Chapter VI

Aesthetic Pleasure and Violence

The poetic formula of philosophical violence leads to the aesthetic formula of Kamala Das rediscovering herself through the medium of her poetry. For her a far-reaching ego-consciousness is the sum and substance of every emotive experience. This ego-consciousness is the real agent of all her volitions in seeking the experiment. In this context the words of Krishna Chaitanya are very important: "The ego abides and develops because the fundamental principle of being is the self's love of itself. Atma-rati or Atma-kama" (407). In the case of Kamala Das, it can be considered as the ego of the individual who had reached the highest level of culture. Therefore, human nature takes the form of perfection in her poetry through experiencing and expressing all the humiliations of surviving in a biased society. The particles of primitive animistic complexities of self-love being the basic reality of Das's poetry, this self-love inspires the ego to seek higher and higher levels of self-affirmation and self-realization. But, however, in general there are two fundamental aspects of this self-love and emergence of ego. Aristotle makes it clear in the Nicomachean ethics: "The good man ought to be a lover of self, since he will then act nobly... but the bad man ought not to be a lover of self, since he will follow his passions" (qtd. in Chaitanya 407). In a way, the subtle difference is between 'act(ing) nobly or follow(ing) passions'. As regards her tirade and criticism of male authoritarianism and chauvinism, Das appears merely appears, as following her 'passions', but the fact is that she is acting very 'nobly' in exposing, intimidating, and reforming the traditional attitudes of men towards women in almost all the patriarchal systems. In
order to call oneself a modern in the real sense, he has to look at others in the same manner as he or she looks at him/her-self. Das is invoking the haughty and dogmatic men-folk for an introspection as to how it looks like being an exploited woman in the social context. This sort of introspection is possible only in the primaeval gregarious perspective of human life. So the “inward path” that she is talking about in the following lines is as important as (if not more important than) the outward one for her in order to be poetically relevant.

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... (“Anamalai Poems VIII,” OSK 110)

This ‘inward path’ takes her ‘beyond the blood’s / illogical arrogance’ to the primitive animism where only life’s primary concerns interest her. Thus, the best criteria to evaluate Kamala Das’s aesthetic parameters emerge as to how seriously she is fundamentally pre-occupied with absolute primary concerns as against the wicked secondary concerns. The secondary concerns which weigh most in the minds of the men-folk are in a way not only harmful, but even dangerous to the body politic in a given social system founded on equality, equal dignity for all, and equal mutual sharing of pleasures and pains. Since Das insists upon the needful phenomenon of equality and equal mutual perception between men and women, she is often thought to be running a one-sided feud against the men-folk. It is a fact that educating men and preparing them to be honest and honourable citizens is one thing, and to expose
their drastic shortcomings and ignorance is altogether another thing. But in the
potential manner in which Kamala Das exposes the men-folk and the lack of concern
in their behaviour towards their women, she only aims at divining a ‘man-thinking,’
to borrow the expression of R. W. Emerson. The thinking man of the traditional
context must renew himself as a powerful ‘man-thinking.’ It is only then that real
happiness becomes available for the humans. The pursuit of this real happiness
through self-love conforms Kamala Das to apprehend the other to a sense of
passionate interpersonal love, and she expects the same kind of intensity of love from
the men-folk in a given society.

A. Aesthetic Experience as the End of Poetry

All said and done, the all-important place of poetry lies in the fact that its
chief function is neither to reform nor to inform and entertain but to aesthetically
please. Defining the term “aestheticism” J. A. Cuddon says, “... the term aesthetic
has come to signify something which pertains to the criticism of the beautiful or to the
theory of taste. ... And aestheticism is the term given to a movement, a cult, a mode
of sensibility... it entailed the point of view that art is self-sufficient and need serve
no other purpose than its own ends” (“aestheticism”). Therefore, without an all-
pervasiveness of aesthetic quality, a poem will definitely degenerate into a mere
treatise in verse and a catalogue of cultural properties, irrespective of any amount of
social and cultural realism interwoven in it. While the thought in a poem is its vital
principle, the immediate interest is its pleasure-giving ability. Emphasizing on the
primacy of poetic delight, Paul Valery observes “Thought should be hidden in the
verse like the nutritive principle in a fruit. A fruit is nourishment, but it is seen only
as relish. We perceive only the delight, but we receive a substance” (qtd. in Chaitanya 209). How the reader should absorb a poem into himself cannot be better expressed. The ‘nourishment’ of the ‘fruit,’ as Valery has put it, becomes an offshoot of the act of ‘relish’ itself. The substance of a poem, thus, enters the consciousness of the reader inevitably, while he delights himself with this ‘relish.’ If so, the chief interest of the reader remains this immediate ‘relish,’ during the course of which the ‘nourishment’ gets into his blood and nervous system. This ‘relish’ is in fact nothing but the aesthetic pleasure. This quality of aesthetic pleasure is known as *rasa sidhi* ("acquiring juicy relish") in the Eastern poetics: and as the tenets of sublime pleasure principle involved through ‘transport,’ in the Western aesthetic theories. The modern psychologists designate this aesthetic pleasure quite cryptically as ‘aha’ experience. Whatever be the name given for this kind of pleasurable relief, insofar as a poet consciously maintains it constantly and consistently, the poetic endeavour becomes worthy of critical regard and recognition.

Indian aestheticians have categorized human motivations into three types: They are *Tamasic* ("blind impul sions of unconscious instincts"), *Rajasic* ("conscious extrovert action"), and *Satvic* ("poised, untroubled participation in the world’s life"). Out of the above three types of motivations, "aesthetic experience," comments Krishna Chaitanya, "cannot be *Tamasic,* because it is not instinct-impelled or unconscious, it needs a heightened consciousness. It is not *Rajasic* because it is not utilitarian in its motivation. It is *Satvic* because it is a mood of poised, tranquil relishing" (211). Schopenhauer describes this ‘tranquil relishing’ as "the painless state Epicurus prized as the highest good and the state of the gods, for we are for the
moment set free from the miserable striving of the Will; we keep the sabbath of the
enal servitude of living; the wheel of Ixion stands still” (qtd. in Chaitanya 211). Any
ork of literature, since it is literature, has to have this quality of making ‘the wheel
f Ixion stand still’ at least for that much time during which the reader relishes it.
his momentary suspension of ‘the miserable striving of the Will’ is the aesthetic
xperience, and according to W. Basil Worsfold:

It is the characteristic quality, which poetry shares with its sister arts, the quality of giving pleasure-aesthetic pleasure, that is, pleasure which arises neither from a consciousness of right conduct nor from an expectation of material profit, but which consists in a sense of enjoyment that is purely self-sufficing and disinterested. (21)

