Chapter - III

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS
Kamala Das is one of the most considerable Indian women poets writing in English today. She was born on March 31, 1934 at Punnayurkulum, a village in South Malabar, Kerla. She was educated both Kerala and Calcutta. Her long stay in Calcutta during her childhood brought her in close contact with the English language. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon, a prominent writer. Das remembers watching him “work from morning till night” and thinking that he had “a blissful life” (Warrior Interview). Das was also deeply affected by the poetry of her mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma, the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nayars (India World). She was privately educated until the age of fifteen when she was married to K. Madhav Das (India World). She was 16 when her first son was born and says that she “was mature enough to be a mother only when my third child was born” (Warrior Interview).
She fails from the illustrious Nalapat family; daughter of the well-known Poet and Jnanpith award winner, Balamani Amma, and Matrubhoomi director V.M.Nair. She grew up in an intellectual and literary background. Her felicity with words found expression in every literary from fiction, the short story, poetry and journalistic articles. Poetry comes to her effortlessly and in later life she had only to decide the medium of its expression.

In her autobiographical fantasy My Story she says that she was writing poems at the age of six. "I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. Each poem of mine made me cry" (My Story, 1988:8)

An impression that Kamala Das had no formal education has been perpetuated by both her admirers and detractors. In fact, she had her early education in a European school in Calcutta. She was one of the few Indian students admitted in the school, the vast majority of them being Anglo Indians or Europeans. Later, during the Second World war, she was admitted in an elementary school at her native place.
Punnayurkulam. Then she was sent to St. Joseph's Latin Convent school at Trichur where she was completed the sixth standard. In My story she narrates several of her experiences in the Convent School hostel where she was a resident student. Subsequently, she was taken to Calcutta and was admitted into a school near her residence. Kamala Das recalls that in this school "nearly all the teachers were old maids, turned sour with rejection, and so we were subjected to subtle sadism of several kinds" (My Story P. 56). It is fallacy to think that she was "educated mainly at home" (1).

Most modern Indian writers in English have gone through English medium schools and are degree holders. Some of them have received education in the West and have had the experience of prolonged stay either in England or the U.S.A. Kamala Das is an exception. She has not gone to a University or taken a degree as her famous contemporaries have done. This has led to the impression that she has had no formal education. Those who talk of her, 'untutored imagination' and lack of 'formal education' have failed to recognize that education and sophistication
can be acquired even without attending a university. Kamala Das has been conscious of this irrational image of inadequate education gathering around her personality as a poet. In 1980 after having acquired an imperishable niche in Indian English Poetry, she wrote, "As I have no degree to add to my name, my readers considered me in the beginning like cripple. My writing was like the paintings done by 'foot and mouth' painters or like the baskets made by the blind." (2)

Kamala Das was born in the traditionally matrilineal community of Nairs, a subscaste of the Hindus in Malabar. She belongs to the 'Nalapat' family according to the matrilineal convention. The traditional Nair devotion to the Tharavadu or the family house is something inexplicable. Several of her poems express her devotion to the family and its members. In fact, one of her genuine inspiration is the preoccupation with family memories. To say that, Kamala Das was born "of a Nalapat mother and a Nair father" (3) shows ignorance about the real significance of the name 'Nalapat'.

Kamala Das is a bilingual writer. She wrote in the pseudonym Madhavikutty, the feminine version of the name of her husband. A part from her poems in English, she has published eleven books in Malylam literature. She was honoured by the Sahitya Academy Award in 1969 for her collection of short stories entitled Thanuppa (cold).

The recognition of Kamala Das as an Indian poet in English came when she won the PEN's Asian Poetry Prize in 1963. Since then she has published several volumes of poetry and prose writings. She was a nominee for the Noble Prize in 1984. Kamala Das has produced five volumes of poetry in English: Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The old Playhouse and other poems (1973), Tonight, This Savage Rite (1979) and Collected Poems, Volume 1 (1984).

Besides her poetical works, Kamala Das has produced a bulk of prose writings, mostly autobiographical. She wrote a number of provocative articles in popular journals. They are forthrightly feminine, unorthodox, scathing.
In December, 1999 Kamala Das converted to Islam, creating a furore in the press. Less than a year later, Kamala Surayya announced her plans to register her political Party ‘Lokseva’. “Kamala Das’s embracing of Islam in December 1999 had kicked off a string of comments and controversy.” (4) Through her conversion to Islam, Kamala Das has crossed yet another frontier. Whether the conversion was spiritually inspired or matrimonially motivated is irrelevant. Religion is a matter of personal choice. As is the decision to marry at 67. Age matters only to couple concerned. People can lead their lives as they see fit, and this includes choosing companions.

