Chapter III
Chapter – III

Confession as a Therapeutic Strategy

Kamala Das, being the daughter of a great poet and the representative of a famous matrilineal family of Kerala, could not let her rebellious spirit overlook the patriarchal domination suffered by women through ages. It is through the act of writing that she unveils the long-suppressed agonies and anxieties in women. Her poems are a fierce indictment of social inequality and gender discrimination suffered by women. The uninhibited expression of her righteous anger in her poems helped her siphon the impurities off her psyche. Consciously she uses her confession as a strategy for two-way purpose. Firstly, by remembering her past, whether pleasant or unpleasant, she feels relieved and secondly, through her poems she sets out in the demonstration of resistance against male-dominated social system. Her poems no longer remain on the personal level; they reach a universal status as they articulate the condition of the deprived and maltreated womanhood. The word ‘strategy’ in literal sense means “the art of planning and directing an operation in a war or campaign” or “plan or policy designed for a particular purpose” (Oxford Advanced Dictionary, 4th ed. 1270). Kamala Das uses the term not only in its lexical sense but also as a political strategy to counter the patriarchal domination and to emancipate the female – both in her body and mind–from the shackles of traditional male oriented value system. Poetry, as a printed medium, can reach multiple number of readers. So her poems help her to purge off her pent-up feelings and at the same time the detailed descriptions of her plights are accessible to the readers who are able to construct a “collective consciousness” regarding the general status of women in our society.
Though poetry as a therapy can be traced back to the ancient time, historically a Roman physician, Soranus, is supposed to be the first Poetry Therapist in the first century A.D. He used to prescribe tragedy for his maniac patients and comedy for those who were depressed (“Beginnings”). Incidentally an interesting point to note is that in classical mythology Apollo is the God of poetry as well as medicine. Historically arts and medicine are interrelated since a long time. In the 1960s and 1970s, the term ‘poetry therapy’ was generally known as ‘bibliotherapy’ which helps medically any patient to be cured by the use of books, or literature. ‘Poetry Therapy’ uses metaphor, imagery, rhythm and other devices. In 1916 Samuel Crothers at first coined the term ‘Bibliotherapy’. After that various experiments and modifications were made in this field:

By the 1960s, with the progressive evolution of group psychotherapy, therapists were delighted to discover that "poetry therapy" was an effective tool which they felt comfortable incorporating into their work. Poetry Therapy began to flourish in the hands of professionals in various disciplines, including rehabilitation, education, library science, recreation, and the creative arts. (“Modern Medicine Recognizes the Power of Poetry”)

These mental health professionals explore the therapeutic value of poetry and according to them such therapy has two different aspects. On one hand it emphasizes the evocative value of literature and on the other; it is found that the patient is getting potentially benefitted by the responses they jot down. They write their response to poems written by others or at times themselves write based on their own experiences and emotions. Their writings, whatever may be in quality or in quantity,
help them set their mental life in normal tune by extracting long-stored pus out of their traumatic psychological conditions. In modern day mental clinic the same medicine is being prescribed to get patients rid of their psychological dilemmas. And these writings, apparently the waste product of their treatment, oftentimes turn into great pieces of creative writing. These uninhibited self-revelations often take the shape of confessional writings. Some writers of this tradition had to stay for some time in mental rehabilitation centers due to their destabilized mental conditions. There they were advised by doctors to write down whatever they can dig out from their subconscious level. Some important poets like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton started their writing as a means to get themselves cured.

In the mid 20th century poetry as a therapy was introduced in different hospitals and mental asylums. In 1950, Eli Greifer, an inspired poet who was a pharmacist by profession started a “Poem Therapy” group at Creedmore State hospital in New York. In 1959 he arranged a poetry therapy group at Cumberland Hospital with the help of two psychiatrists, Dr. Jack J. Leedy and Dr. Sam Spector. Two of Dr. Leedy’s contemporaries, Ann White and Gil Schloss were also busy in conducting “Psychotherapy” sessions in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, schools and also with some individuals. In 1969, with Dr. J. Leedy, they established the Association for Poetry Therapy. Dr. Leedy edited two influential books i.e., *Poetry Therapy* (1969) and *Poetry the Healer* (1973) which are significant in the understanding of poetry therapy. At that time some individuals were also using this technique. Among them the method of research run by poet Joy Shieman within a mental health unit of a hospital in California, was termed “Thera-poetics”. In 1970s a
‘Poetry Therapy Institute’ was established by Dr. Arthur Lerner in Los Angeles and he authored the book *Poetry in Therapeutic Experience* (1976). In 1971, poet Ruth Lisa Schechten was appointed as the first official poetry therapist at Odyssey House, in New York City. She is the author of an important book *Poetry Therapy: A Therapeutic Tool and Healing Force* (1983). Around that time another poet Art Berger was able to convince that poetry was a vehicle for self-discovery in Poetry the Healer (1973). A minister from Ohio, Dr. George Bell, developed a certain technique as “the feed back poem” which enabled the counsellor and counselllee to understand each other better (“The Association for Poetry Therapy”). In 2003 a very significant book titled *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice* was published by Nicholas Mazza. Apart from these path breaking books some major researches have been proved seminal in this field. J Barron in her “Poetry and Therapeutic Communication: Nature and Meaning of Poetry” (1974) pointed out the power of poetry to increase proximity between a client and a therapist. At the same time she describes that the concrete language of poetry helps the client to return to his/her past in more substantial way and it brings the influence of the past into present. Barron states:

> The intellectual and the complex process of thought are converted into the elementary experiences of feeling, emotion and imagery. In this way they become vivid and understandable. (qtd. in Miller)

In 1975, Robert Ross in his “Unlocking the Doors of Perception: Poetry and the Healer” highlighted the use of poetry therapy as some clients suffering from traumas could not give their deep feelings proper expression. Candice Miller in her article “Poetic
Existence: Words That Help Us Feel Alive” describes Ross’s process of using poetry as therapy:

Ross highlighted an existential aspect of poetry that relates to choice: freedom. Ross’s idea is that by using one’s own poetic language, clients are experimenting with the world and options, thus creating a sense of freedom in their world. This relates to the hopeful long-term benefit of clients realizing that they have choices, and thus, taking more risks with potentially better pay-offs in life. (Miller)

M. Charles in “The Language of the Body: Allusions to Self-Experience in Women’s Poetry” (2001) analyses the poems written by several women pointing out their conscious and unconscious experiences related to women’s bodies. Poetry helped them express these experiences and as a result they felt relieved psychologically. Eva-Wood in her “Thinking and Feeling: Exploring Meanings Aloud” (2004) has shown that poetry can be useful to a reader if the emotions expressed in the poems are given more importance than cognitions. Some other projects like Shapiro and Stein’s “Poetic License: Writing Poetry as a Way for Medical Students to Examine Their Professional Relational Systems” (2005), G.Shaw’s “The Multisensory Image and Emotion in Poetry” (2008), Marcum-Dietrich, Byrne, and O’Hern’s “Marrying the Muse and the Thinker: Poetry as Scientific Writing” (2009) have paved the way for the therapeutic use of poetry and found poetry an influential tool in the treatment of the unconscious. So from the above references the ongoing development of poetry therapy is easily discernible. As a non-traditional process of therapy it achieved remarkable success.
In an interesting way Nandini Sahu in her essay “Poetry as a Therapeutic Process: Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das” traces out that often failure in love rather than its consummation proves more powerful theme in the poetry of confessional poets. And it is more prominent in the case of women poets. They get jolted when their tender universe of imagination has been shattered by the deception and ignominy in love. Sahu depicts that lot of poets like Plath, Sexton, Rich, Caroline Kizer, Joy Harjo, Gouri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Meena Alexander and many others have maneuvered the concept of love poems as a substitute to purge out frustration from their soul:

For them, poetry is a medium of intimate revelation leading towards personal salvation, redemption. It is a therapeutic process, a way of coming to terms with the exceptional female energy that lies in their inner self. (36)

The poetry of Kamala Das is a spontaneous continuity in this tradition. May be aesthetically or technically these poets differ from each other, but issues concerning women’s experiences and subjugation of their mental conditions, bring all these poets under one umbrella. As a poet, the theme of love is Das’s forte and she, throughout her poetic career, constantly kept herself busy in search of her true lover. But at the same time she decentralizes her primary focus towards various directions. According to Sahu the result of these love poems may be compared to a therapeutic process. As in the case of patients of hyper tension hemorrhage recurs at times and the patients feel relieved, similarly in case of confessional poets their outbursts in poems give them an opportunity to vent their pent up feelings, thereby giving them a sort of psychological relief. In the case of Kamala Das also composing poems had a therapeutic effect. As a confessional
poet, minute details of personal experiences and female body are vividly present in her works. As discussed earlier, as the first post-colonial, post-modern Indian female voice, Das very courageously and honestly bares her ‘two-dimensional’ (“Loud Posters” 9) womanliness on paper. But these self-revelations never turn into a luxuriant exposure of carnal ego. This is rather a process of self-discovery, of self-purification. Das adopts this American mode of confession as a therapy to regain her normal life-style and to be valued as a writer irrespective of any gender discrimination.