However, aesthetic pleasure, to the extent that it ‘consists in a sense of enjoyment that is purely self-sufficing and disinterested,’ is derived not necessarily from the experience of a pleasant situation, but it can invariably happen in an encounter with the tragic, or from the reflections of any human emotion, be it love, hate, happiness, pity, fear, anger, violence, sorrow, anxiety, agony, dread, and even asean. This arousal of aesthetic pleasure from the tragic happens due to a situation which Bullough gives the name “aesthetic distance.” Citing an instance of aesthetic distance,” Cuddon says, “one may deplore Iago’s motives and actions and the thoughts he expresses but at the same time receive considerable satisfaction from the way he does things or expresses himself, as well as from what he expresses’ “aesthetic distance”). It is here that the real scope for argument lies in the context of modern literature which invariably encounters only the tragic. Creativity itself, in th
modern context, is a quality of encountering the tragic and transmuting the tragic
phenomenally into aesthetic experience. This is made possible in the creative process
by stimulating the pure static thoughts and animating them into rhythmic becoming.
Since this becoming is a process of transmutation and a creation of beauty, the
experience of this becoming is aesthetic. If, during the process of poetic creation, the
creative mind experiences a relief from emotions, it invariably brings forth in the
reader's mind also a similar effect which is his [the reader's] aesthetic experience.
This is also popularly called attribution of sympathetic experiencing of the process.
In this context Vaghbhata (the Elder), the twelfth century critic, says,

The content of poetry must be drawn from actual life, but it should also
be judiciously idealised. The purpose of the idealisation is two-fold. In
the first place, it is that, having its source in the poet's imagination, it
may appeal to the same faculty in others and not to their intellect
merely. In the second place, the purpose is that particular things of
common experience may thereby be transformed into general ones, and
thus readily induce a detached attitude in the reader or spectator which
is the essential requirement of aesthetic experience. (qtd. in Chaitanya
214)

When poetry, 'having its source in the poet's imagination,' appeals 'to the
same faculty in others,' the reader may identify himself to be in the same suffering
situation as that of the poet; and he attains an equal degree of emotional purgation to
which the poet must have been subjected to while writing the piece. For a good piece
of poetry 'blesseth him that gives and him that takes' In this twice blessed state, as
Chaitanya observes, the “emotion first experienced by the poet is private, a state of his being. If it is to be transferred, the only way is to make the spectator or reader live through the same experience and feel the same emotion. This ideal revival is possible because human nature and experience are generally identical” (32). What undeniably haunts us in the literature of our times is this aesthetic experience born out of the writers’ perpetual encounters with the tragic and the ominous; and the transmutation of the particular experiences into general ones. Thus, for a complete evaluation of the poetry of any poet, it is imperative to examine whether it serves, along with other social and cultural objectives, this aesthetic purpose; whether it makes ‘the wheel of Ixion stand still’ for the reader, and whether the reader is ‘for the moment set free from the miserable striving of the Will.’

In the case of Kamala Das this identical nature of human experience extends to both men and women even when they are put apart as mutually rivaling entities in the blissful act of life. As a matter of fact, the contingent restlessness created by the rival factions contending with each other becomes the very tissue of her poetry. In being so, the poetic content of Das touches the highest levels of aesthetic experience. As a modern feminist poet, she constantly and successfully creates in the minds of the readers the characteristic emotions of our times such as anger, anxiety, angst, dread, fear, and nausea. As Anisur Rahman rightly says, “The poet experiencing the pain herself makes more than a personal suffering, a common feminine predicament. Herein lies the true feminine sensibility expressed in a form where Kamala Das the woman and Kamala Das the artist coalesce into one and transcend each other” (8) Thus, when the emotion is predominantly tragic, it becomes the reader’s suffering
too; and it is through this vicarious suffering of the reader that her poetry is universalized.

B. Aesthetics of Anger

Modern feminist liberation movement that took its initial roots in the revolutionary tracts and fictional writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf in the twentieth century added a particular judicious sympathetic wave towards woman and her downgraded status of survival almost up to the nineteenth century. There is certainly a point of potential argument in the essential manner in which the creative writers took up the cause of the feminist liberation as a privileged fundament of woman's prerogatives by adopting a violent tractarian approach towards highlighting women's special importance in being an equal creative agent along with men in all the prevailing social systems.

Since the tone and tenor of the feminist poetry and fiction took the form of violent machismo reactions, the ultimate tug of war turned out to be a macho-machismo feud in its operations. In this feud of extraordinary verbal dimensions, there is at bottom a humour born of incongruous mutual attitudinal surmises. In cognitively understanding the rebellion and violence, there is pleasure, sublimation, and even exasperating moments of inflating the momentary mutual emotional surges, particularly in the context of intimate interpersonal entanglements of men and women in their exclusivities and privacies. After all, the whole feminist violence and rebellion emerges out of the 'lovers' quarrel' (to borrow the phrase of Robert Frost), which has its own sweetness and light in enhancing the intellectual horizons of man and in combating his inbred ignorance and lack of transparency. When one of the
parties in their personal interpersonal quarrels, one finds, is the 'central intelligence' (to borrow the Jamesian formula) of woman herself as the mouthpiece, the whole violence and rebellion in operation takes the form of a literary strategic trait to be eschewed by a judicious reader in his own personal silences.

Thus, in the European feminist writers and the American poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, the very manner of violence took the form of exulting aesthetic exuberance. The introduction of a new challenging verbal idiom used for the purpose of expressing this violence progressively contributed for the language of violence and rebellion in the hands of the poets and fiction writers. This tone of anger and challenge then contributed for the strife between men and women taking upon itself almost the form of par-excellent epical dimensions. The poetic and creative mouthpieces of this war and its epical dimensions are substantially prominent in offering certain revolutionary modes of creative and literary expositions even when they are less important when aesthetic pleasures and sublimations are taken into consideration. In order to make their message prominent and promptly attended to, they attribute for their tracts a tone of violence, and this violence in itself has the tenets of aesthetic excellence.

The whole corpus of the feminist literature, thus, becomes an added aesthetic ornament in the literary dimensions. Therefore, the violence in the woman writers is a spacious aesthetic formula that becomes all too important particularly in our times of innumerable vexing problems concerning decisively destructive arms and armaments of atomic weaponry and unceasing covetousness of the nations for decisive wars. Feminist aesthetic propositions prominently act as momentary needful
dimensions from the irretrievable hopeless situations in which man is involved in our times. The modern feminist poetry is a prime example of how anger and anxiety can be converted into texts with par excellent aesthetic dimensions both in form and spirit. Creation of new and exclusive idioms for the expression of anger and angst with challenging tonalities in the feminist confessional poetry has definitely enriched literary aesthetic experience in our times. Also it had vibrantly opened up altogether a new way of looking at the basic essences of human relations from the point of view of a pleasurable operation of the human intellect.