Yet, today as Sorayya she seems to have renounced those old ideals, projecting herself as a woman who prefers bondage to freedom. There are many ways of looking at Kamala Das’s conversion to Islam. All her life she has enjoyed defying taboos.” (5) In such a scenario, Kamala may even appear to provide an alternative. Whether her change of heart is hormonal or spiritual, her joyful decision to marry, adopt
new religion, explore new realms of a faith and preach it to the world, injects not only optimism but euphoria.

On the threshold of a new millennium, Sorayya alias Kamala Das straddles two worlds one presenting freedom the other bondage; one progress the other regression. In the process, she has set the cat among the pigeons.

*My Story*:

My story was first serialized in a Malyalam journal and was later translated and serialized in an English weekly. This deliberately contrived fantasy veiled in the form of an outspoken autobiography earned Kamala Das a dubious reputation among the orthodox. She realized this too late and towards the close of the serial wrote.

"It was obvious to me that I had painted of myself a wrong image" (*My Story*, 1988: 192). "There is a basic story which Kamala Das tells about herself in her poetry and autobiography, *My story.*" (6). Raised
in the warmth of a tight-knit Kerala matrilineal society, she was uprooted when her father moved to Calcutta. For a time she attended a Catholic boarding school and was suddenly at a young age married to a cousin, for whom she apparently had little affection, while he was too preoccupied with his career to expect from his young wife than a cook and sexual partner. Left by herself as she and her husband moved home in accordance with his job, rebellious, angry and confused, Das turned to others for affection. Her husband's willingness to let her have her sexual experiences was a further blow to her ego.

Her Baljakala Smarankal (Childhood Memories) is unmatched in brilliance. "Her autobiographical work My Story, which came out in 1976, demolished traditional sexual barriers by dealing in female sexuality. For the first time, perhaps, in the history of women's writing in India the "love needs" or unsatisfied sexual yearning of women were delineated. That a woman writer could dare to speak in this fashion of female sexuality was something that the Kerala psyche could not easily countenance.
Indeed, the reaction that her work evoked locally made Kamala Das feel rejected and alienated. (7)

The need for the woman writer to express herself is foregrounded by major critics. In their introduction to a collection of feminist essays published in 1987 Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielson declare: “Writing plays a vital role in forming our perceptions of our lives as women, in working out our feminist views and in communicating them to others.”

Only by writing an expression could the woman writer succeed in breaking down existing social power structures and create a place for herself in the world masculine hierarchies. By writing the self, the woman writer could challenge accepted notions of the female. The feeling of social responsibility in reconstructing her social role gave the woman writer courage and confidence. An autobiographical mode itself became popular and an accepted means for the woman writer to explore her personal identity.
By verbalizing, the woman writer was attempting a breaking-up of the power structures of a hitherto acceptable patriarchal discourse. Linda Anderson theorizes upon this aspect of women's autobiographical discourse: "It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about herself since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her feminity as passive or hidden. She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the place from which she writes is produced by difference and produces difference." (9)

My Story has drawn the attention of the press as well. On the back cover page of My Story (1988), some notable opinions as review extracts of the press have been given as follows:

"Among the best things I've read...... is the turbulent self-indulgent, but at all times, frank Story of Kamal Das." - Deccan Herald
Kamala Das does not hide her secrets and does not follow the rules of old morality.

-Assam Tribune

My Story describes a life of frolicking in sex..... The book has its accent on titillation...
The titles of chapters are revealing."

- World Literature Today

Kamala Das’s My Story was seen by a few as a "Woman’s tale of woe"; as a story of a woman’s loneliness, and as anguish of a subaltern.