II

*Summer in Calcutta*, Das’s first volume of poetry, was published in 1965. Though the volume contained only fifty poems by Das- it signaled the entry of a powerful poet in the history of Indian Writing in English. These poems display ‘love’ in various moods. And at the same time this collection establishes Das as a ‘confessional poet’. Vrinda Nabar observes:

There is indeed a lot of love in the fifty poems of this volume. Also present is a high degree of intensity, along with an almost compulsive candour, a disregard for “nice” feminine concealments, and an aggressively independent assessment of the man-woman relationship. This makes many of the poems speak with a distinctive voice . . . . Her chief strength in this book was the spontaneity with which she recorded her most intimate responses, an uninhibitedness which even now is more or less unique (being entirely without frills) in the Indian context. (20)

Das enjoyed a significant part of her life in Calcutta and those experiences are portrayed in these poems. The themes are varied, ranging from love for an ideal lover like Krishna
to her trauma of being a female in Indian society. She expresses her observations in a very frank manner as “she realized that the poet’s physical and psychic responses to his or her environment form a continuous process, that there can be no drastic division between the poet’s “professional” and private/personal lives” (Nabar 20). Like her autobiography My Story, she is candid enough in exhibiting her intimate life in these poems.

Kamala Das’s second volume of poetry The Descendants was published in 1967. After the publication of Summer in Calcutta, this volume surprised and shocked the readers of Das. A sudden leap from the poems like “The Dance of the Eunuchs” or “Forest Fire” in Summer in Calcutta to “The Suicide” or “The Invitation” in The Descendants is what strikes the readers. Das as a poet shifts her focus in a bid to overcome a psychological crisis. As Devindra Kohli in his Virgin Whiteness notes:

If Summer in Calcutta (1965) is a poignant cry for a sustained human relationship, The Descendants (1967) tends to overcome this defeat by a metaphysical poise. (18)

In this new volume the longing for sustained human bond is substituted by a death wish. This obsession with death is actually her effort to calm her agitated soul, to arrive at a peaceful and serene state. Kohli points out, “. . . there lurks beneath this pseudo-metaphysical poise the inability to reckon with emotional defeat and frustration, with a sense of nothingness” (18).

In Summer in Calcutta Das uses ‘Sun’ and ‘Fire’ as vital symbols of preserver and destroyer of life. After the destruction a fresh beginning, a new construction is possible. As in the “Forest Fire” the speaker is metaphorically compared to all consuming fire. The
speaker’s poetic hunger represented by the imagery of fire stands for her desire to treat the entire life span—from baby in a pram to the old mother—of a woman’s life. The consumption of external reality will help her create imaginative equivalents in poetical compositions. Or the poems like “Summer in Calcutta” or “The Dance of the Eunuchs” dazzlingly express the vitality and energy of the Sun. Though in some cases the heat becomes scorching and unbearable, still Sun is the originator of life, the supreme maker of life force. In *Summer in Calcutta*, this symbol acts as the medium of the continuous tying and untying of man-woman relationship.

In the second volume *The Descendants* there is a different way of looking at life. A special characteristic that is to be noticed here is the use of a new image—that of the ‘sea’. Most of the poems like “The Suicide”, “The Invitation”, “Composition” etc use the ‘sea’ imagery. Image of sea in these poems connote a merger with the ultimate. It acts as a reminder to finish the voyage of this corporeal frame and to submerge oneself into the depth of utter forgetfulness. The sea as a symbol of inevitable death recurs in many poems of this volume. The expression of a bitter consciousness of the poet persona shocks the reader’s response. She doesn’t confine her use of image and symbol within traditional bracket. To some critics the thematic focus of these poems raise some unavoidable responses, as A.N. Dwivedi describes this volume as, “by and large, bitterly death-conscious, perhaps death-obsessed” (10). Devendra Kohli, likewise, says something similar when he observes that an atmosphere of darkness prevails in *The Descendants* (*Virgin* 26). Many times the poems of the second volume are defined as the reservoir of mental disorder, disease and death. If there is the symptom of disease, there must be at the same time the attempts to get rid of it automatically. As an animal licks its
own wound to get it cured, it is our basic instinct that if we are to carry on in our life, the panacea for the inherent or psychological disorder must come from inside. Otherwise the life which is full of toils and traumas becomes unbearable. Life, when it gets disordered, automatically generates a counter force or energy to fight the malady. In case of Kamala Das her confessional poems have a therapeutic value as they attempt to set her distraught mind in order and help her to finally overcome the desire to put an end to her life by committing suicide.

“Composition” in this volume is a poem which may introduce us to the process of therapy. This much debated and at times misunderstood poem belongs to the category of longer poems like “An Introduction” or “The Suicide”. In the second volume of poems, “Composition” is the last poem turning into the mouth-piece of the poet’s suffered self. Adil Jussawalla very clinically observes the following:

She writes almost exclusively of love, sex and loneliness in the tone of an insistent confession. I suppose the value of the confessional is that by exposing those dark areas which are normally concealed it might touch some of the deepest points in the reader’s own subconscious and so uncover what is worth uncovering. But the confession may also be part of an elaborate private therapy, a literary drug used to make the poet feel better, of little concern to the reader and about as interesting as a hypochondriac’s complaints. (emphasis added, qtd. in Agarwal 139)

This observation becomes more appropriate when we read her poem “Loud Posters”, “. . . though you may have no need of /me, I go on and on, not knowing why...”(15-16). When poetry becomes a therapy to purge oneself out of his /her traumatic condition, the focus
of the poet towards his/her reader becomes less important. It rather generates a narcissistic approach – a reflection upon one’s own self:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude

Autobiography. (93-95)

It is one type of self-prescribed method used for a cathartic process. This may be the reason behind the disintegration, displacement or the obscurity inherent in the poem.

“Composition” is a poem of 269 very short lines. Very few poems by Das can equal its length. But some critics are not satisfied with the length of the poem. To them the lines are mere repetitions of some clichéd use in various poems by Das. The first impression of so long a poem can be deceiving, but a detailed analysis brings out the multi-dimensional character of the poem. As the title suggests, the poem is really a composition, a creation in literature. Apparently the rebellious or the revolutionary attitude of Das seems to end with a resignation to the sea, maybe it is an attempt at ‘death by water’. But a spontaneous movement rotating around the confused and disintegrated self of the poet needs a ‘composition’ – some kind of organization through a creative process of writing. This poem includes multiple number of experiences merged into a somewhat chaotic whole. Though superficially disorganized, it might be an organized disorganization from the poet’s point of view. Self revelation of a disjointed and disintegrated mind may result in a disordered piece of work. To a confessional poet the natural flow of their emotional outburst deserves greater prominence than the disciplined way of ‘composition’.
It is true that these experiences are scattered in most of her poems, but a systematic examination can lead to a proper understanding of Kamala Das the poet as well as the human being. I.K.Sharma in his “The Irony of Sex: The Gloss or the Teakwood (A Study of Kamala Das)” says, “Put together, her poetry is a dissertation and that too a well documented one of her lived experiences. And the experiences she has in life we often come across in her poems, are of an unkind variety” (149). Readers often misunderstand this variety of uninhibited frank confessions. But it has to be kept in mind that these are more than mere self-exposures, they are self-discoveries or self-examinations.

“Composition” is constituted of such various experiences. They include “memories of grandmother”, “reminiscence of childhood”, “her marriage”, “relationship with husband”, “disillusionment with the concept of ‘freedom’”, and “search for root”. Some other feelings like love-hate, growth-death, futility, desperation, disintegration, displacement of mental set up etc are embedded into this plethora of experiences.