It is here that Kamala Das's poetry, as a feminist confessional document, becomes relevant insofar as it is an aesthetic formula of expressing the angst and violence of a hurt feminine psyche. Thus, there is a way of interpreting her poetry from the vantage point of the Rasa theory ("theory of aesthetic emotions") of the Sanskrit aesthetics. As has already been discussed, the production of rasa, or the emergence of "juicy relish experience," is the ultimate purpose of all aesthetic approaches. The ancient Eastern rasa theory formulates nine rasa ("aesthetic emotions") viz. Sringar ("the erotic"), Veer ("the heroic"), Roudra ("the furious"), Karuna ("the piteous"), Hasya ("the comic"), Bhayanak ("the fearful"), Beebhatsa ("the repulsive"), Adbhut ("the marvellous"), and Shant ("the peaceful")

It is interesting to note that, on a conscious perusal of the body of her poetry, most of the emotions enumerated in the Rasa theory are prominently attended to by Kamala Das on instances. Even on the point of repetition, a few lines can be quoted to illustrate this point. To start with, the following lines can be quoted from the poem "For S after Twenty Years," for "the erotic":

"..."
The fountain in chilly winter, blossoming ice blue,
And he shy, rose skinned, glossy haired, selfconsciously
Kneeling to take my photo. That noon a carousel for
Strong lusts, the sun tanning our pimpled cheeks,
The woodwasps on
Every tree, the shadows, green rugs at our feet, you singing (TSR 23),
for 'the fearful,' from "The Fear of the Year":

.. fear has warped us all; even
In the freedom of our dreams, it
Thrusts its paws to incarnadine
The virgin whiteness (CP 108),

or from "Terror":

Fear

is our leader, leading us into
high exitless hills (OSK 41).

for 'the repulsive,' from "The Testing of the Sirens":

On the old
cannon-stand, crows bickered over a piece
of lizard-meat and the white sun was there
and everywhere (BK 58);

or from "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

They

Were thin in limbs and dry, like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness

Were in each of them (CP 106):

for ‘the comic’ (which, in her poetry, is invariably satiric) from the poem “Next to Indira Gandhi”:

Next to Indira Gandhi my father I feared the most.

You chose my clothes for me

My tutors, my hobbies, my friends,

And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me a husband (OSK 118),

and for ‘the peaceful,’ from “The Wild Bougainvillea”:

I walked and I walked, the city then
tamed itself for me, and then my hunger for
a particular touch waned. I sent him roses

and slept through a dreamless night (OSK 49).

Nevertheless, the most prominent type of aesthetic experience that Kamala Das offers emerges out of observing the painful nature of the pageant of the world in its unequal and humiliating disbursement of pains in the name of pleasures. If so, the predominant *rasa* of her poetry is *Roudra* ‘the furious,’ which is a manifestation of her metaphysical violence against her constrained freedom as a being. In the case of Das, it is a kind of tragic fury that manifests itself throughout her poetry, like in the following lines of “A Losing Battle”:

Men are worthless. to trap them

Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood. (OSK 48)

or in the following of "The Freaks":

Can this man with
nimble fingertips unleash nothing more
alive than the skin's lazy hungers? (OP 11)

or in the following lines of "Conflagration":

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive,
The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame. (D 20).

All other emotions—be it Sringar, Bhayanak, Beebhatsa, Hasya, or Shant—that emerge in her poetry are the attendant forces, only to intensify the manifestation of Roudra as the ultimate spirit of her poetry.

C. Poetry as the Medium of Personal Experience

"I see poetry in an experience," says Kamala Das in an interview with P. P. Raveendran ("Of Masks," 149). Poetry itself becomes boiling pot of emotions and feelings when such experiences are forced upon the incumbent by the institutions, systems, and the authoritarian onslaughts of others. In Das's poetry the encounter with the tragic and the ominous, and the transmutation of the tragic into creation of beauty invariably take place against the backdrop of personal experiences. The exclusivity of private phrases and the marvel of personal idioms are so harmonized with the experience itself that the 'matter-manner' conundrum in her poetry alleviates itself to a point where all experiences become exulting, and, at the same time, poetry
becomes the medium of personal experiences. As had already been discussed, the paramount emotions in her poetry are anger and fury of a woman who, being thrown into a cultural context where life becomes awfully crumpled and suffocative, seeks life each moment with the 'necessary courage to be' in a world full of formalistic cultural obsessions and objections. Poetry for her, as it is for Wallace Stevens, is a medium of personal experience, where the mediating ground of poetic tissue is not less personal. Naturally, such poetry is bound to be of a personal nature, though in a broad spectrum analysis, it is universal in the sense that experience as a woman in a given cultural milieu is not very different from that of other women. But the fact that anyone or everyone is not gifted with a capacity to present such experiences to the world in a style that is aesthetically satisfying places the poet above others. In other words, experiences are universal and it is the style of expression that differentiates the aesthetically lofty from the ordinary, the sublime from the banal. Literature is the reflection of experiences in a particular style. If so, Kamala Das's poetry is born out of her own private experiences, and, at the same time, out of a perception that they are also someone else's experiences, who may have been subjected to a similar life-situation. The archetypal image of woman whose voice rises representing "a million, million" voices is beautifully presented in her poem "Someone Else's Song":

I am a million, million people

talking all at once, with voices

raised in clamour, like maids

at village wells (BK. 40)
These lines are reminiscent of Walt Whitman's lines in his poem "Song of Myself":

"Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (L. 1324-26). In the case of Kamala Das also, it is this multitudinous constitution of her personality that makes her poetry a formula of 'million, million people / talking all at once.' The image of 'maids at village wells' fittingly serves the purpose of representing feminine grievances, as it is generally at the wells that village girls exchange their pains and pleasures with each other. The poet's voice becomes an amalgam of tongues muted for centuries, entering into a single mouthpiece and talking all at once. The concluding lines of the poem clarify this representation of muted tongues:

I am a million, million silences
strung like crystal beads
onto someone else's
song... (BK 40)

The expression 'strung like crystal beads / onto someone else's song' is somewhat ironic. It is in fact allowing 'a million, million silences' to string onto the poet's own song and become a single rhythmic voice. As she confirms in "Anamalai Poems V," she only enters others' dreams to steal their thoughts.

My songs echoed in strangers' dreams, in unease
they stirred in their sleep and sighed. Yes, often, poets
gatecrash into the precincts of others' dreams
as Gods and Goddesses do many a time
in unsolicited magnanimity (OSK 109)
It is this attempt to ‘gatecrash into the precincts of others’ dreams’ to ascertain her own identity or lack of it with that of others, and become an archetypal voice, that makes her metaphysically significant and aesthetically lofty. This is what Camus means when he says, “... from the moment that a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience” (28). Taking this way, any voice of protest representing a class of its own becomes metaphysical. This ‘metaphysic’ in Kamala Das’s poetry is made possible by the poetic sensibility’s ‘gatecrash onto the precincts of others’ dreams,’ and as Kurup observes, in her poems “she articulates the universal angst of the modern feminine sensibility rather than being self-accusing and morbid and emerges as a rebel genius whose stance as a poet is even more important than her poetry” (144). In stating that ‘My songs echoed in strangers’ dreams, in unease / they stirred in their sleep and sighed,’ the poet vibrantly suggests that quite unconsciously as though through the medium of the ‘collective unconscious,’ she poetically captured the human impulses of multitudes of others, and comprised them in her poetry as invaluable offshoots of the conscious expression of her own experience. She in fact suggests that human consciousness or authenticity is not at all an exclusively private property of the incumbent. In the human set, the very presence of consciousness is a non-thetic phenomenon of unifying all the humans under one umbrella called humanity. So every particular conscious experience is a reflection and refraction of the universal consciousness. If so, according to Kamala Das, every living moment in our life, and thereby every poetic moment, is a mutually shared complexity. But at the same time, insofar as the experience itself passes through one’s particular personality, it has all the apparent invaluable preciousness of being
one's own personal experience. It is unfortunate that amongst the critical counters of India Kamala Das is regarded as a raving virago, instead of being properly and sympathetically understood. The necessity of sympathetic understanding of her poetry emerges out of the universal concern that she maintains as a central point of her poetic experiences and expressions. In fact, the fundamental nature of the pain she experiences and expresses in her poetry is universally acknowledgeable as a certain principle of evil that haunts the entire humanity. The personal-most expressions and charges in her poetry assume for themselves a par excellent universal status, if only they are comprehended as the expressions of the innermost grievances of almost all women in the world.

