories Radha smeared sandalwood paste on her breast. She fell asleep, and when she woke up, he still hadn’t come and the sandalwood paste was dry. She felt it was such a waste of sandalwood. I understand her. I see her as a human being. (27)

Kamala Das dons this costume of myth to portray her self, to confess her intimate feelings about love. She de-mythifies the traditional concept of Radha & Krishna and uses the divine figures to justify relationships outside marriage. In reply to de Souza’s query about the “theme of adultery in Radha-Krishna stories” she says frankly:

Adultery has always thrilled me. My favourite reading was *Anna Karenina*. I liked *Madame Bovary*. I would have been satisfied if I had been punished like them. If I committed a sin it was in a sinless way. I gravitate to wicked men. (27)

In her poem “Radha” the intensity of passion is frankly stated:

The long waiting

Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting

And the reasoning

So that in his first true embrace, she was girl

And virgin crying
Everything in me

Is melting, even the hardness at the core

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting

Nothing remains but

You. (1-10)

The total surrender to Krishna is so openly stated that the description of such passionate physical union appears very honest. The language in these poems is not different from her typical style of expression used in other poems.

In another of her important poems “Ghanashyam”, the myth of Krishna is used to transcend the limitation of earthly love. Ghanashyam or Krishna acts as the shelter in the turbulent life of Das:

Ghanashyam,

You have like a koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart.

My life, until now a sleeping jungle, is at last astir with music.

You lead me along a route I have never known before. (1-4)

The poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue where in a conversational tone she requests Ghanashyam to help her out of her troubled situation. She confesses that her marital life is a failure and her husband took her just as an object of sexual gratification:

We played once a husk-game, my lover and I
His body needing mine,

His ageing body in its pride meeting the need for mine

And each time his lust was quietened

And he turned his back on me

In panic I asked don’t you want me any longer,

Don’t you want me

Don’t you, don’t you? (20-27)

Das imagines Ghanashyam as an ideal lover with whom she can share her own discontents and dissatisfactions. She brings down the myth of Krishna from a spiritual level to a human plane where Krishna or Ghanashyam becomes her “sympathetic” love partner. Jayakrishnan Nair says:

Rather than a ‘spiritual paramour’, she is all through seeking an ‘ideal paramour’ who will bestow on her all that she has missed in her lived life, and who in a sweep can exorcise the loneliness of her life. In fact, for Kamala Das, ‘Krishna’ is a mere icon standing for the profile of an equal and sympathetic love partner. ‘Krishna’, for her, is as ideal as a perfect humanistic agent, the reflection of her self’s mere longing to reach for the unfathomable. So her ‘Krishna’ is not the mythological figure with all the mythomaniacal antiques, but he is her own ego poetically conceived and objectivized in a sort of vibrant figurative vicarious entity. (202)
According to Nair Krishna in Das’s poems is a “poetic ploy”. Krishna embodies for her masculine perfection which no male can possess in this world. In fact Das recreates the myth of Krishna in her poems. Nair continues:

Thus her ‘Krishna’ is her supporting agent, who introduces into her a kind of hymnal unification of the self with the other. The ‘Krishna’ figure in her poetry, therefore, should be looked at only as a poetic ploy to convey a desire, a longing to be one with a perfect masculine being that is unreal, and also one that will not be realized in the practical world of things. Therefore, the association of the mythological ‘Krishna’ with her ‘ideal lover’ itself turns out to be a myth. (emphasis added 203)

Incidentally it may be mentioned that there exists a close relationship between myth and feminism. In her poems Das engages herself in the appropriation of traditional myths by manipulating it in her own way. In other words she deconstructs the patriarchal myths to construct them in her own unique way. Sachidanandan observes:

Women poets subvert patriarchal myths either by revising/‘revisioning’ them or by simply denying them and declaring, “No more masks, no more mythologies!” Kamala belongs to the latter category. (21)

By reinterpreting the myths Das wants to give a shock to the traditional society. Laurence Coupe in *Myth* has discussed with reference to Helene Cixous’s “Laugh of Medusa” how women’s movements have reinterpreted myths:
Myths will always need retelling and reinterpreting, and the women’s movement, feminist and postfeminist, has made striking contributions to this process… Again, Helene Cixous takes the figure of monstrosity in the undoubtedly male-oriented Perseus myth, and celebrates the female monster whom the hero has to behead. For her “The Laugh of Medusa” is an emblem of a bisexuality which evades sexual distinction and domination, and she proposes a new kind of writing which subverts essentialism and express the multiplicity of desire. (190)

In another very influential book *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth in Feminist Thought*, the stress has been given to the revivification of ancient myths in order to use them as tools for resistance:

Instead of creating new genealogies, many feminists have chosen to revivify ancient narratives to arm contemporary struggles. There is a tendency to overlook the strangeness of this choice. These myths are after all not only the products of an androcentric society, they can also be seen to justify its most basic patriarchal assumptions.