‘Composition’ becomes the universe of Das’s life in a nutshell. The imagery of the sea lurks in the background waiting for her who having suffered a traumatic and painful life wants to “come face to face with the sea”. The sea assumes the role of a persona to whom she would like to confess her feelings. Like her American Confessional Counterparts Plath and Sexton, Das feels an unavoidable death-instinct. Suicide seems to her the one and only route to escape from this life of humiliation and torture. Somehow this tendency takes us back to Freud, who in his *Beyond the pleasure Principle* (1920) describes his new theory about death-instinct, which afterwards has been termed as ‘Thanatos’. Thanatos is in conflict with its opposite drive that is ‘Eros’ or the life-instinct:
In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud was forced to revise his earlier theory of the drives that asserted the primacy of pleasure principle, that is to say, the theory that our primary motivation as human beings is the fulfillment of pleasure or desire. Clinical experience revealed to Freud that subjects compulsively repeated painful or traumatic experiences in direct contradiction to the primacy of the pleasure principle. Freud called this beyond the pleasure ‘the death drive’ and suggested that the primary purpose of life is to find the correct path to death. (Homer 89)

Jacques Lacan modifies this theory. He insists, “We are not driven towards death but by death” (Homer 89). In his famous discourse regarding real, imaginary and symbol he has tried to establish ‘the real’ beyond the symbolic and the imaginary stage. He associates the concept of ‘real’ to the concept of ‘trauma’. In this case psychological trauma is given priority over the physical cut or wound. Some human disaster or violent war or terrorism can result in a kind of traumatic disorder in one’s mind. In that case he/she needs a proper form of counselling or therapy. While discussing Lacan’s theory, Sean Homer describes it in very brief and interesting way:

The most common form of psychological trauma today is seen to be physical or sexual abuse, such as incest. For psychoanalysis, however, a trauma is not necessarily something that happens to a person ‘in reality’. Instead, it is usually a psychical event. Psychic trauma arises from the contradiction between an external stimulus and the subject’s inability to understand and master these excitation. Most commonly such confrontations arise from a subject’s premature encounter with sexuality
and the inability to comprehend what is taking place. This event then leaves a psychological scar in the subject’s unconscious that will resurface in later life. (83)

Freud links the concept of trauma to the primal state when a child can not comprehend whether he is going through real or imaginary experience. Lacan makes a distinction between ‘real’ and ‘reality’. By ‘real’ he means which is beyond grasp and ‘reality’ to him is the ‘social reality’ which comprises of symbolic manifestation of ‘real’. Sean Homer continues:

The experience of trauma also reveals how the real can never be completely absorbed into the symbolic, into social reality. No matter how often we try to put our pain and suffering into language, to symbolize it, there is always something left over. In other words, there is always a residue that cannot be transformed through language. (84)

Lacan identifies this excess as ‘x’ which is real. Lacan consequently associates this ‘real’ with his concept of ‘death drive’. Therapeutic poetry can be a proper channel to absorb this ‘residue’ and to clear the blockage of the poet’s mind. Poetry written by the suffered self can help the individual to get rid of this death-wish mulled over by him/her when harassed by either real or symbolic events in his/her life.

In a more clinical way psychiatrists or therapists prescribe the ailing patient to go through some poems composed by various poets. They may find in these pieces an outlet for their troubled feelings. Such an exercise may prove helpful in smoothing out their ruffled feelings, thereby resulting in a psychological stability. The therapists prescribe some particular poems which may elicit the expected emotional response from the
patients. In other words, the reading of these poems turns out to be a healing process by extracting the trauma out of the patients’ chaotic and confused mind. Nicholas Mazza in his *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice* has given some examples of this form of writing. He mentions some case studies one of which is concerned with a 15 year old girl who having suffered a great pain asked Satir the meanings of life. Virginia Satir composed a poem “I am Me” for her. The poem addressed the issue of self-worth in a positive and unique manner. The poem proved psychologically comforting and the patient felt considerably relieved.

Mazza in his clinical discussion has shown that poetry therapy has a close relationship with music therapy. He mentions some therapeutic compositions like Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All” (1977) or Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush’s “Don’t Give Up” (1986). However one thing is certain that these works can ignite more unexpected reactions in the patient’s mind and this can lead him/her more towards the act of committing suicide, “The danger of a client’s romanticizing suicide remains a potential problem” (82). In this discussion of Poetry Therapy and Death-instinct or suicide there are two different sets of patients. In case of some patients the therapists advised them to read poems composed by other poets and in some cases they advised the patients to compose their own poems and express their emotion and feelings. The first type of patients just goes through the poems, find proper co-relations to identify their own pains and sufferings and share their suppressed trauma with the therapist. On the other hand, another set of sufferers usually compose their own piece to extract their mental turmoil. The forms of writing can vary from poem to diary-writing or to letter-writing. Mazza cites a survey:
Bruce Roscoe and his colleagues . . . in a study of 149 high school students, found that 86% of the participants used at least one form of writing for the purpose of self-expression. Poetry was rated as the most popular form (37.5%), with diaries rated second (33%). (78)

The writings become helpful for assessing the self as well as treating the internal malady. Plath, Sexton and Kamala Das belong to this group of suffered and battered self. Through their poems they set out in a journey of self-expression. In his book Mazza gives another example from his case-study:

Michelle, an 18 year old being treated for depression, revealed that she read and wrote poetry in addition to keeping a diary. She shared parts of her diary with me, and it revealed not only feelings of her emerging sexuality, parental conflicts, and concern with death, but also feelings of despair. Her poetry revealed poor self-image, social inadequacies, and intense feelings of insecurity. Michelle also revealed that she had read much of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. She reported ambivalent feelings toward a boyfriend whom she had been dating for 2 years. The boyfriend had been inflicting a verbal and physical abuse on Michelle. (81)

According to Mazza the girl was in an extremely frustrated state with no alternative for improvement. At that time she was going through a moderate risk of committing suicide. Mazza proposes her Robert Frost’s “The Road not Taken” which afterwards proved fruitful. Mazza tries to clarify the second type of patients more clearly. He makes a prominent distinction between the ordinary patients and those patients who are supposed
to be reputed poets. She analyses, “when the poet is also the victim, the perspective becomes even more compelling” (86).

In the confessional poems of Das one finds the features of therapeutic poetry. As Rahman in his analyses of Das’s poems observes, “Kamala Das’ confession induces pity and terror: “In expressing herself she kills the dragons of experience and achieves a sublimated state” (17). Her poems produce a cathartic effect on her mind. Her self-expression helps her to draw out the suppressed experiences from her subconscious level and purifies her hidden pains. It’s not that all of her experiences beget depression and desperation. There may be some impressive events stored in her memory, but her womanhood has been battered and humiliated so much that these agonizing moments have overwhelmed her identity as a liberated human being. A continuous self-expression must divulge these experiences. And this process of confessional writing will help her to get rid of long-suppressed secrets by untying the knot of inhibition.

Generally “Composition” can be divided into two main sections – ‘Innocence’ and ‘Experience’. Remembrance of things past plays a pivotal role in her frank confession which ultimately eases her distraught nerves. As Rahman says:

The rush of her ideas in most of her poems is like the rush of violent tides of the sea which, when succumbed to expression, leave the poet in a state of purgation. She achieves tranquillity and equipoise and is cool, serene and sometimes numb. (emphasis added 17)

In an urge to achieve such benumbed state she recollects the memory of her grandmother whom she loved most. In a number of poems she reminds us how beautiful and pleasant were those days with her grandmother. As in “My Grandmother’s House” she remembers
such place, “There is a house now far away where once/I received love” (1-2). In “Composition” she is very much respectful towards her ancestral tradition which obviously includes her grandmother. Here both literally and metaphorically ‘grandmother’ stands for the Nayar heritage. A sense of innocence, a sense of angel-infancy pervades the whole poem. But her purity is lost with the death of the grandmother:

... the red house that had
stood for innocence
crumbled
and the old woman died,
lying for three months,
paralyzed
while the thieving ants climbed her hands
and ate the cuticle.(15-22)

The same situation is narrated in another of her poems, “Blood”:

Finally she lay dying
In her eightysixth year,
A woman wearied by compromise,
Her legs quilted with arthritis
And with only a hard cough
For comfort;
I looked deep into her eyes
Her poor bleary eyes,
And prayed that she would not grieve
So much about the house. (57-66)

And again in “My Grandmother’s House”

That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books. I was then too young
To read, and, my blood turned cold like the moon. (2-5)

The relationship with ‘grandmother’ and ‘house’ mentioned repetitively draws the attention of the readers to the deeply anguished self of the poet. She feels grieved not only for the sake of the loss of her ancestral belongings, but because it caused a sudden disruption of her well-nourished innocence, “It may be /that in my heart/I have replaced love with guilt” (“Composition” 28-30). In a sudden moment of realization she discovers that, “both love and hate are /involvements” (“Composition” 31 -32). And this discovery is the result of her “experience”. She grows up but the memory of her ancestors is not altogether lost; it is suppressed in her unconscious by the normal process of growing up.

While she is engaged in her daily activities, childhood memories surface and helps her remove the psychological blockage resulting from a sense of loss. Rahman analyzes her confession in “Composition”, “her courage to stand the odds and express herself fully and frankly has deepened her faith in life whereby she has acquired a vision that typically smells of the native soil and heritage” (17). I .K. Sharma in his “The Irony of Sex: The Gloss or the Teakwood (A study of Kamala Das)” also shares the same view:

Very often it is noted she leaps heavily on her memory (and her grandmother and her old house come alive) and from thereon she leaps on
to a new subject in the poem. Thus, the past she recounts may be seen as a symbol of old human ties. Placed alongside the present where she is searching for love, the past recalled throws light on the contemporary values. (154)

Through this process of reminiscence she unravels her subconscious step by step.