D. Poetic Alternatives

The poetry of Kamala Das cannot be separated from her life. Though the element of generality is prominent towards conclusion of almost every poem, yet its birth takes place in the en-situational poetic sensibility. Thus, each poem of hers is an encapsulation of her closefisted encounter with life in a particular situation. In fact, there is a veiled attempt to relive through memory play the circumstances that had passed through her life. When life's hopes are not fulfilled, and when all encounters eventually end up in disillusionment, the autistic imaginative sensibility unfurls its canvas and starts sprinkling painful colours of imagination on it so that the half-lived moments of life attains a fulfilment through poetic strategy. Kamala Das visualizes her own ideal world and even creates it around her in imagination, just like all the romanticists and confessional poets do, where she reads aloud her own rules of love and life, and plays queen like a gold fish in an aquarium. Thus, in the world of poetic
imagination the poet seems to seek alternatives for life’s prime moments that were slipped out of her hands in real life. Elsewhere in an interview with Irshad Ahmed, Das elaborates on this fantastic world:

I believe that each of us must live in two worlds existing close to each other like substance and shadow – one, the world visible to us and therefore, called real, and the other invisible, existing in the sixth and inaccessible dimension which we fill with fantasies. The revelations picked up from the real world must strengthen our existence in the shadowy world – and likewise the vitality gained from our sojourn in the world of fantasy must contribute to our strength in the real world.

Each world must benefit the other, as one’s personality is the sum total of one’s knowledge, dreams and fantasies; our poetry will gain from our honest portrayal of it. (“I have Kept” 80)

Das is trying here to bring together poetic imagination and fantasy born of autistic splendour. She calls this autistic splendour as ‘shadow’. Needless to say, a shadow is two-dimensional in nature, and in being so, it eludes and keeps the depth unexplored. This ‘shadowy’ nature of the world of fantasy is invariably a part and parcel of everybody’s experience. Therefore, ‘each of us must live in two worlds existing close to each other’ simultaneously. However, the ‘sojourn in the world of fantasy’ is not a mere imaginative escape, it is an attempt to attribute upon oneself a deviated actor’s trunk, and look at the relative differences and deficiencies from a third party angle. Here, then, creation becomes an attempt to capture unity in imagination, as the poetic sensibility tries to substitute the incomplete universe with a complete one in
imagination, and fulfil the unfulfilled hopes through poetic creation. In fact, it is in that shadowy world ‘existing in the sixth and inaccessible dimension’ filled with ‘fantasies’ that life’s fulfilment is made possible. It is a two-way process in the sense that ‘the revelations picked up from the real world’ that is past, incomplete, and lost, lends the poetic sensibility the requisite knowledge and ingredients for achieving a wholeness and unity in the ‘world of fantasy. And ‘the vitality gained from . . . the world of fantasy’ reciprocally contributes to the poet’s ‘strength’ in the real world, which is her poetry. Ahmed also sees this an “attempt to achieve a sense of completeness through writing and to re-live the imperfectly lived or half-lived moments of life,” which “bears testimony to her unifying and unified vision of life as a literary artist” (Reflections 130). This ‘unifying and unified vision of life’ is invariably supplemented with and supported by innumerable colours of imagination. It is these colours of imagination that work as the cementing forces of confectioning the consciously ‘lived’ and instinctively ‘half-lived moments of life’ into elaborately structured artefacts of poetry. As instinct is momentary both in operation and disappearance, the recapitulation of the ‘lived’ and ‘half-lived moments’ brings a sort of formal stylistic perfection in her poetry. This can be further clarified by what Camus comments upon rebellion and creativity

Through style, the creative effort reconstructs the world and always with the same slight distortion which is the mark of both art and protest. When the most agonizing protest finds its most resolute form of expression, rebellion satisfies its real aspirations and derives, from this fidelity to itself, a creative strength (239)
The 'same slight distortion' that Camus mentions is what gives this imaginary world the status of artistic creation. The redistribution of elements ('picked up from the real world') in the imaginary world, as the poetic sensibility envisions it, makes it unified and complete as well as aesthetically satisfying. At the same time, this process of unification in the world of fantasies has a soothing effect on the creator, which can be considered as a sublime reliever. This relief is made possible by two things: one, by giving vent to the pent up suffocative agonies through the outlet of poetic creation, and the other, through the sense of achievement of a better world albeit in imagination. Through each of her poems, Das tries to recapture the 'unfulfilled' or 'half-lived' instinctive moments of suffering she has undergone as a girl, as a woman, as a wife, and as a beloved.

As a wife she has undergone the neglect of her husband in the prime most times of her life. In the poem “An Introduction” she has very clearly stated about this neglect. Added to the confusion and quandary prevailing at the very young stage of womanhood, the early marriage that too with an uncaring man made things worse for her. Here she talks about how painfully she found herself an unwanted entity with her own man:

When

I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door. 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... (Op 26)

There is an abundant suggestion about the personal pain she experienced when her man 'drew a youth of sixteen and closed the door.' Her man's preference for a sixteen-year youth of his own sex as against the presence of his woman (wife) certainly has a reference to some hateful incident in her personal life. The following lines from her My Story suggest at the probable incident of a homosexual preference and indulgence of her husband.

At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they shoved 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... I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. (110)

The above instance may be very private and personal in being a biographical incident. But these insufferable biographical incidents in a general way compound in women an awful sense of being neglected, abandoned, and declared unwanted. The expression 'When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask / For' clearly suggests at the emotional turmoil and the loneliness she has felt at her encounter with male indifference towards her initial longings for companionship. The felt ecstasy at the initial stage of growing into adulthood all of a sudden transforms into a vacuum, and the edifices of adolescent dreams about love relationships crumble together. In the ultimate analysis, Kamala Das vibrantly suggests at a fundamental fact about the very nature of woman. Woman wants to be possessed and favoured affectionately.
Even the slightest gesture that derides her hopes for possession and affection creates
in her an inconsolable introspective agony, as a result of which she considers her very
feminine credentials as absolutely useless (symbolized here by the expression ‘my sad
woman-body felt so beaten / The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me’) in
keeping her partner as an exclusively possessed property for herself. It is this
gregarious-born possessive instinct that gets mollified on suddenly feeling and
experiencing that her male counterpart is not attending to her in the hoped-for
manner. On the contrary, his extra-normal dramatized intimacy with his male friend
in the very presence of his spouse compounds in her a great revulsion coupled with an
utter hatred. Needless to say, her companionship with a partner who has no concern
for her is literally a shattering experience. Her possessive instinct receives a
shattering blow here, and she becomes inconsolable.