The transformation of normative stories into potent tales of resistance has sometimes been a controversial endeavour for feminists.

(Zajko and Leonard 2)
Classical myths are continuously being reinterpreted. Myths have “the potential to incorporate women’s tradition and perspectives”. Lillian Doherty in “Putting the Women Back into the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women” traces the link between feminism and reinterpretation of classical myth:

Myth is important to feminism because it is one element of literate culture that has the potential to incorporate women’s traditions and perspectives. By this I do not mean simply that at some time in the distant past men’s poetry incorporated a women’s tradition once and for all—for example, by reflecting vestiges of ‘matriarchal’ social or political organization. Rather, because myths are stories that combine an imaginative fluidity with an authoritative force, and because they are told in a variety of contexts even when they are also written down, they provide a point of entry for women’s perspectives and concerns in the discourse shared by women and men. (299-300)

While discussing about the necessity of reinterpretation of classical myths and the possible outcome of this interpretation, Coupe contextualizes two terms “mythopoeia (forging new possibilities of narrative for women)” (190) and “mythography (interrogating the dominant male narrative)” (190). Myth remains as a social construct which is almost necessarily male. Kamala Das uses the Radha-Krishna myth as a framework for displaying a mortal woman’s love for her lover. She says to P.P. Raveendran in this respect:
I think I decided to wear a disguise. That was why I shifted to poems that seemed metaphysical. Because many people used to advise me that I should write about the love between Radha and Krishna and escape criticism from people rather than write about my own affairs, if there were any. (148)

It is clear from the above words that she uses the mythical framework as a disguise to express her views on love. She writes frankly about physical or bodily love using the Radha-Krishna myth which strategically enabled her to “escape criticism from people”. Often as a deliberate tactics to evade social criticism Das gives a transcendental or metaphysical look to her poems dealing with bodily love. As Nair observes:

. . . the mythical framework in some of her poems is only an attempt to give them a transcendental look, and the mythological figures of Radha and Krishna are a mere subterfuge to escape social criticism. All this in a broad parlance is only a visionary manner of confectioning for oneself a state of imaginary circumstance, since talking of such subjective desires as personal properties amounts to resorting to verbal expressions without en-situational gravity. So imaginatively and poetically dramatizing the self and the other in the mythic extensions and distances solves the whole problem of the poet. (203)

However, in “Ghanashyam” Das shares with Krishna her very personal emotions and feelings. In Krishna she finds an alternative after being deprived by her husband in love. She expresses it very nicely:
In love when the snow slowly began to fall

Like a bird I migrated to warmer climes

That was my only method of survival. (27-29)

At any cost she wished to get rid of loneliness. And for that she was even ready to engage herself in extramarital affairs. But, she understands the futility of mundane love affairs:

In this tragic game the unwise, like children, play

And often lose in.

At three in the morning

I wake trembling from dreams of a stark white loneliness,

Like bleached bones cracking in the desert sun is my loneliness. (30-34)

She is again thrown in a land of loneliness. These infertile affairs couldn’t provide her that shelter which she has always craved for. She achieves the wisdom and after lots of wandering, she visualizes Ghanashyam taking the place of her mortal husband. She writes about a complete merger with the ideal lover:

And each time my husband,

His mouth bitter with sleep,

Kisses, mumbling to me of love,

But if he is you and I am you
Who is loving who

Who is the husk who is the kernel

Where is the body where is the soul

You come in strange forms

And your names are many. (35-43)

She imagines Ghanashyam to be the ultimate lover. In his company, the distinction between the husk and the kernel, the outer and the inner world, the body and the soul melts away. She is even aware of the myriad forms, shapes and names in which her ideal lover is known. But still she is not certain about her intent. She is full of questions, full of doubts:

Is it then a fact that I love the disguise

And the name more than I love you?

Can I consciously weaken bonds? (44-46)

She uses the identity of Krishna as a cover up, a façade to escape the wrath of society while pursuing her extra marital love affair. Krishna epitomizes all desires. Sudhir Kakar in his book *The Inner World: A Psychological Study of Childhood and Society in India* explores his views on Krishna cult: “The cult of Krishna affords his devotees all manner of fantasied instinctual gratification through an unconscious identification with him” (172). She bears in her heart a deep urge to merge with the Divine. To get rid of the burden of life, the pangs of mismatched relationship and the earthly mortality, she
whishes to delve deep into the peaceful, serene and all encompassing embrace of the Divine. She compares herself to an enchanted fish that is racing towards the love-net cast by Ghanashyam:

    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. (68-72)

The interesting thing to note here is that the relationship between the ‘seeker’ and the ‘sought after’ is described in purely mundane terms. The lines do not speak of spiritual salvation; rather the poet uses the Ghanashyam myth to describe the ideal lover-beloved relationship on this earth.