When she reaches her maturity she faces a dilemma. Maturity involves dilemma of identity and existence. The elements of love and hate were present in her being since her childhood. Kamala das herself writes:

I have replaced
And discovered
That both love and hate are
Involvements.
But this only signifies growth
And, growth is natural. (30-35)

She feels the basic problem of a woman lies in the ‘growing up’, in the biological development from a child to a woman. A particular gender role is being constructed by the socio-political tradition. Truly as Simone de Beauvoir says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295). Das reveals that for a woman, “The tragedy of life/ is not death but growth” (36-37). In a philosophical tone, she declares the general predicament of a woman. At the same time she multiplies herself and becomes the representative of each and every woman. Because of this the “child growing into adult” has the typical undertone of a female voice. No male poet is capable of making this
feeling of ‘growing-up’ equally poignant. In “An Introduction” Das vividly narrates the situation:

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

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. Then I wore a shirt and my
Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. (23-25 & 30 -36)

Being fed up with these self-proclaimed categorizers, Das eventually invokes the sea to be her last refuge. In “Composition” Das undertakes a journey down memory lane and ultimately explains her strong desire to walk into the sea “to lie there, resting/completely uninvolved” (206-207). In a number of her poems like “The Suicide”, “The Invitation”, “Substitutes” etc Das writes about the intimate relationship between the soul and the sea. The sea invites the exhausted soul and provides a shelter; it seems to generate a sense of freedom from all types of involvement. This sea can be seen as a medium of purification – to clean and remove the burden of living. The poet feels within her an extreme urge to ‘come face to face’ with the sea, but simultaneously she hangs between desire and its fulfillment. She communicates her feelings to the sea:
O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead . . . (“The Suicide” 50-55)

Only a timely suicide (‘resting’) can help her escape those traumatic memories and to be totally detached from her existence. “Rest” is the term attributed to the permanent suspension of physical and psychological machineries. But to reflect upon death is not death itself. Between the reflection and the action there lies a gap. This gap is generated by the conscious mind. As a fully conscious self she cannot perform the final act; she cannot avoid the earthly reality of the corporeal frame. She imagines about death but feels that there are greater hungers that lurk at the bottom of the sea. She thinks of dissolving herself into many a fragment. In the ‘Introduction’ to Signifying Self, Judith Harris explains Lacan in this connection:

Death is understood through the imaginary register as bodily fragmentation and disintegration; that prospect is what we find most anxiety producing about mutability. The creative writer contends with various types of fragmentation—temporal, intrapersonal, interpersonal, sensory, and ontological—and uses associative language to unify disparate experiences. (5)

The same approach is adopted in “Composition”. Having expressed her desire to “take a long walk” (224) into the sea, instantly she changes her position. She realizes that “rest is
only a childish whim” (219). Childish because she has grown mature to realize that instead of allowing her to disintegrate she “must linger on” (255). A contradiction between “desires to give up the worldly existence” and the call to “wake up, come alive” (205-206) is obvious, because with her age she has also developed a web of relationship and responsibility in her life. Emotionally she can renounce this world, but her conscious self cannot avoid the firm bond that she has with life. She must feed the ‘hunger’ continuously with her poetic self. The dichotomy of ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’ establishes her as a modern poet who is caught between the unending discourse of body and soul. It is not the sea but the poem which will gladly bear the burden of her life. Her poems will sluice out her mental blockages and help her to arrange properly her fragmented selves:

To crumble,

To dissolve

And to retain in other things

The potent fragments

Of oneself. (“Composition” 237-241)

“Composition” starts as a poem traversing through three important stages of a human being, i.e. – childhood, maturity and the old age which is waiting for a spiritual other world. Das having reached the last part invites the sea to go through it. Sea acts like a tunnel through which the mortal self can go beyond its earthly existence. But the problem arises when she understands that being confined in the corporeal framework, it is not possible to achieve bodiless, shapeless, abstract freedom of soul. As she herself confirms in “The Suicide”

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

In “The Invitation” she suffers from the Hamletian dichotomy – “To accept or not to accept the invitation”, and simultaneously tries to respond to and move away from the invitation of the sea. She feels that it is the sea that can provide her peace, comfort, and redemption against the force of oppression, yet she is not sure of her choice of the sea as a place of rest.

The sea imagery which frequently occurs in her poems is as an obvious outcome of life’s felt experience. Neither literally nor metaphorically is death being romanticized by her, rather it is the necessity without which she cannot get rid of the ‘tragedy of life’. In My Story she clears the point, “I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in anyway but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvement” (171). The sea serves here as a medium of self effacement from the collected unconscious and by merging with her she will be rid of all personal and unbearable memories. Anyhow she wants detachment from involvement with her surroundings. The sea might help her in this wish fulfillment. In the years of her growing up from a child to a traditional wife or a mother figure, she didn’t find enough time to look inward. She “had then / no time at all for the sea” (“Composition” 46-47). ‘Sea’ is supposed to be the symbol of ‘freedom’. But at that time she was much engrossed in the enjoyment of sensory pleasure. While the ‘sea’ is vast – limitless, fathomless and endless – Das’s own self appears to be temporal, limited and materialistic. Her reliance on ‘bodily wisdom’ and its possessiveness is in contrast to the
wide open sea. With physical growth certain instinctive desires become dominant. But these desires are confined within the mere corporeal boundary of daily life. Jayakrishnan Nair in his “The Onset of Poetic Rebellion” very beautifully shows how at this juncture of growing up the ‘self’ becomes more and more pre-occupied with its existential demands that come from within (70). The sea, the eternal archetypal symbol of freedom, remains far away from her grasp. He describes:

The sea symbolizes the magnificent ‘other’ as against the self which is totally engrossed in its own properties of growth and development. The suggestion here is that when the self is totally pre-occupied with its own being, it does not have a relative vision of the ‘other’… It precisely suggests the simple idea that when the instinctive urge predominates the self, the inevitable ‘other’ as a presence ceases to be operative. This irreversible course of alteration resulting in the irretrievable loss of a much better time is an agonizing experience for her. (70)

The split becomes evident between her physical and mental age, between her reception and perception. Nair clarifies this chasm:

The relative manner in which she presents the various facets of growth in life ultimately contributes to one simple summation, that is life in its overall presentation of growth and development offers no relative comfort or ease. In all probability life has to be lived, and for the poet it has to live with all contingent regrets and distinct agonies from time to time. (71)

Das reflects upon her experiences in My Story in great detail. Her married life disillusions her about the piousness of conjugal life. Search about a lover in her husband ends with an
aged professional who treats Das just as a medium of gratification of carnal desires. Instead of getting a friend she sees the reflection of a father-figure in her husband. Her much-waited romanticism regarding a blissful marital life is replaced by newly discovered pain and agony. Merciless repetition of such moments destabilizes her identity and consequently she learns the way to suppress her desires like the traditional Indian woman. For a long time she suffers the burden of unfulfilled dreams and desires. She looses her mental stability. She might have ended up her life just like other Indian wives by succumbing to the patriarchal despotism if she hadn’t developed the power of creative-writing. She found writing a medium of self-therapy. Her frank disclosures in her poems open up the channels of protest, resistance and revolt against this system. The mode of confession in her poems becomes a strategy to release her unconscious – the storehouse of her sufferings and traumas. Judith Harris does a perfect analysis, “The confessional quality of telling a story is secondary to the primary act of locating moments in life that perfectly symbolize a state of being in which the self is painfully realized in the world” (8). Language used in such poems becomes the ‘signifier’ for the thing ‘signified’. Language is the sign, signifying something which can be represented through a symbol, image or a word. The relationship between the experiences or events in a person’s life and the language used in his/her writing to express the experience is similar to the concept of signified and signifier. Though apparently the signifier and the signified bear an arbitrary relationship in the realm of language, but in this process of writing as a therapy, language is guided by certain grammatical rules and orders. When the writer uses that language, naturally an order emerges in his/her mental world, “a writer signifies felt experience through a functional realm of language, bringing disorder into order, inner
turmoil into inner reserve” (6). When the experience is translated into words, it forces some kind of structure onto them. Creative writing is a conscious act for unlocking the unconscious. A poet may write about his/her past but the very process of writing can create an atmosphere of ‘presence’. When past experiences are rewritten they cease to be past. Harris in her book refers to another pioneering work in the field of therapy, *Writing as a Way of Healing* by Louise Desalvo and observes, “Writing can actually diminish painful symptoms by providing a new context in which the writer can see himself exerting control over a fear or threat that once seemed unmanageable” (13). In that book cited by Harris, Desalvo terms this type of writing as “righting of a wrong” for victims of sexual or physical abuse, “Overcoming victimization often depends on making external what had been always internalized; bearing the wounds in words” (13). This process of writing unlocks the fixed and constipated past into the continuous flow of talk and redefinition.