It is at this point that the poet felt a compulsion to defy all the customary
ingredients of gender dichotomy and differentiation. The subsequent lines in the
same poem confirm this, which reveal a desperate effort on her part to run away from
the reality of being a woman: “Then I wore a shirt and my / Brother’s trousers, cut my
hair short and ignored / My womanliness” (OP 26). This desire on the part of the poet
to assume upon herself manliness just by wearing ‘a shirt and my / Brother’s trousers’
and cutting her ‘hair short’ speaks for her innocence. It is not at all a matter of dress
code that determines man and woman. The intentional ground reality of both male
and female partner is to arouse themselves to the occasion in order to be equally
sharing the mystic joys of love-play through sublimation (man) and through orgasm
(woman). The innocent manner in which she expresses herself to be manly by way
of wearing a 'shirt and her brother's trousers' and cutting 'her hair short' is her vibrant poetic stylistic gesture to suggest at one important point: In the interpersonal matter of love-play, woman is not really a passive agent. She, as a woman, too breeds in herself an impossible desire to enact herself as an active agent like a male in the love-play. But then, to the extent that nature itself had conformed her to the passivity, there is always the trauma of unfulfilled desire to be as active and even virile as man is. She has as much inherent fire in herself as man seemingly appears to have or pretends to have. Insofar as it is a mere invitation for an equal recognition of woman's needs in love-play, the poet's purpose lies in reminding man that her physical posture is not at all really passive. It is for her man to understand the possible availability of concealed active state in his feminine counterpart in the naturalistic sense. But will he ever understand her? Or, will she ever meet a man who understands her? The answer is 'No' and 'Yes.' 'No,' in the sense that the perfect man that she is looking for throughout her life, and is talking about throughout her poems, is only an idealised entity and cannot be a being-in-the-world. 'Yes,' because in the dual world complexity as explained earlier, i.e., one's existence in the 'real world' and 'the world of fantasy,' whatever is not attained in the 'real world' is 'realized' in the creative self's 'sojourn' in the 'world of fantasy.' In "An Introduction" she vibrantly reveals this realization:

I met a man, loved him. Call

Him not by any name, he is every man

Who wants a woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love (OP 26)
The expressions 'every man / Who wants a woman' and 'every / Woman who seeks love' themselves explain the needful state of each other in a gregarious sort. Here the meeting is not between two worldly persons, but between the idealised states of man and woman who are mutual invitees for comprehending the other. And this union between the ideal lover and ideal beloved, both living in the 'sixth sense,' constantly and consistently takes place in a dreamy state of mind. The poet considers this union more important and more legitimate than any worldly commitments.

Kamala Das confers on this 'ideal lover' a mythical framework in many of her poems, and calls him the archetypal 'Krishna,' that mythological god who had been considered as the universal lover of all in the world. Due to this 'Krishna' symbol, to a great extent, her poetry is interpreted as 'transcendental' on the lines of the Indian Bhakti 'devotional' cult of poets. For instance, Mohanlal Sharma, while evaluating the theme of love in Das's poetry, comments:

In a final summing up of the predominant theme of love in the poetry of Kamala Das, we may say that through the varied experiences of love and hate, pain and joy, slowly but surely, the poetic persona (who is primarily identical with the author) progresses towards a transcendence of the lusts of the body, the physical hungers. Throughout her multifarious relationships, she was in quest of her spiritual paramour, the eternal companion of her soul, the Divine Mate, her Krishna (103-104).

Kurup also comments in a similar tone: 'Not only the poems directly dealing with the Radhakrishna theme, but almost every poem of Das' poetry and each chapter in her
autobiography stands testimony to the fact that sensual and religious elements are inseparable in her work from the start” (288)

At the outset, there is no transcendence in the poetry of Kamala Das in the sense of approaching a higher reality through conscious preparation and practices of mind. All this metaphysical babble of transcendence is only a matter of critical gibberish. Talking about the ‘progresses towards a transcendence of the lusts of the body, the physical hungers,’ is quite untenable in the context of Kamala Das’s poetry. The interpersonal engagement of the spouses for the purpose of acquiring mutual exquisiteness of excitations should not be characterised as lust. The strict sacrosanct Indian traditions of religions consciously relegated the pleasures of love to lust as though that is something unwanted and peripheral for the purpose of the spiritual good of the being. Interpersonal love has been traditionally depicted as a source of destruction in the course of Mukti (“spiritual salvation”), which in all probability is the ultimate goal of being human. Needless to say, all this is practically unviable in the naturalistic context where the protection of the self and propagation of the race are the prime movers of evolution itself. Therefore, for a realistic poet like Kamala Das how far this transcendence transpires could be a subject for debate, and it becomes instantly pertinent to try to clarify the ever-brewing myth of spiritual transcendence in her poetry.

E. The Myth of Transcendence

Whenever Kamala Das talks about her ‘Krishna’ or the ‘eternal lover,’ one should keep in mind the ‘dual world-dual personality’ complexity already discussed above. Rather than a ‘spiritual paramour,’ she is all through seeking an ‘ideal
paramour’ who will bestow on her all that she has missed in her lived life, and who in
a sweep can exorcise the loneliness of her life. In fact, for Kamala Das, ‘Krishna’ is a
mere icon standing for the profile of an equal and sympathetic love partner.
‘Krishna,’ for her, is as ideal as a perfect humanistic agent, the reflection of her self’s
mere longing to reach for the unfathomable. So her ‘Krishna’ is not the mythological
figure with all the mythomaniacal antiques, but he is her own alter ego poetically
conceived and objectivized in a sort of vibrant figurative vicarious entity. This kind
of poetic figuration of her private most ‘Krishna’ into a public figure is born of her
gregarious instinctive necessity of an exclusively dependable other for the self in
order to withstand the doubts, difficulties, and mysteries of the world. Thus, her
‘Krishna’ is her supporting agent, who introduces into her a kind of hymnal
unification of the self with the other. The ‘Krishna’ figure in her poetry, therefore,
should be looked at only as a poetic ploy to convey a desire, a longing to be one with
a perfect masculine being that is unreal, and also one that will not be realized in the
practical world of things. Therefore, the association of the mythological ‘Krishna’
with her ‘ideal lover’ itself turns out to be a myth. This point of view is further
strengthened by Das’s own statement in an interview with P. P. Raveendran:

I think I decided to wear a disguise. That was why I shifted to poems
that seemed metaphysical. Because many people used to advise me
that I should write about the love between Radha and Krishna and
escape criticism from people rather than write about my own affairs, if
there were any (“Of Masks” 148-149)
The above statement of Kamala Das firmly establishes that the mythical framework in some of her poems is only an attempt to give them a transcendental look, and the mythological figures of Radha and Krishna are a mere subterfuge to escape social criticism. All this in a broad parlance is only a visionary manner of confectioning for oneself a state of imaginary circumstance, since talking of such subjective desires as personal properties amounts to resorting to verbal expressions without en-situational gravity. So imaginatively and poetically dramatising the self and the other in the mythic extensions and distances solves the whole problem of the poet.