Kamala Das’s good intentions were deliberately misunderstood not only by male critics but by women—including her relatives. Her very act of defining female space was taken to be a threat to male citadel. This resulted in severe critical dissent and adverse publicity not only by men but also by women. She had to withdraw her stand and herself as a consequence.
Qualities which could have been considered as great and admired if the writer were to be male, but since *My Story* came out of the pen of Kamla Das, her forthrightness and expressiveness became a curse to her which, would have been lauded had the writer been male. These qualities were considered as her drawback. The writer who had defined female space became diffident and unsure of herself. Her intrinsic worth gave her agony for life. As a result of this she was compelled to give explanation for her work. In preface to *My Story* she writes:

The doctor thought that writing would:

distract my mind from the fear of
a sudden death, and besides there were
all the hospital bills to be taken care of

Kamala Das’s insecurity and fear of social disgrace made her write *My Story*. Instead of gaining popularity after writing the biography, the critics made her lick the dust.
What Bruce king has else where said above that Kamala Das's aim is to "assert, dominate and conquer" becomes a futile gesture of Kamala Das.

Kamala Das encountered the public and social disparagement because of her My Story. She is happy and bold to face what comes after her publication:

This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of My Story has given me.

Kamala Das's views expressed in the passage quoted above indicate her sincerity and happiness over the accomplishment of her creative work. The critics in general and society in particular (including her relatives), consider her confession as subversive and insurgent when she writes sincerely about what are her feelings about the first night with her husband, her husband and his friends homosexuality; her sexual experience with lovers out of wedlock, her views about her parents, her desire for marrying a youngman
of her choice when she fell in love with his personality. Even her hatred for city life and her love for the village life, her sympathetic attitude towards labourers, finally, her frank views about sex and love, her hatred for people who consider her as nymphomaniac; and her love for her grandmother and her reminiscences about her life in Kindergarten; her experiences in boarding school are linked closely between the incidents in her life with the origin of the poems. This fact belies T.S. Eliot's belief that poetry arises not out of the personal experiences of the poet’s life, but out of the store-house of the poet’s mind:

The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images which remain there until all the particles which can write to form a new compound are present together ... the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with
the noise of the typerwriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes!

Therefore, T.S. Eliot says, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion"; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

II

I deal with Kamala Das' experience of her first night and with the works of Kamala Das vis-à-vis her My Story. The feminine psyche's obsession with sex is perverted because of the inherent urge for spiritual fulfillment in love through the medium of sex. As a feminist rebel against the conventional marriage, she writes in the article 'The Sham of a Marriage' (Blitz): "I am thoroughly disappointed with my marriage and everybody else's marriage is where. The ideal marriage, mental cripples clinging on to each other until death."
Married at the age of fifteen, and finding herself tied to a hollow relationship which she could not untie, Kamala Da's story, despite its sensationalism, seems partly contrived. Marriage did not offer her any solace from loneliness. She faced in her married life a male-oriented world of sex and lust. It was customary for the much older husband to give his bride a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night. Recollecting the first sexual experience from her married life she says, "Then without any warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack. I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace." (My Story, p.89)

Kamala describes his first attempt at penetrating her as an unsuccessful "rape". In fact, her body continued to resist him for nearly a fortnight. She describes the wedding night as brutal, insensitive and unfulfilling. His conversation, she says, was almost wholly sex-oriented; his enjoyment of sex was mechanical and pleasure seeking. Kamala felt that he had no love for her, that his marrying her was only part of an attempt to improve his social and financial
status. He wrote his first letter not to her but to a cousin whom he had occasionally embraced.

This inconsiderate and raw sexual approach of her husband to her who was then a girl of fourteen reflected on her attitude to love and sex.

"He was obsessed with sex", she writes of her husband. "If it was not sex, it was the Co-operative Movement in India, and both these bored me. But I endured both, knowing that there was no escape from either. I even learnt to pretend an interest that I never once really felt." (My Story, P.127)

"I knew then", she says," that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable." (My Story, 95) What she sought outside the "legal orbit" of marriage was redefinition of her feminine self. But she failed there once again.
In this section, I deal with her husband’s homosexuality with his friend and with her extramarital love affairs.

In *My Story*, describing this corrosive aspect of sex she says, "I felt then a revulsion from my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through" (*My Story*, P.104) Her husband’s homosexuality is shown here, "At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they showed me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture but after some time, my pride made me move away." (*My Story*, P.104)
The sexual haste of her fiancé gave her a rude shock, she writes: "At the hedge, beside the Damson tree, he embraced me, and puzzled by his conduct I ran back to my house". (My Story, P.81). She was a burden and a responsibility. Neither her parents nor her grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, their marriage was fixed. And further she says, "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, and don’t you like my touching you... I felt hurt and humiliated." (My Story, p.82)