In “Composition” Das brings forth the futile marital life out of her memory which lessens the weight of suppressed agony from her unconscious. She didn’t get love from her husband but was given lot of ‘freedom’ by him. But she misunderstood the meaning of ‘freedom’ and starts begging love, “at strangers doors to/receive love. . .” (“My Grandmother’s House” 15-16). Love and lust were often confused and the confusion led her to be doubtful about her own sexual identity,

I asked my husband,

Am I here to

Am I lesbian

Or am I just plain frigid? (“Composition” 64-67)
She got no answers to her anxious question. Her husband did not come out with any help:

For such questions

Probably there are no answers

Or else

The answers must emerge

From within. (69-73)

Simultaneously she divided herself into two entities – the outward and the inward. She constructed two faces – one with mask and one without it. As there was no chance of achieving true love which could transcend the corporeal frame, she prepared to go all out for the arousal of sensual passion. But under the disguise of such a façade, Das strips off her mind and reaches to the core of her existence. It is from that melancholic darkness that her autobiography is written. Here is a confession within a confession; being fully bare she discovers the sphere of utter loneliness and those days of ‘angel-infancy’. She reaches to her one and only shelter equipped with pure love. She misses her grandmother who is a symbol for protection, sympathy, shelter, protest and above all, love.

In her there is a constant urge to move from margin to centre, from a position of little importance to one which is vital to her life. She took to writing her autobiography as a means of achieving this goal:

I must let my mind striptease

I must extrude

Autobiography. (94-96)

At the same time writing autobiography can be a process of unburdening her soul of unhappy experiences. She does it very well in My Story. After the publication of her
major poems in 1960s and 70s she published this book. Apparently the book was able to ‘whip up’ desire among her paramours, but its therapeutic value cannot be minimized.

In an interview with P. R. Raveendran, Das distinguishes her early poems including “Composition” from poems written at a later stage of her life: “The recent ones have been actually controlled by reason and logic. . . They are just poetry written by a lady, and there is no flutter of the wings there” (147). Poems like “Composition” are the spontaneous and emotional outcome of the poet’s confused and bewildered self. She reveals in these poems whatever she can recover from her subconscious state. She discloses each and every intimate experience concerning her body and how such experiences failed to realize her dream of true love. Consequently she was beset with the feeling of loneliness.

In “Composition” she addresses the reader not to misunderstand her as a nymphomaniac, as she talks about “a girl with vast/sexual hungers” (103-104). As she openly narrates her sexual escapades readers may naturally arrive at such a judgment. She acknowledges the risk of being misinterpreted, at the same time she is not much bothered about such response: “I am not yours for the asking” (107). She is able to make a distinction between the flesh and the soul. She expresses the pathetic condition of womanhood through her individual experience of being a woman. Externally all women are same, but it is the soul which makes the difference:

All skeletons are alike,
only the souls vary
that hide somewhere between the flesh
and the bone. (122-125)
The ultimate is the soul where one can reach through a ripping of the flesh. It is her life-long journey to reach to that ultimate essence of existence.

Childhood memories attract her and she derives inspiration and encouragement from reminiscing those memories. But her growth as a woman teaches her the other side of tenderness. On the one hand she knows “that both love and hate/ are involvements” (32-33), and on the other, she nurtures the intention of escaping this existence. She vacillates and hesitates to take a decision. Das remembers from time to time her grandmother and old family home. Whenever there is a crisis of identity or the exhaustion of physical gratification, she always gropes like a child for a shelter, for a known face on whom she can depend. The ‘grandmother’ is always “a lighted/ lantern on the window-sill” (136-137) dispelling the fear of darkness and at the same time she represents the warm touch of sympathy. The memories of childhood and grandmother haunt her most. “Grandmother’s House” becomes a symbol of love and succour for the poet. Whenever she was confronted with loneliness, with the problem of emotional crisis she fell back on the memory of her grandmother’s house and that had a therapeutic effect on her mind. She could feel peace and consolation in her mind. The dialectics between flesh and soul reaches to a climax in the following lines:

I also know that by confessing

By peeling off my layers

I reach closer to the soul

And

To the bone’s

Supreme indifference. (152-157)
She knows that only through the medium of confession she can unburden her victimized and turbulent self and make her soul feel guiltless. These self-revelations are purely personal, and yet they are imaginative. These poems are spontaneous outbursts of personal feelings, they are not the outcome of conscious construction of her artistic skill; instead they seem to be frank declarations of the ordinary events from an ordinary life: “what I narrate are the ordinary/events of an/ordinary life” (160-162). The tone is shocking and this is the prime objective of these confessional poets like Das who want to give a violent jerk to the traditional socio-cultural system run by patriarchal mentality. So by the side of her ‘blatant striptease of her mind’, she disrobes the conventionally polished and well nurtured social rules and regulations. In an ironic undertone she describes other husbands and wives who have already turned their houses into ‘merry doghouse’ and criticizes marriage as a futile institution. It is obvious that in this system all women must surrender themselves before the male-ego.

In the next stanza she talks about forgiveness, “I have reached the age in which /one forgives all” (191-192). As if the ‘confessing, the peeling off’ has provided her such status where she has already gained the soul’s supreme detachment. But this mental stability may be seen as the outcome of a therapeutic effect of confession. After a lot of bitter, shameless confession she has achieved a mental poise, a calm of mind. In an interview with Kamala Das, Iqbal Kaur asked her “Have you forgiven everyone who caused you unhappiness, specially your husband?” (162). In reply Kamala Das said:

I can’t but forgive people who caused me to write poetry. If they hadn’t hurt me, I wouldn’t have been a poet at all and probably the only thing that really matters to me is my poetry, my writing and the right to live as a
poet. So far as my husband is concerned, I am grateful to him for the suffering inflicted on me in my youth, for without them I would not have written poetry at all. (162)

This state of forgiveness thus, is not just a consequence of becoming mature in terms of age; it is closely linked with her poetic creativity. While trying to put up a challenge against the maltreatment done to her, she uses her poems as her only weapon. Simultaneously the ‘sense of forgiveness’ helps her to go for a silent yet powerful protest against them.

The next stanza in “Composition” again repeats her longing for ‘mind’s striptease and peeling off the layer’. Even if she has reached her maturity when she considers her friends and foes alike, still the long-suppressed truth has to be revealed. In an ironic tone, she writes about every other woman who might have undergone similar experience only to be subsequently destroyed “like a moth on a flame” (215). Actually she wants her readers to be empathetic to her, to feel her past. She has reached that part of life, when the submissiveness and lack of activity can turn anyone indifferent towards life. She advises other women like her to fall in love, to make the best of a bad bargain. Maladjustment in married life is a common thing but instead of vainly lamenting the situation one must try to wrench out whatever happiness possible out of such conjugal life. She herself has failed in this endeavour but her advice to other couples is to “obey each other’s crazy commands” (183):

fall in love

fall in love with an unsuitable person,
fling yourself on him
like a moth on a flame. (211-215)

She remembers her urge for a ‘suitable lovable person’ and her failure in getting one. She looks back and tries to feel the agony which she once underwent. Her confessions help her unearth her tumultuous mental upheaval and this results in the psychological catharsis through the homeopathic procedure of ‘like curing the like’. “Excavation” of painful memories through confession will uproot the ‘deep, deep pain’. That is why she adopts the technique of self-revelation. P. K J. Kurup validates this point, “Excavating the most painful and naked psychological causes she arrives at the brute physical fact of ‘bone’s supreme indifference” (157). Hence her final discovery is:

the ultimate discovery will be
that we are immortal,
the only things mortal being
systems and arrangements,
even our pain continuing
in the devourers who constitute
the world. (“Composition” 242-248)

Such a realization of the “immortality” finally makes her abandon her desire for death. Being a mortal, one can be immortal by means of his/her involvement with the mundane world. Anne Brewster in her essay “The Freedom to Decompose: The Poetry of Kamala Das” says,
Now the journey, passing from physical suffering to spiritual resolution, returns to an affirmation of the physical world. To refuse to do is to remain on a mental level, “trapped in immortality”. (147)

This façade of immortality hangs in front of our mortal existence. In reality our whole existence is one of involvement with mundane activities and the poet says:

I must linger on,
trapped in immortality,
my only freedom being
the freedom to
discompose. (255-259)

‘Discompose’ literally means ‘make (sb) feel uneasy or uncomfortable’ (*Oxford Advanced* 341). Her confessions cause embarrassment to many, particularly to her male readers; and here precisely lies her success. After a long journey the poet realizes that a total ‘detachment’ from this life cannot be achieved. So her desire for facing the sea remains unfulfilled. Instead she decides to exercise her freedom by involving herself in composing poems which might disturb others. Instead of choosing ‘rest’ she opts for a life of poetic activity to register her protest against the society which tried to suppress and ignore her identity as a woman. “Composition” squeezes out her suppressed despair and depression. The word ‘composition’ has a verb form ‘to compose’ which means ‘to calm’. The poem equally helps Das to turn her heated and disoriented mind to a calm, soothing existence. Various experiences regarding her childhood, youth and maturity which are expressed in this poem help her assuage the traumatized areas of her subconscious; after this cleansing, she may again go back to the existence of her much-
desired innocence. And this circular process continues. She herself explains in her autobiography:

I wished to escape from my home and walk on and on until at last my feet reached the end of the world. I did not think then that the traveller would only reach ultimately his starting place and that our ends, our destinations are our beginnings. (*My Story* 87)