Even if we do not take her above statement at its face value, a close analysis of her ‘Radha-Krishna’ poems would reveal that while an awareness of the possibility of transcendence does exist in her sensibility—it is certainly not ‘transcendence of the lusts of the body’ as Mohanlal Sharma puts it—, the real barrier is not smashed off, and always her journey ends on the frontier and not beyond. As she says in “Feline,” the perception of “a sea wailing beneath the sea, / a sky behind the taut drapes of our firmament, / a rain that rains hard and long within the summer-rain” (OSK 35), is merely a cognition which does not necessarily mean that her poetry unravels a full-fledged faculty to culminate in to that ‘sky behind the taut drapes of our firmament.’

The metaphysical concept of possible heightening experience very often comes because of strong interference of instinctive imagination. Transcendence as a spiritual or romantic phenomenon is always a matter of personal experience. It is always unique without any parallel reference to make whether it is the experience of interpersonal entanglement in love or it is the experience of self-supposedly acquiring and concretising for oneself, imaginatively of course, the relevant feel of elevation.
and heightening. To the extent that these experiences are exclusively personal, enthusing, and elevating, they have in them a kind of mythical and mystical composition that eludes all logo-centric paradigms. As a matter of fact, the practical impossibility of achieving them to the complete and total satisfaction on the one hand, and the possibility of putting abstract imaginative insights into the phenomenon itself on the other automatically turn these experiences into certain myths. These myths, in order to be what they are, always depend upon contraries and antitheses. Contradiction being the life of a myth, the very possibility of asserting favourably or otherwise always depends upon the state of mind on instance. The same spiritual transcendence or sublimation is most likely to remain as teasing riddles challenging the capacities of the incumbent to understand. Experience of course is there, and it is felt in all its intensity, but understanding the same or attributing some sort of objective meaning for it is not at all possible. Therefore, these experiences are required to be expressed as mere myths and archetypes, which have in themselves a kind of laconic versioning of drawn images into a graspable mythical entity. Since these dream images are constantly altering and performing themselves as evocative artefacts of certain experiences, they only contain in them a dream-like quality that always eludes reason and rational analysis. The experiences themselves being ecstatically inflated, we do not allow ‘cold reason’ (to borrow the expression of John Keats) to interfere and interpret. All said and done, they have a sort of inexplicable and inexpressible quality of their own; and this quality can be poetically transmitted through what Malraux suggested as ‘the universal dialectic of gestures.’ Thus, gestures and suggestions are mere pointers as a compass needle towards North. It is a
well-known fact of experience that the mariner's compass needle just points towards the North but it never arrives at North. Such is the profound nature of the poetry of Kamala Das. In her poems, these gestures and suggestions are sometimes concretised through the mythical figures of ‘Radha’ and ‘Krishna’ or their innumerable forms suggesting at the possibility of man and woman acquiring a sort of transcendental plane in their ideal companionship.

However, while her ideal lover or ‘Krishna’ exists in her imaginative faculty, ‘Radha’ also lives as another person in herself, who is the reflection of her own abandoned self. This abandoned self continually whiplashes her from her interiorities. In the poem “Feline” she says:

Another lives in me, I fear, a twin left unborn,
unnamed, unacknowledged, bitter with defeat,
and, she with her new-moon eyes stabs my face
and turns me so often, half human,
half feline (OSK 35)

It is in fact a haunting experience of being perpetually condemned by another one living in the inner self. The expression ‘a twin left unborn’ is glaringly remindful of the vanquished self. This persistent haunting experience further impels the poet to seek an ideal lover or to idealise her love-experience. Her subjective mystical animations compound in herself the very icon of ‘Radha’ in the above lines. This ‘another’ who ‘lives’ in her is probably that ‘Radha’ figure, and the poet invokes the same to suggest at the needful immensity of experiencing love and its promises more or less in an archetypal manner. Both ‘Radha’ and ‘Krishna’ as conceived by her are
charming archetypes, actually representing her own self's figurations. Therefore, the 'Radha-Krishna' composite that subsists in her poetic personality is only a matter of dreamy wish-fulfilment that provides a relief and a real fulfilment of having poetically completed a task. This is what she means when she makes the following statement in the interview with Raveendran:

If I feel that my life is inadequate in some areas, I try to fill that— I try to perfect my life by adding things which may not really have happened. But for me they are real— they have happened. That is why sitting here in this armchair I can still write of murders or of brothels. ("Of Masks" 150)

This is what exactly can be called 'autistic imagination' and 'dialectic thinking' in the language of the psychologists. But, however, it is the par excellent manner in which a cornered and constrained child imagines for itself an imaginary world where nothing of the practical world intrudes to confine it and curtail its imaginative freedom. In such moments the child virtually lives in two different worlds altogether different from each other: one, the desired imaginary world, and the other, the practical detestable world for one reason or the other. The ultimate purpose of two felt worlds for a child envisages the child's concerned manner of revenging the practical forces, again, in its own confused projects. Just like dream is not a solution, and yet it is a human experience, in the same way the autistic poetic imagination is a certain fact of the manner in which human mind works.

In the case of Das the continuous act of perfecting her life 'by adding things which may not really have happened' is in fact the manifestation of her creative
faculty and her imaginative power. So not only ‘of murders’ and ‘of brothels,’ she can also dream of her ‘Krishna’ and her innumerable meetings with him. Hence, in the poem “The Maggots,” ‘Radha’ (here an image of the poetic persona) does not morally hesitate to lie with her husband after having made love with her ‘Krishna’:

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna

Loved her for the last time and left...

That night in her husband’s arms, Radha felt

So dead that he asked. What is wrong,

Do you mind my kisses, love? and she said,

No, not at all, but thought, What is

It to the corpse if the maggots nip? (D 22)

In the poem we have two distinctly contradictory personal experiences the poet had undergone: one is a total and complete fulfilment, and the other is a total and complete shattering. Here Das is poetically proposing two states of experience in their relative dimensions of fulfilment versus unfulfilment. The affair with ‘Krishna’ is a living experience, whereas the affair with her own husband is cognate with death in the sense that there is no pulsating animation. It is very interesting to note that such moments of drastic variation and opposition are very common in the lives of women. But the vicarious figurative manner of ‘Krishna’ figure put side by side by the poet brings out a very interesting property of experiencing, practically speaking. She is comparing here the unavailable Heavenly bliss with the practically available detraction and disaffection in the real life. The desired plenty is contrasted with the
available nothing. One is life and the other is death. When the abandoned self
(‘Radha’), wandering in the world of imagination and fantasy, already establishes an
ideal relationship with the perfect masculine being (‘Krishna’), everything else in the
practical world dissipates to a state of nothingness. Therefore, after having had her
creative self’s flights to the self-supposed heights of exquisiteness and ecstasy, she
returns to the practical world completely exhausted and almost ‘dead.’ So the
husband’s kisses on her body are not at all even felt by her as they turn out to be as
good as if ‘maggots nip’ on ‘the corpse.’ The expression ‘if the maggots nip’
vehemently suggests at the nauseating experience of the woman persona in the
practical world where she is fated to drag her own dead self and present it to her
exterior paramour who persistently feeds on her ‘dead’ body as ‘maggots’ feed on the
‘corpse.’ In considering herself as a corpse, the expression of unfulfilled desires
comes to the forefront as a detestable and nauseating experience. It is as good as
death itself. In “Maggots” Das portrays her powerful world of poetic imagination,
treading which all worldly things become dead, decadent, and repulsive. In spite of
their thematic relevance, the images of ‘Radha’ and ‘Krishna’ gradually fade away,
and what is eventually projected is the self’s annoyance in being bothered by external
interventions when it wants to luxuriate in the aftermath of satiety gained from the
imaginative bond with the ideal.