In chapter 21, of My Story She says: "His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin', she mentions, "Whenever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breast and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin. He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar." (My Story, p.84) Further, she describes,
"My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid, I did not know what sexual desire meant; not having experienced it even once. Don’t you feel any passion for me he asked me? I don’t know, I said simply and honestly," (My story, P.82)

She herself was aware of her frigidity. says: "Sex was far from my thoughts." Her husband’s pride of his having had contacts with "sluts and nymphomaniacs" creates a revolt in her heart against the very institution of arranged wedding. Her husband gave her freedom to enjoy sex. Her fraternity also sounds bewildering within herself. As keki N Daruwalla rightly says that," The intensity of feeling, ably controlled in her better poems and the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex, immediately won for her big audience." Kamala Das is prominently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near neurotic world. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love, the lazy animal hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliation are the wrap and woof of her poetic fabric."
aggression manifests in: "I remained a virgin for nearly a fortnight after my marriage. He grew tired of the physical resistance which has nothing to do with my inclinations." (My Story, P.90)

She writes also in "An Introduction":

He did not beat me.
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The Weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I Shrank pitifully.

Hence it was impossible for her to submit to his clumsy fondling. It was difficult for her to understand as to why she should be treated as just an object and not a partner in the game. The one who wanted to be given an identity that was lovable soon realized that she was not needed by her husband except as an object of his sexual gratification.

"During his stay in Malabar, he spent most of his time with his cousins and his sister-in-law, paying me little attention and never bothering to converse
with me. At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal, simply and without exhilaration. " (my story, p.94) One can notice that the male psyche tends to treat woman as a desirable commodity, a vassal. A woman is obliged to satisfy the sexual hungers of her husband. The humiliation of a woman's situation of this kind is discussed in detail by Kamala Das. "For him such a body was an embarrassment, veteran that he was in the rowdy ways of sex which he had practiced with the maidservants who worked for his family" (My Story, P.90) Her husband interested only in her body and used it for his bouts of lust, which seemed insatiable.

Returning to this feminist's relationship with her husband we are told that, "The only topic of conversation that delighted him was sex and I was ignorant in the study of it. I did not have any sex-appeal either." (My Story, p.94). As a result, she could not satisfy the sexual hungers of her husband while he could not satisfy her emotional hungers.

So she decided to avenge the indifference of her husband. She thought that the best way to tortu
him was to be unfaithful to him at least physically. In fact, she felt very happy when she could hurt him. She writes in 'The Proud One':

Is it any wonder that
He felt hurt when the old wife turned whorish and withdrew from under him.

IV

Kamala Das's views on her parents, her adolescent infatuation with an adult and a bricklayer and her hatred for sex became the thematic nexus of this section. Kamala Das says:

"Like the majority of city-dwelling women, too tried adultery for a shortwhile, " she says, " but I found it distasteful... When we embraced, we fell in the cerulean pools of his many mirrors as a deathless motif ... Yet I hated the exploitation of my body." (My Story, P.183).

She tried to entrap a young bricklayer busy in building a modern house for her father, but that didn't
come off. She says, "Among the workers, there was a young bricklayer who had come from another village on contract. He was extremely handsome. I sent my maid-servant with a gold-coin as my gift and an invitation to meet me near the shrine of the Bhagavatis in the evening after moonrise." (My Story, p.95)

She then allowed one of her cousins to hold her in his warm arms for a few minutes and to kiss on her mouth. She describes the incident thus: "A cousin of ours one day grabbed me when I was climbing the stair whispering, "You are so beautiful" and although I did not believe him, in sheer gratitude I let him hold me in his arms for a couple of minutes. He panted with his emotion. When he kissed me on my mouth I disliked the smell of his stale mouth." (My Story, P.95-96) It was because of her husband's failure to understand her psychic and emotional needs that she could not get peace in his arms. She accuses him in "Man in a Season" and says that it was he who

...... let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with
Shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines,you let your
Wife seek ecstasy in other's arms......

But no man could provide her all that she needed. Each one of them viewed her as an object. She says, "I expect by men to behave like Gods but none of them could ever rise to her expectations."

Realizing that her needs, her inner experiences regarding her husband, she says," I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him at least physically. " (my story,P.95). She rather wishes to bring about a sexual revolution and as Millett puts it, "a sexual revolution in terms of a change in attitudes and even her psychic structure is undoubtedly essential to any radical social change."