In an interview with Sreedevi K.Nair, while Das was asked, “Isn’t Krishna a fabulous myth?”, she replies:

    To me He is not. Even now He is with me – as my friend, lover and protector . . . I remember having gone to Poonthanam’s illam to attend a religious function. The organizers took me around the house. Pointing to a pillar from a distance, they told me “That is where Lord Krishna appeared before Poonthanam”. I tried to be very skeptical and asked, “Isn’t Krishna
a mere myth?” But when I reached the spot, I felt my hair standing on ends. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I rushed to the stage and began my speech with “Oh, Krishna . . .” I don’t know what all I said. But within a few minutes, the whole audience was profoundly moved. They were literally seething in the ocean of devotion. When I stepped down from the dais, many rushed to me and touched my feet. They might have taken me for Krishna’s Radha . . . I might be her . . . (n.pag.)

Krishna appears to her in a purely human form shedding the mythological allusion attached to the divine figure. And it is not surprising that her poems where her love for Krishna is passionately stated are replete with reference to physical love. She always enjoys the presence of Krishna in her life. As in “Krishna” she says:

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. (1-4)

Her idealized love for Krishna gives her a great relief from the burdensome life that she was obliged to carry on with her husband. Concepts like ‘prison’ similar to that of ‘net’ used in ‘Ghanashyam’ do not speak of spiritual transcendence, rather such expressions speak of Das’s preference for corporeal enjoyment and happiness.

In “The Maggots” Radha, the wife, blatantly lies to her husband and is in deep meditation for her paramour even when the husband is kissing her. Her body is unable to
respond to her husband’s amorous advances:

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...
That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip? (1-7)

The lines express her deep disgust for a loveless life with her husband and on the other hand her love for Krishna which takes her to a life of bliss and happiness.

In “Sunset, Blue Bird” nowhere the identity of Krishna is disclosed but he is everywhere in this poem. Krishna, who always lurks in the depth of Das’s inner world, is very beautifully unfolded like a secret. She imagines herself as Radha waiting passionately for Krishna who doesn’t turn up, but still she is more than happy in just remembering him:

the

Sun set on that beautiful face his breath was heavy in my ear he
Said not a word he no longer comes to me, no longer stands at
The open window to smile at me but everywhere I look see him
Everywhere I do not look I see him in all I see him in

Everything like a blue bird at sunset he flits across my sky. (12-18)

The lines flow in a frenzy of passionate love, momentarily overlapping the normal sequence of time and space. In this beautiful poem Das portrays her Krishna, the ideal lover as a human being:

He was like a man like any man he clutched me to his breast he

Said he loved me and I was happy and thought he was happy too (1-3)

Krishna as a human being can give the speaker the pleasures of the senses. The repeated use of the word ‘man’ speaks of a certain sense of proximity and security that might not have been felt by the speaker had the relation been abstract and divine. Das’s quest for Krishna is actually an effort to equate her husband with Krishna as in “A Man is a Season”:

A man is a season,

You are eternity;

To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins

Into various hands, you let me mate mate with shadows,

You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife

Seek ecstasy in others’ arms. But I saw each
Shadow cast your blurred image in my glass, somehow

The words and gestures seemed familiar. (1-8)

The reference to extra marital relationship in the poem is only a pointer to the fact that physical relationship with temporary love partners can never give the satisfaction that a wife enjoys in the company of her husband.

The poem marks the difference between the human lover and the Divine, one is seasonal and temporal, and the other is eternal and permanent. Krishna is the archetypal lover but at the same time the persona in the poem cannot ignore the bodily experience of the human lover. In fact, one finds in the poem the speaker’s effort to find the infinite in the finite.

In conclusion we may say that in Kamala Das’s poems the reader encounters the body as an expressed experience, as a figure made up of speech. In traditional love poetry the body is always implicitly present. Kamala Das’s uniqueness lies in the fact that through her free and frank confessions about the body she has made it a fiction of presence from a fiction of absence. In this regard we may take note of Virginia Woolf’s words in her essay “Professions for Women”. She acknowledges that as a woman writer she failed to tell the truth about her experience as a body. This problem, she further says:

. . . I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful – and yet, they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather
than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she still has
many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. (241).

These words by Virginia Woolf were written more than half a century ago. But since then
there has been a substantial growth of literature dealing with women’s bodies written by
women. In case of Indian English Literature Kamala Das can certainly claim a pioneer
position in breaking the made-up mirror image of woman.
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