The image of eternal lover again appears in the poem “A Man a Season”
where the poetic persona indicts him for having made her wander like a vagabond
looking for an ideal relationship in this shadowy world. Eventually she realizes:

A man is a season.
You are eternity,
To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows.
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstacy in others' arms. (CP 80)

The dilemma of man-woman relationship is always irresolvable in the sense that man's moment of ecstacy comes to a flare and finish in the manner of a 'season' in its own appointed moment of interpersonal engagement of his woman. But the emergence of ecstacy and resolution in woman is a continual tangle of events experienced in series of consecutions. The whole poem suggests at the simple fact that there are distinct variations in the processes of experiencing sublimations in man and woman. In man it emerges in the manner of 'a season' and blows off, giving way to another 'season.' But in the case of woman the demands of pleasurable relief are invariably many. In a fitful consecution they operate in woman's inner experience. The lifelessness of her real-life love affairs is hinted at in the expression 'mate with shadows.'

But in effect, these mating with 'shadows' made her aware of the male-universe in which each figure resembled her eternal lover's "blurred image," and even "The words and gestures seemed familiar" (CP 80). These interactions with the shadows could never take her out of her loneliness: "Yes, I sang solo, my songs were lonely" (CP 80). While the body sings 'in empty shrines,' the self wanders through thick forests of loneliness in search of the mysterious 'idol' which is the ideal. Finally, the ecstacy of becoming one with the ideal is attained through poetic
imagination and writing of poetry. This is what she mentions in “Anamalai Poems III”:

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... (OSK 108)

So writing of poetry, for her, is writing ‘away’ her ‘loneliness’ that gathers itself, ‘heavy as a vault’ that ‘only death might open.’ Unlike ‘a release’ offered by death, which ‘then / I would not be able to feel or sense,’ the poet invariably experiences the ‘release’ offered by writing poetry. If so, writing poetry itself is an escape mechanism from the hard realities in the world that constrains the individual from the four walls of morality, ethics, religion, and tradition. Freedom in its abstract sense implies an absolute manner of asserting that ‘since it is my life, I live it the way I like it.’ Thus, each poem offers her a ‘release’ of the emotions that weigh heavy in her heart, and if so, the overall effect of the realization of the ideal through creative process is a matter of instant leap rather than a process of transcendence. In other words, what is accomplished does not reach a transcendental plane in terms of the mythological Radha-Krishna or Meera-Krishna relationships, but it is surely and purely a non-thetic, self-emanated, self-satisfying dream phenomenon. If so, it is a greater achievement in terms of exquisiteness and ecstasy gained through aesthetic dimensions.
Thus, some critics, reading spiritual transcendental motifs in the ‘Radha-Krishna’ poems of Kamala Das, read too much in between the lines. The real formal felicity of her ‘Radha-Krishna’ poems echoes the nuances of folk love-poetry, in the context of which the lover and the beloved enter into a hot lovers’ quarrel. All her ‘Krishna’ poems envisage this omniscient delicate charm of the folk love songs which are available in any language. The invocation of the ‘Krishna’ icon is not at all for what the spiritualists call mystical transcendence. On the other hand, the ‘Krishna’ icon is an imagined poetic property, and the kind of total immersion and sublimation that is suggested in the companionship of ‘Krishna’ is only a cosmetic dream vision. But then, this cosmetic dream vision, to the extent that it offers a total and complete fulfilment, is to be comprehended as the phenomenal exquisiteness of heights that is aspired by woman in the companionship of man. Otherwise, invocation of ‘Krishna’ myth is only a mere poetic sublime height of fulfilment. ‘Krishna’ is poetically invoked just to suggest how pathetic and low the companionship of mortal man would be. The grievance and violence of Kamala Das lies in this fact and not in the unfounded imaginary exquisite ecstasies as she experiences in the companionship of ‘Krishna.’ There are goodly reasons why she invokes ‘Krishna’ icon in her poetry. While Lord Krishna is an ideal mythic lover in the Hindu mythological context, he is just used by her as a passionate suggestion of the so-called dreamy aspiration of fulfilment. These fulfilments are more felt in their absence rather than in their achievement. However, the absence of dream-vision fulfilment functions here as a gross parallel to the absolute realistic absence of joy and fulfilment in the companionship of ordinary mortals.
If so, one who closely studies Das’s poems that prima facie seem to be mythological would conclude that unlike in Sarojini Naidu, the ‘Radha-Krishna’ relationship in her does not have a divine framework. In Sarojini Naidu, ‘Radha,’ the seeker, is human; and ‘Krishna,’ the sought, is always that divine elusive figure. The relationship between them is that of the creator and the creature, and not of two equally ideal lovers like Das’s ‘Radha’ and ‘Krishna.’ In fact Naidu’s ‘Krishna does not promise a one to one meeting, but he tells her, “I am of thee, as thou of me, a part / Look for me in the mirror of thy heart” (“Songs of Radha-The Quest” 156). But on the other hand, in Das’s quest for her ideal lover she always meets him and secures herself within him, as is suggested at in the poem “Krishna”:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,

I cannot see beyond it.

Your darkness blinds me.

Your love words shut out the wise world’s din. (CP 75)

In this context, what P. Mallikarjuna Rao says is pertinent:

In Sarojini Naidu the Radha-Krishna relationship is a metaphor for that between Atman and Brahman; in Kamala Das the relationship, though one of ideal lovers, is realized in human terms and as such it does not rise to “the divine level.” Sarojini Naidu’s Radha is not anti-sexual, yet sex is not the primary concern in the Radha poems. But in Kamala Das sex implies a “deep and intense relationship” which is not devotional; it is very much human in its concern (66)
Kamala Das is a stark realist. She is not at all a mystical transcendentalist. A poet pursuing the path of transcendence cannot say,

Do not thrust upon me

the scriptures compiled by sages
wise and celibate
or pacifying philosophies.
I have held a man
between my legs and have
brought forth goodnatured sons ("Stock Taking," CSK 120)

She does not believe in the real divine interferences in the affairs of man and woman. Lord Krishna would not be really available even for imagined companionship. It is only in the Bhakti ("devotional") cult of poets like Meerabai, this transcendental phenomenon can be felt. In the poetry of Kamala Das, it has a negative suggestion in being a phenomenal unavailable consequence in the mortal companionship. There ends the purpose of ‘Krishna’ metaphor in her poetry.