She describes the masculine attraction she felt, for a dark old man at the airport:

"I had heard of his fabulous lusts. He drew me to him as a serpent draws its dazed victim, I was his slave. Tonight I tossed about in my bed
thinking of his dark limbs and of his eyes glazed with desire. Very soon we met and I fell into his arms." Again Kamala Das describes the male attraction, she says, "I felt that I ought to meet him when I grew up, and perhaps become his mistress." (My Story, p.59). She was looking for an ideal lover. She describes, "I was looking the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha.......... I was looking for an executioner whose axe would cleave my head into two." (My story, P.171)

Kamala Das explores the concept of sexuality in the autobiography, "My story":

"I let him take my body every night, hoping that the act would relax his nerves and make him tranquil." (My story, P.102)

She describes an incident when a visitor from Bombay called them for breakfast to his hostel room. She describes, "I was relaxed and happy when suddenly his hand moved closer to my thigh and rested touching it lightly. I thought that it was
accidental. But his hand crept under my thigh and became immobile. What was happening? Although I had men falling in love with me, none of them had shown sexual desire. 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.” (My Story, p.150).

Kamala Das also describes the incident to be a rape scene. One night when she was all-alone, the old Ayah allowed a drunken stranger to enter her room and commit an incomplete rape in the dark. The stranger visited her at night and “drew closer to me... under his weight my limbs became rigid and I wished to raise myself to vomit. Soon enough, after an incomplete rape, he rolled off my body and lay inert at the foot of the bed.” (My story, P.107) And then handsome young man from the Khar gymkhana came into her life. She fell in love with him. She describes a tender experience with her lover:
"One evening when I was seated on the top step of the porch, the grey-eyed friend came to sit at my feet. His lips had a tremor which delighted me. I hope you are not falling in love with me, I said smiling down at him. He hid his face in the folds of my Sari. " (P.114). She goes on to relate another moving experience : "...... During that summer while the Gulmohars burnt the edges of the sky, he dressed my hair with scented white flowers, plucking them from beneath my window. What did he want for 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......... (My Story,PP.114-115)

And then carlo came into her life. She describes,"...... Carlo said, holding my hand tightly in his, please don't change, please don't change into a Bombay bitch. You can marry me, said Carlo. You can forget your grey-eyed friend, leave your
indifferent husband and come with me to my country." (p.121)

According to M.K.Naik, "a closer reading proves that, this is not just a cheap exercise in stretching 'my two-dimensional/Nudity on sheets of weeklies', not a wanton display of 'thighs and sighs', nor yet merely a case 'from head to verse'. Kamala's persona is no nymphomaniac, she is simply 'every woman who seeks love'; she is 'the beloved and the betrayed', expressing her 'endless female hunger', 'the muted whisper at the core of womanhood'. She may 'flaunt... a grand, flamboyant lust', but in her heart of hearts she remains the eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity."

Her autobiography 'My Story' derives from a traumatic frustration in love and marriage, compelling the victim to 'run from one/Gossamer love to another', sadly realizing that 'love became a swivel-door/when one went out, another came in'. The result is her confessional prose and poetry
obsessively mulling over love, sex and body's wisdom.

In the following pages my topic of study is Kamala Das's city life verses her love for rural life and her childhood days. As a corollary to this, she shows sympathetic attitude towards labourers. Connected with this are her views about sex and love as a nymphomanic.

She was torn deeply between the desire to plunge into the materialistic pleasure of the city and an impulse to escape from its gross and degenerate vulgarities. This conflict was to become a focal theme in her later poetry. According to Bruce King, "the contrast between a familiar, secure, loving home and the world she now experiences since leaving her family for marriage, its dissatisfactions and love-affairs is the theme of 'The Corridors'".

Why do I so often dream
Of a house where each silent
Corridor leads me to warm
Yellow rooms....and, loud voices
Welcome me, and rich, friendly
Laughter, and upturned faces

......... once awake, I
See the bed from which my love
Has fled, the empty room, the
Naked walls, count on fingers
My very few friends, and try
Helplessly to remember.

(The Corridors, The Old playhouse and
other Poems p.45).

The poem describes a recurring dream in which
the poet wanders along the silent corridors of
house to enter rooms filled with laughing.
Friendly people, whose names she cannot recollect
and whose relationship to her remains a mystery.

"After the illness" is written after the poet's
illness which she describes in My Story:

"After my return to Delhi I found my health
declining. The right side of my abdomen ached dully and constantly. I coughed throughout the night. I could not retain even the blandest food. : ( My Story P-168)

She was admitted in the Wellington hospital, Delhi. The love of the husband survived illness. As a result there is a slow change from the brink of death to the 'accustomed grooves' of life.