III

The image of sea has a significant presence in a number of major poems like “The Suicide”, “The Invitation” and “Substitute”. The sea is not static here rather it takes part in the dialogue with the poetic persona. The poet finds in it the ultimate abode of human life. After life’s fretful fever the sea appears to be a soothing self appeasing the tormented and tortured soul. It acts like a safe refuge. The poet considers ‘suicide’ by drowning herself in the sea as a means of finding solace from the life she undergoes. These poems, which are nothing but her autobiography in piecemeal, describe her personal life. A.N. Dwivedi observes, “The poetic persona is in great despair due to failure in love and married life, and she receives invitation from sea to commit suicide in order to escape the trials and tribulations of existence” (103). These poems vividly narrate these “trails and tribulations of existence” of Das’s life and at the same time there is a tendency to yield to the utter depth of the sea. What she says in her poems is more vividly described in *My Story*:
Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements. (171)

In “The Suicide” Das explains her profound frustration for being a woman. She is well aware about the burden of ‘female body’. She knows that this is the obstacle which does not allow the love of a man to enter into the soul. Though Das is often overburdened with the theme of sexuality and her writings are criticized as the epicenter of lust, but this is not the fact. On the contrary, she spends her whole life in search of pure love. It is only the body which becomes more attractive and acceptable to the males including her husband. There lies the duality of body and soul and her conscious effort to keep the ‘body’ away from her thought. She says in “The Suicide”:

I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the soul may enter
The vortex of sea.
Only the souls know how to sing
At the vortex of the sea. (9-14)

But at the same time she is aware about her existential plight and she knows that being a living creature it is impossible to avoid the necessity of flesh, the interdependence of body and soul cannot be avoided:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body

My soul shall be bare. (1-4)

This is the ultimate reality she cannot disobey. In the poem Das talks about the body–soul dichotomy, side by side Das also laments over the loss of her childhood. In her other poem “Composition”, Das is trapped between her past and present, between innocence and experience. While the phase of ‘experience’ proves unbearable to her, her childhood memories are laced with memories of her grandmother and her Nalapat house in Malabar. In “The Millionaires at Marine Drive” Das remembers her grandmother even long-after her death, “Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother’s death:/ I wonder why the ache still persists” (1-2). The ache persists perhaps because, “no longer was/There someone to put an arm around my/Shoulders without a purpose” (9-11). And “Evening at the Old Nalapat House” enlivens the memory of past. These memories are undoubtedly melancholic. They bring out the loneliness of Das’s life. Das, amid her crowded life, finds herself without any suitable partner who could replace the sad memories of her past with a pleasant present. In “The Suicide” that “sense of alienation” becomes more prominent as she narrates her past:

I had a house a Malabar
And a pale-green pond.
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months. (69-72).

She cannot reconcile her post-marital life with her pre-marital days. A sensitive woman like Kamala Das was forced to live her life in such a way that crushed her happiness and expectation. There remains a gap, an unbridgeable chasm between the two phases of life.
This is validated by Ramesh Kumar Gupta in his “A Feminist Voice – A Study of Kamala Das’s Poems”:

The contrast between the happy security of childhood under the loving guidance of her grandmother and her quest for love as an adult is actually brought out in the poem, “The Suicide”. (34)

The journey from ‘innocence’ to ‘experience’ was not a smooth one. It was so sudden that Das could not assimilate the change. She was thrown out of the world of childhood where the ‘child’ was treated without any gender bias to the traditional sphere of an Indian woman — a stereotyped role ascribed to any Hindu married woman. Moreover, it was her husband who made her condition worse. She couldn’t fit herself in the category of traditional ‘wife’. But she knew that,

I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.
I must keep the right distance
Between me and the low.
And I must keep the right distance,
Between me and the high. (42-50)

Muktha Manoj Jacob’s observation is worth mentioning in this connection. In his essay, “Feminine Sensibility in the Poems of Kamala Das”, he writes:
Marriage places before a woman a set of gender defined roles inscribed by society. Transgressing these roles is tantamount to a defiance of social norms and invites a wrath of the power holders, in this case the men. Reality, for the society is only what it chooses to see and it chooses to see woman is forced to wear a mask, throughout life, whether she relishes or not.

However, in her poems she confesses her intimate experiences and gradually un_masks her “pose”. Being exhausted by these “role playing” she wants to take shelter in the lap of the sea:

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead. (“The Suicide” 51-56)

Two things she wants from life. Firstly, throughout her life she has wanted to live a simple life, a life which is without ‘pose’, ‘pretensions’ and ‘mask’. It is this simplicity which keeps body and soul very close to each other. A simple life is more humane.

Secondly, the search for true love has always been the primary focus in her writings as well as in her life. She wants to be touched at soul, body comes after that. But being an unfortunate one, her first companion in love surprises her with assault on her body. Her identity as a female faces a near-extinction. Her imagination and expectations are brutally shattered. She is left with nobody but the sea to confide. Only one option is open to her
and that is committing suicide. That is why the imagery of ‘sea’ recurs in her poems from
time to time. In “The Invitation”—“the sea is garrulous” (D 4). What is perceived as a
monologue in “Composition” or “The Suicide”, in “The Invitation” the sea takes active
part in a dialogue with the poet:

Come in,

Come in. What do you lose by dying, and
Besides, your losses are my gains. (D 4-6)

It invites the tormented soul described in first three lines, “I have got all the Sunday’s
evening pains” (D 3). The poet speaks from the point of view of an invitee who has been
offered a safe haven in the lap of the sea. There are references to dissatisfying love,
unending lust and an urge to wait for an opportune moment, the appropriate person. A
web of anxieties, crisscrossed with the unavoidable attraction of the sea is spread in this
poem. A psychological destabilization is felt in the dialogue. When Das says,

He came to me between
Long conferences, a fish coming up,
For air, and was warm in my arms
And inarticulate . . . (D 9-12)

She expresses her intimate personal experience where her husband used her for
momentary pleasures and it becomes evident that she has been physically wasted by her
husband or someone else. Her feminine identity is relegated to a mere negation. The
desperation arising out of failed love in married life leads her to construct the image of
sea which can solve her problems by consuming her. A. N. Dwivedi aptly says:
The poem highlights the staggering situation of a middle class wife in the clutches of male domination. It externalizes the poetess’s hapless condition in a loveless family. That her life is empty and sterile without her lover, who is not likely to come back to her, becomes so clear in it. There is no solution to her personal dilemma arousing suicidal thoughts in her. (105)

Kamala Das in these poems makes a journey down memory lane which is a means of ventilating her long-suppressed agonies. As in “The Invitation”, the sea tells her, “you are diseased /with remembering” (D 12-13). Her mental instability compelled her to dig up the past in a bid to overcome her psychological malady. Suicide is the common mode of escaping the traumas of life; the Indian woman in Das at first passively considers this mode seriously. But a sensitive poet in Das saves her from this self-annihilation as she realizes that suicide ultimately brings nothing save sheer destruction. These poems help her a lot. By unburdening her intimate life, she feels relieved and transcends her personal plight to represent a universal womanhood. Dwivedi very justifiably sums up the therapeutic value of confession:

The invitation for death or suicide is so urgent and strong, but she resists it by throwing up courageous suggestion of her own, by reminiscing the happy moments of her past life lived with her husband, by holding out promises of better life in the future, and by overcoming the invitation for self-destruction eventually. (103)

So, “reminiscence” of some past events, like some rare beautiful moments with husband, can soothe her disturbing self and thus by pacifying her rough mind, it helps her to gain
lost identity, to achieve self-dignity and to reject the much desired path of committing suicide. Sutapa Chaudhury in her paper, “‘The Sea is Garrulous Today’: Reading “The Invitation” by Kamala Das” comments:

The Invitation of the sea is alluring but the protagonist resists it; thus affirming her own individuality, her identity – her need is, not for a total merger, but to articulate her desires, and live up to her own potentials. The female protagonist in this poem denies and turns away from a negative, subordinate, submissive role - she refuses to get submerged, washed away, engulfed in the cold waters; her selfhood and identity obliterated for ever in the conventional codes and categories. (Sarangi 11)

So, Das is more eager in developing her personality amid the hostile socio-cultural environment women are forced to live in than accepting death as the easiest way to submerge her ego. She becomes more and more courageous after the disclosure of her intimate life and after the process of purgation she becomes confident of establishing her identity. Sutapa Chaudhury analyses her condition:

Suicide, notably, is also the socially acceptable way out for the betrayed and as such fallen woman. The female protagonist, however, ignores the solicitations of the enticing sea. She is keen on preserving her own identity, her autonomy. She is quite capable of living her own life in her own way. She does not need any advice; for, as she says, she does not care what the sea does, “slosh up, slide down, go your way”, retorts the narrator and fervently wishes that the sea would be as indifferent to her as she is to it and let her be herself – let her “shrink or grow”. She is clearly
irritated by the sea’s uncalled for intervention in her life for she prefers to live her own life according to her own rules. “I will go mine”, she asserts emphatically:

Oh Sea, let me shrink or grow, slosh up,
Slide down, go your way.
I will go mine. (9)

The more she writes the more she finds herself confident enough to tear apart the bondage of patriarchal society. The image of sea is clearly contrasted with the image of the Sun, the producer of life, the harbinger of spirit. As in “The Westerlies”, a significant poem included in an anthology Tonight, This Savage Rite, the poetic-persona discards the pessimistic sea,

The Strong winds from the Arabian Sea carried my childhood
Away, later they swept the gloss of my skin,
Licked the sheen off
My wavy hair; I ought not to have walked towards the sea and
Against the whiplash of the Westerlies. (LP 1-5)

After being able to resist several invitations of the sea, now the poet wants to move towards the land of the Sun,

I should have travelled
Eastwards the morning sun, I should have worshipped
The gold not the silver of the moon. (LP 6-8)

The sun imagery prevails over the sea. She wants to live a life worth living. Throughout her literary career she has considered ‘love’ as the only hope to carry this life forward, to
situate herself above the worldly sorrows and sufferings. Forthright narrations of personal moments in these poems have made Das’s soul guiltless, clear as a crystal. Throughout her life she has wanted to be creative. In “The Westerlies” she believes in her,

I still have

A chance, a last chance, for inside this ageing body, inside

This ashen fatigue my blood is a bouncing fountain, ageless,

Red and warm, I shall yet go meet the young sun, forget

The deeply moaning sea, the bitter Westerlies.

The desert in my soul. (LP 11-16)

The same attitude is visible in the conclusion of “The Suicide”. We have seen that these poems are deliberate portrayals of personal anecdotes. Each of them rips apart the suppressed feminine psyche to reveal the poet’s battered self. But these confessions ultimately lead to a cathartic effect resulting in the control over her disturbed soul. Through the process of “memorization”, similar to Freud’s theory of ‘repressed memory’\(^1\) where the unconscious mind is alleviated by making it conscious, Das gets her inner self relieved and stabilized for further creation. Recollections of pleasant memories of grandmother and childhood days teach her to construct a resistance against the inescapable advances of the ‘sea’. She knows that the ‘death by drowning’ can only be defeated by the process of ‘swimming’ that comes naturally to her:

O sea, I am happy swimming

Happy, happy, happy ...

The only movement I know well
Is certainly the swim.

It comes naturally to me. (64-68)

Swimming metaphorically corresponds to ‘balance’. It needs a constant exercise on the part of the body to keep it floating against drowning. It strikes an equilibrium between death and life. Das, as a good swimmer, is well aware of it and that is why she emphasizes it by repetition:

Yes, the only movement I really know

Is swimming,

It comes naturally to me. (“The Suicide” 83-85)

Words like ‘yes’, ‘certainly’, ‘really’ and ‘naturally’ emphasize her sense of confidence.

On the other hand, the process of writing, especially poetry writing, provides her the practice of ‘swimming’ through which she can face the difficulties of life. In “The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road” Das is unmoved by the existence of sea and nonchalantly terms the ‘sea’ a resting place for dead body:

The corpse-bearers threw

The garlands into

The sea. A queue of

Sea-gulls rode the waves.

My husband said, I think I shall

Have a beer, it’s hot,

Very hot today.

And I thought, I must

Drive fast to town and
Lie near my friend for an hour. I
Badly need some rest . . . (20-30).

She sets out for rest in the company of man. Her vision of ‘taking shelter into the lap of sea’ is gradually replaced by the urge to ‘find love’ that is more meaningful. She shows a penchant for life, an optimistic life, a creative life. A.N. Dwivedi’s comments about ‘The Suicide’ may be worth mentioning here, “the theme is the poet’s contemplated or suggested suicide, but the poem finally rejects it through a renewal of the sense of life” (11).

IV

In a number of poems belonging to the series, “Anamalai Poems”, the therapeutic value of her poetry can be felt by the readers. This set of poems is less talked and is markedly different from the poems in which we find Das in her own typical mind-set. These poems contain her mature expressions and feelings. Often these poems are mistakenly placed among earlier writings. But as P. P. Raveendran has observed in his essay “Text as History, History as Text: A Reading of Kamala Das’s Anamalai Poems”:

Anamalai Poems are a series of short poems that Kamala Das wrote during her sojourn at the hills of Anamalai in Tamil Nadu following her defeat at the parliamentary elections of 1984. Although she has reportedly written twenty-seven poems as part of the sequence, only eleven have so far been published. (94)

Like her other poems, this set of poems speaks about her mental disorder. The poems have a political background but they deal with the poet’s psychological upheaval. The
reason behind the depression expressed here is stated by Das in an interview with P. P. Raveendran:

I was at that time recuperating after the depression I picked up in the wake of the parliamentary elections I contested and lost in 1984. That upset me a great deal because one month’s campaign went behind that defeat. (150)

It was not just physical exhaustion causing health problems; it disturbed her psychological health, too. She continues:

Walking in the sun, getting up at five and going around and getting up at midnight and all that ruined my health. My mental health too. I became very depressed. As depressed as anyone losing a dear one would feel. At that time my sister took me to her Anamalai home in the mountains in Tamil Nadu. She said I had lost my voice totally with all the speeches I’d made in the street corners and slums… They are so real, you know. They are full of the pain I felt. (151)

The defeat in election caused her a lot of psychosomatic distress. Though she was never a political activist, she wanted to win the election for orphaned mothers and a secular society. Joining politics, establishing a new political party and engaging herself wholeheartedly for the election partially gave her a happiness for the time being as these gave her opportunity to work for the society. Unlike Das’s other poems, which voice a rebellion against the patriarchal society doing evils to the women in particular, these poems express the degenerating condition of the society in general. She vehemently attacks the human race in “Sepia”: 
It’s time to hold anger

like a living sun

and scorch,

scorch to the very marrow

this sadmouthed

human race. (1-6)

The poem depicts in a tone, which is a mixture of vehemence and melancholy, the modern human race sulking in a dull drudgery; such a defaced race stands in need of a spiritual purging. Das describes this race as unproductive and insubstantial creature:

They are faceless, many cousined,

sad, they rush at every call,

they only sulk in privacy.

their religion?

the newspaper-hate, the bulge

in wallets, the scent of morning tea

and of course,

of course, the weekend’s

tired lust. (29-37)
In her whole life, Das has faced these people who have maltreated her in different ways. There are ample references in her writings. In this poem she rants and raves about this degenerating society by reacting furiously:

Are they the distinguished human race?

Enough, enough, they have just had enough of everything.

Let anger grow like a living sun and scorch, scorch to the very marrow this sadmouthed human race. (30-37)

She has always tried to express this anger in her poems, stories, articles and paintings. She thought of giving her protest a social and political dimension and hence chose to get involved in politics. In “The Cart Horse” Das metaphorically compares her condition to that of a cart horse which stands in need of rest and refreshment:

Of late my words have worn Thin, my speech resembles The jagged gallop of
A cart horse that needs to

Be reshod and perhaps

Given rest, for, poor thing,

Its roads were arduous

And its burden always

Too heavy. (1-9)

She finds politics a diverting medium to give herself rest from her normal course of life. She talks about that old cart horse that is lucky enough to die on road, but those who remain alive, they become old and decrepit. Das being an uncompromising self in her life cannot accept that decaying stage and to make herself active enters into politics. So, to her it was not just a distraction, rather it was a serious decision. It was ironical for a person who once told, “I don’t know politics” (“An Introduction” I) to contest the parliamentary election at a later stage of her life. It may be viewed as a protest against a system which marginalizes women by depriving their participation in public affair.

In the election she did not get more than two thousand votes, but the energy she spent made her felt quite exhausted. “Anamalai poems” are the after effect of such uneven course of life. The soothing and alienated environment of the hill helped her to convalesce soon. Here she found the deep association of nature undisturbed by the clamour of crowded city. She didn’t have to maintain the daily routine of ordinary life.
And the impenetrable mist of the mountain helped her to get detached from the outer world. She says in “The Anamalai Hills”:

There are no clocks here at Anamalai, no cock crowing

the morning in, as the muezzins call from cold mosques,

only the mist so absentmindedly lingering on, long past

the dawn’s legitimate hours and the invisible

bird’s crazed cry, occasionally from the mosquito tree. (1-5)

The mist settles in like an all encompassing cover wrapping around her and helping her to forget the defeat in election. The hills, the mountains and the beautiful landscape offered her a chance to escape from the mundane reality and its hardships:

From somewhere within my heart the mist ascends, the mountains

awake, perhaps the rains are over and the swamps are dry

again. It had been only the mist rising against the hills,

clinging and unclinging as it must always do . . . (6-9)

In these poems she has moved away from the attitude she generally adopts to display her protest against patriarchy or from the exhibition of female body to validate the empowerment of womanhood. The poems speak of a withdrawal from the outside world and there prevails an all enveloping silence which soothes her troubled spirit. The ‘deaf-mute’ Anamalai gives her solace and comfort:
Anamalai stands undisturbed.