In 'The Swamp', the poet's frustrated life nourished on nostalgic memories. The 'Locus of anguish' is the husband. The poet recalls the words of her great grandmother that virtue is the richest jewel and comments sardonically. "virtue is the richest jewel yes yes yes but he is the jewel I prefer to wear once or twice a week with pride".

"The Swamp' ostensibly takes its name from the Swamp in Malabar in which the poet tells us she once sank with a wail one hot morning during the rains. This poem is directly autobiographical, it
being about the poet's childhood, especially in the first part. Here, the present is punctuated by flashbacks into the past: the poet's grandmother wearing the jewels of a virtuous life, the poet herself born fair and growing to be the 'first dark girl in the family' and even the bhagvatis oracle promising to protect her grandmother's descendants from "illness and untimely death."

It was her shift from the sheltered life of the village to the first-paced, mechanical life of the city that sparked off her poetic utterances, she spent her childhood and early stage of adolescence in the city of Calcutta where her father occupied a managerial post in a British company. Her impressions of Calcutta may be gathered from her first collection, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). Her poetry evokes an anxious passionate state of mind where memory and desire mingle.

Kamala Das seems to be nourishing the puritanical conviction that sexuality is indeed dirty and ridiculous. We get not one but several
clues to it in her autobiography, "My Story". For example she tells the reader:

"Whenever he tried to strip me of my clothes, my shyness clung to me like a second skin and made my movements graceless. Each pore of my skin became at that moment a seeing eye, an eye that viewed my body with distaste." (My story, P.112)

She was the descendant of Nalapat culture that was obsessed with purity, and since sexuality clashed with her concept of purity anything that defiled purity was hated by her. Kamala Das associated sexuality with physical attack, which made her feel "hurt and humiliated". Devindra Kohli comments that, "No wonder, when Kamala Das speaks for love outside marriage she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security." She is only revolting against the sexual politics she was confronted with. She wishes to be a free bird and cannot easily control her urge to fly. The limits set for woman by society cannot confine Kamala Das. Her
autobiography fully reveals all the aspects feminine sensibility.

Thus, Calcutta is a mother-city for her as she was brought up tenderly in the lap of it. There is conflict between the childhood's city which is distant now and the present state of unfulfilled desires and nostalgia.

Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog jumping my routine hoops each day, where is my soul. My spirit, where the muted tongues of my desire?

Our childhood city is distant, now ....

(Of Calcutta', Collected poems, p. 59)

Although the house is 'cobwebbed' and although its brass vessels are missing, she goes through all the rituals connected with the life gone by: cultivating the fields, wearing the traditional dress of the Nayar women, getting her palms and feet anointed with henna every Tuesday by the maid servants, learning Sanskrit, 'if there is a paradise on earth for me', Kamala Das admits, 'it
is this old house beside the sea', My Grandmother's house celebrates this house as her great comfort and her binder with an enviable past:

Her nostalgic memories of her childhood and her grandmother who has been a source of affection and inspiration to her. Her grandmother's house the symbol of impenetrable source of security and protection which she missed in her married life. The atmosphere of terror and violence of her married life is contrasted by that of peace, softness and security of the old house which she remembers only with a sense of pride and love.

Her 'Sweet frail great Grandmother' and the Nalapat house which gave her love and freedom and fed her with the juices of life are now only memories. Such nostalgia makes her awareness more intense of her' sense of loss' at the hands of husband.

In My Story, she recalls, "My brother and I, with the help and co-operation of our friends began
a theatre movement, calling our group the Wannery Children's Dramatic Society, and staged each of our production on the multi-levelled patio of the Nalapat House, hiring gaudy curtains, costumes and and the stage hands from the nearest town." (My Story P.36)

Kamala Das's childhood memories are mixed with her experiences in the city of Calcutta. Among the poems 'Of Calcutta' is a return to the old theme. It is essentially an autobiographical poem like 'An Introduction'. It is in the form of a monologue addressed to the city of Calcutta and it is full of recollection. After thirty years the city has greatly changed. Every recollection is presented in the context of the city Calcutta. Kamala Das recollects her love-affairs in her childhood as well as her love for the city which nurtured her love like a mother. Therefore she says,

......... Yes, our Calcutta,

Where we loved as children once, both you

And I our eyes dark nest where day dreams roosted.
Kamala Das goes to depict a charming sequence of childhood experiences: the clatter of wheels drawn by a string at nightfall, the brick-temple she and her brother built, the shared silences near ponds at midday, the paper boats kept in a line.