Wrapped in the shrouds of betrayals, the woman walks along no longer seeking comfort in human speech. The mountain seems deaf-mute, but the flesh of her spirit is but its flesh, and, her silence, despite the tumult in her blood, its destined hush. (14-19)

The misty ambience of these hills transfused ‘mental peace’ in her. The hills and its surrounding atmosphere restored an order to her disordered mind and exhausted body.

In case of self-therapy, the poet himself or herself acts as the counsellor and tries to relieve his/her mental disturbances after confessing his/her very intimate details through poetical compositions. Poems in Anamalai series display emotions which are very intense and abstract. The environment depicted in these poems is that of an isolated islet entirely detached from the human terrain. The images used in the poems are meant to provide her serenity, tranquility and peace of mind. The hills and its overlapping misty darkness do not represent the tiredness and fatigue of an exhausted soul; rather they are the desired refuge of a battered self, eliminating each and every adversity of a crowded life by providing serenity and silence. These poems depict a landscape where no one should be allowed to trespass or intrude upon the calm and quiet atmosphere. She expresses her preference for such a place:

How often have I trod these mountain paths,
The mist, like tattered pennants beckoning

To me; yes, from each city I lived in,

Each dusty small town I stole out often

To walk this winding road . . . (“Anamalai Poems I” 1-5)

Sometime she wants to take shelter in the ‘mist’ as she is unable to face the ‘heat’ of life:

At times I feel that I hide behind my dreams

as the mountain does, behind the winter’s mist

I cannot look the day in the face of once

I did, with gumption or confront myself and

declare, yes, old girl, I have sure let you down. (“V” 1-5 )

The grand presence of ‘Anamalai Hills’ in their original forms and shapes is felt in these poems. But, simultaneously, these ‘beauteous spots’ also represent Das’s longing for an imaginary arcadia where she can enjoy the freedom of spirit. Like those poems where she remembers her childhood and her grandmother, these pieces also reconstruct a memorabilia where she can take a sigh of relief from the burden of survival. The hills, for her, are the abode of tranquility. In these poems she strategically maneuvers her confessions blending fact with fiction. She welcomes the “kind night” when dreams are born. The seventh poem in the series is worth mentioning:

If someone would only remove the sun
From my way I would not have to face

Another sorrowful day but I would

Lie then in kind night’s embrace, soothed by its

Blinded compassion while its groping fingers

Would anaesthetize my private terrors. . . (1-6)

She wants the night to linger on as it will help her to get rid of the turbulent and intemperate season of brutal criticism that she has garnered all along her life. But she is not loud while giving voice to her anger and annoyance. Unlike in her poems “The Old Playhouse”, “Nani”, “An Introduction” etc where she unswervingly hits at the patriarchal hegemony, in Anamalai Poems her tone is low and hushed. In the sixth poem of the series she laments the absence of marital happiness without disturbing the calmness of the atmosphere:

No, not for me the beguiling promise of

domestic bliss, the goodnight kiss, the weekly

letter that begins with the word dearest . . . (13-15)

The use of dual negatives “no, not” emphasizes her extreme frustration about love. She knows that she has been denied this blessed part of life. But at the same time she is equally conscious about the futility of such relationships. She knows the ultimate reality that marriage is nothing but social prostitution, a legal bondage where the male partner,
the husband, dreams about another woman. She makes a protest. But again she does it in a very quiet tone; almost in an ironical manner she writes:

not for me the hollowness of marital
vows and the loneliness of a double bed
where someone lies dreaming of another mate
a woman perhaps lustier than his own. (16-19)

“Anamalai Poems” are not about protest, not about the slogans for the empowerment of woman or the demonstration of bodily pleasure. Here the poet is trying to probe into the labyrinth of her psychological complexities. These poems are about feelings, about the nourishment of her psyche. Das tells Weisbord about the genesis of these poems:

But after losing the election, the deposit money, the support of my family, and my voice, I became utterly lonely and physically disabled. To save me from dying, my sister took me to Anamalai, a high peak in Tamil Nadu, and gave me a tape recorder. ‘If you feel very sad, speak into this at night. You will be less lonely’. (96)

Ultimately the recordings of those isolated moments took the shape of poems. The intensity expressed here issues out of her meditation of soul. The soothing moods of the hills, the serene background and the complete withdrawal into the apparent seclusion have turned the heated mind to a calm one. Amid this exclusive isolation she sets off her voyage in search of her inner being. She knows that only by communicating with her
inner being she may attain the ultimate peace of mind. But the path is not smooth as often there are obstacles raised by the corporeal frame. Often we have noticed the conflict between body and soul in the poetry of Das. But this temporary alienation from the civilization has provided her ample space to ponder over the essence of existence. In the fourth poem of this series the speaker realizes that if one can see beyond the bodily existence death becomes ‘meaningless’:

Ultimately we come to know

that for us there is only one

claimant whom by mistake we call

death, obsessed as we are by our

physicality, restrained

by the eyes’ inadequate power

to perceive beyond the farthest

precincts of truth. If only the

human eye could look beyond the

chilling flesh, the funeral pyre’s

rapid repast and then beyond

the mourner’s vanquished stance, where would
death be then, that meaningless word
when life is all that there is, that
raging continuity that
often the wise ones recognize as God? (1-16)

So long the body exists; there is death, the end of this mundane existence. But if we can look beyond the ‘chilling flesh’, that ‘meaningless word’ death will be overshadowed by the ‘raging continuity’, the never ending flow of life. Only then this life will be transcended to meet the ultimate, the God. She makes a conscious effort to understand the significance of life. As she says in the ninth poem, “Life yields its true meaning only/in early youth or in weary / age” (1-3); she has reached that stage when the true meaning of life is comprehensible. She has reached her fifties—the beginning of the ‘weary age’ and is wise enough to grasp the inherent significance of this life; her journey is now from physical to the metaphysical, her focus shifts from the body to the soul. Das in the manner of Vaughan in “The Retreat” is eager to reach her original home. In the eighth ‘Anamalai Poem’ Das confesses her definitive experience:

The longest route home is perhaps
the most tortuous, the inward
path you take that carries you step
by weary step beyond the blood’s illogical arrogance, yes,
beyond the bone and the marrow

into that invisible abode of pain,

yes, that deathless

creation tethered to your self . . . (1-9 )

She is able to feel that ‘deathless creation’. But she knows that she will have to undertake great suffering which is necessitated by such a journey:

Other

journeys are all so easy but

not the inward one, the longest

route home and the steepest

descent . . . ( 14-18 )

After reaching her fifties, she realizes that she must achieve transcendence over the body. Always the worshipper of true love, she is in search of love that might come in the form of ideal love embodied in Lord Krishna. And she knows that she is yet to have it. Only if she can go beyond the mundane level of carnal pleasure that ‘love greater’ will be realized by her:

There is a love greater than all you know

that awaits you where the red road finally ends
its patience proverbial; not for it

the random caress or the lust

that ends in languor.

Its embrace is truth . . . (“X” 1-6)

All she has to do is to be patient as she will ultimately taste the embrace of ‘truth’. Through her journey inward she will someday experience the glimpse of truth—the comforting and relaxing ambience of spiritual love. The Anamalai Hills, both literally and metaphorically, provide her that space. And these poems act as the medium through which she can wipe out her depression, her troubled memories. Writing is a process which lightens the burden of suppressed subconscious. Das feels herself privileged that she has the gift of writing her life, her intimate life on papers. In the third poem she herself admits:

If I had not learnt to write how would

I have written away my loneliness

or grief? Garnering them within my heart

would have grown heavy as a vault, one that

only death might open, a release then

I would not be able to feel or sense . . . (1-6)
The strategy of confession helps Das to undergo a therapeutic purgation and she feels relieved as she could ‘write away her loneliness’. At the same time these poems are of universal interest as they impart the truth about gender inequality and oppression, about the need to unify aspects of the self and because they show the inscriptions of collective pain. Kamala Das through her poems touches irresistible pain that unites us or tears us apart. The poems recognize the gravity of woman’s position in society which is a succession of atrocities. Hence, reading of these poems does produce a therapeutic effect on the reader, too.

Note

1 Repressed memory is a state where a memory has been instinctively blocked by an individual due to the high level of nervous tension or shock contained in that memory. Even though the individual cannot recollect the memory, it may still be disturbing them consciously. For a detailed analysis see Billing.
Works Cited


< http://www.saybrook.edu/newexistentialists/sites/www.saybrook.edu.newexistentialists/files/media/Poetic%20Existence%20%20%20Words%20that%20Help%20us%20Feel%20Alive.doc >


---. “Text as History, History as Text: A Reading of Kamala Das’s *Anamalai Poems*”. Print.


Sahu, Nandini. “Poetry as a ‘Therapeutic Process’: Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das”.


Sharma, I. K. “The Irony of Sex: The Gloss or the Teakwood (A Study of Kamala Das)”.