The poet through a series of rhetorical questions asserts the gap between those precious memories and the brother who in all probability no longer shares them.

Several poems in the first book deal with memories of the poet’s childhood. Childhood is commonly seen as one of the happiest periods in her life. ‘My grandmother’s house’ is an example of her tendency to sentimentalise the past, to exaggerate its significance and sometimes, to artificially manufacture a dichotomy between past and present. She remains genuinely rooted in her early childhood.
The Descendants which followed Summer in Calcutta in 1967 contains twenty three poems. In 'Suicide', Kamala Das narrates her childhood, memory of swimming in a pale-green pond in her house in Malabar until she was reminded by her grandmother that she 'was much too big to play/naked in the pond'. In My story, the poet writes, "Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but it is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements." (My story p.215). She goes back nostalgically to her grandmother's house and to her white lover, both associated with her swimming memories.

In My Story Kamala says, "But he offered himself as a stiff drink, he offered to help me forget and in the afternoon I lay in his white arms, drowsily aware that he was only water, only a pale green pond glimmering in the sun. In him I swam, all broken with longing, in his robust blood I floated, drying on my tears. Carlo reminded me of the pond at Nalapat where I used to lie sunning
my face and my growing limbs. He reminded me of the ancient Nirmatala tree which had at one time a string hammock tied onto its branches where I lay listening to the gentle sounds of the summer afternoons....” (My Story p.158)

Her childhood memories were very much mingled with Calcutta experiences. She confesses that she feared Calcutta and longed to escape from it. She told her husband that they ought to run away from Calcutta and its corrupting atmosphere. “Such are the kind of games that are being played in Calcutta during its winter. The players are practiced liars. Lying will come so naturally to them that most unwillingly they deceive others. The new comers of this society will be ridiculed and laughed at. The ones who first embraced me with loving words of welcome later spread unwholesome scandals about me. It was from Calcutta that I lost my faith in the essential goodness of human beings.” (My Story - P.149).

Yet she could not escape because “poets cannot close their shops like a shopmen and...
return home.” Instead she drew inspiration from the life of the city which she did not like. She writes: “And yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the said poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw for the first time the eunuchs’ dance. It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute, gaudily painted like a cheap bazzar toy. It was at Calcutta that I saw the Ox-carts moving along the Strand Road early in the morning with proud heavy turbaned men, their tattooed wives with fat babies dozing at their breasts like old drunkards in clubs at lonely hours (My Story, P.157)

‘Punishment in kindergarten’ is probably inspired by a childhood incident that happened during a school picnic to Victoria Gardens, Calcutta. In ‘My Story’ Kamala Das recounts this unhappy incident which has remained in her memory ever since. The children were given sugarcane juice and ham sandwiches which she threw away behind the bushes. Kamala Das recounts in My Story, and says, “I went away to the farthest
fence and lay near a hedge of Henna which had sprouted its tiny flowers. The sun was white that day, a white lamp of a sun on the winter sky, I was lonely. Oh I was lonely that day. No one seemed to want his company, not even my brother who was playing a kind of football with his classmates." My Story p. 9)

'My Grandmother’s House’ and ‘A Hot Noon i Malabar’ are two of the early poems in a series of nostalgia poems Kamala Das was to write on her childhood memories around her family house and the grandmother.

'My Grandmother’s House’ is one of the nostalgic poems first published in Summer i Calcutta. It is nostalgic because it portrays the happy, carefree days of the poet when she was a child. She yearns for the return of these days. In Malabar, she used to live in the aristocratic parental home which was affectionately supervised by her grandmother.
This poem attempts to recapture and sustain the poet's childhood memories. Kamala provides us detailed information regarding the genesis of this poem. In Chapter 33 of My Story.

One of the major preoccupations in Kamala Das's poetry is a joyous retreat into the past. The past for her, is symbolized by her grandmother, Nalapat house etc. 'The Suicide', 'Composition', 'My Grandmother's house' and 'A Hot Noon in Malabar' these poems revive the memories of the days gone by and these memories weld together the fragments of her life into an existent shape. 'Blood' belongs to this category of autobiographical poems in which wistful nostalgia is the dominant sentiment.

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