In fact, in Das’s poetry we sense a moan from her cognitive self that remains hard-fixed between the watery edge of this world and the ‘sea wailing beneath the sea’: we hear in it an inner cry of failure to establish any firm bond either with the eternal or with the temporal. Her self’s numerous attempts to enter that ‘sea wailing beneath the sea’ invariably culminate in its indecisiveness because while it receives incessant invitations from the sea ‘beneath,’ it also experiences a recurrent pull from the sea of life in the suffering world. So standing between the creaturely bondage in this world and the aspired transcendental heights of the other world, the poet
perennially suffers a dilemma. This is what is suggested in her poetic tête-à-tête with
the external sea in the poems “The Invitation” and “The Suicide.” In “The Invitation”
the self is trying to pull back from the incessant and tempting call by the ‘sea’:

Come in,  

Come in. What do you lose by dying, and

Besides, your losses are my gains. (D 14)

But the state of the poet’s self is different. It cannot so easily give up this life owing
to many associations. So the self’s response to the sea is:

Oh Sea, just leave

Me alone. As long

As I remember, I want no other

On the bed with him, the boundaries of

Paradise had shrunk to a mere

Six by two . . . (D 14)

Here the poet is aware that she is in the entrapment of creaturely avidities. The
reference to the carnal bed as ‘the boundaries of / Paradise’ is notable for its irony.
The outer sea is but in no mood to hold back its invitation: “End in me, cries the sea.
Think of yourself / Lying on a funeral pyre / With a burning head . . .” (D 14). The
conflict is now more conspicuous. The ‘Paradise’ of ‘Six by two’ now becomes ‘a
funeral pyre’ where the poet is lying with ‘a burning head.’ But at the same time, an
understanding of the inevitable nature of this entrapment makes her reject the sea’s
continuous plea “No I am still young / And I need that man for construction and / Destruction Leave me . . .” (D 15)
Here the poet autistically declares the victory of life over death, knowing it fully well that death comes to all in its own way and in its own time. In the meantime, life asserting itself as a victorious champion is only an ironic matter in the ultimate sense. As a matter of fact, the poet’s self, like the sea waves, is vacillating between the sea of life and the reality of death. The ‘sea metaphor’ exactly stands for the sea of life whose eddies are invariably compounded in death. The invitation of the sea and the contingent response of the incumbent to refuse to enter the sea provides us a very interesting imaginary drama of life and death that constantly play hide-and-seek on the conscious plane of everybody and anybody in one form or the other. This hide-and-seek dramatic entanglement of life and death gets re-enacted in the sensibility of the poet in a typical mock-serious manner, particularly in view of the fact that death comes to all in its own appointed time, and any refusal to succumb to death is only an evocative passionate desire to have more and more life for oneself. However, presently there is no possibility or hopes of transcending these ‘whiplashes of memories’ of ‘Lying on a funeral pyre / With a burning head.’ Ultimately the self returns to its own shell of ‘Six by two’ losing all hopes of escape.

Even in the poem “The Suicide” the poet gives an impression of entering the sea “deeper,” and finds,

The sea’s inner chambers
are all very warm

There must be a sun slumbering
At the vortex of the sea (D.2).

But there is a graceful withdrawal to life and its agonies
I tell you sea,
I have enough courage to die,
But not enough
Not enough to disobey him
Who said. Do not die
And hurt me that certain way. (D 1)

However, at the end, the self consoles itself and gets ready to take the dip in the sea. But only “Take in my naked soul / That he knew how to hurt” (D 4). This request to ‘Take in my naked soul’ is in perfect harmony with the opening lines of the poem “Bereft of my body / My soul shall be bare” (D 1). This suggests at some sort of incompleteness even in ‘soul’ without ‘body.’ So the concluding lines of the poem “The Suicide,” “Only the soul knows how to sing / At the cortex of the sea” (D 4) remains a mere belief, and are never meant to communicate the possibility of a total transcendence. In this context, what Sunanda P. Chavan says is worth quoting:

. . . the sea still remains an important metaphor to communicate the ordeal of the self instead of providing a condition to transcend the self and reach the ultimate knowledge. The sea incorporates the soul’s yearning for the impossible ideal of love. Hence, the consolatory note on which the poem [“The Suicide”] ends . . . seems rather to echo the helplessness of despair in the recognition of impossibility to achieve fulfilment on the levels of body and soul simultaneously. (The Unity 147)
It is this ‘recognition of impossibility to achieve fulfilment on the levels of body and soul simultaneously’ makes the poet hold back herself from entering ‘the sea’s inner chambers’ and live her life in this world with all its agonies, anxieties, and pleasures, even when she knows that there is a ‘sun slumbering / At the vortex of the sea.’ This may also be the only factor that restrains the poet from a physical self-elimination. As has already been discussed in detail, the poetic sensibility of Kamala Das has not been transcendental like that of Avvayyar or Mirabai. It has also not been fatal like that of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, for whom death seemed to be the only way out, if not their mission. The impassioned manner in which they pursued death is evident in their poems. For instance, Sexton writes in “Wanting to Die,” “But suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know which tools. / They never ask why build” (142). And Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” says, “Dying / is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well” (245).

In the case of Kamala Das also there are confessions to a few suicidal attempts in her *My Story*. In the poem “The Suicide” she solemnly expresses her wish to die.

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 (D 2)
While many critics feel that this suicide wish is a mere pretence in Kamala Das, according to Nair, “In Kamala Das the suicide-wish has always been strong but not precipitate because of her essentially spiritual psyche and deep sensitivity” (97). The spiritual psyche that Nair talks of is only a secular inner authentic particular. It does not have anything to do with mythical traditions, or the metaphysical dimensions of Sarojini Naidu or Mirabai. What all Kamala Das compounds in her poetry is her own spirit’s aspirations to assert her personality and her personal concerns. It is in this sense that the ‘spiritual psyche’ as said by Nair has to be understood, and not in any sacrosanct and religious manner. Kamala Das believes only in one religion i.e. the religion of being human; and the inner spirit in this human context is the necessary radar and indicator of the poetic path that she has to divine for herself. Therefore, her poetic self does not accept a defeat, and she does not resort to the suicidal tendencies. Life is a precious given for her, and she wants to live it to the ultimate leagues of depth.

However, probing into the real cause of such self-restraint and abstention from self-elimination, one finds the presence of a more sacrificial and pitiful form of self-killing instinct in her. In Kamala Das it is present as an impulse not as an unfounded desire of physical elimination, but annihilation of her other [social] self by means of dying many deaths. By defying everything that is socially imposed, and by vying for everything that is naturally suggested, she has deliberately made herself a misfit in the honorific traditions of social systems. Thus, every creative moment becomes a moment of death for her social existence, be it as a mother, a wife, a daughter, a beloved, or even as a so-called civilized being. So the seemingly absent suicidal
instinct in the poet is owing to an intuitive urge to represent and present through poetry the agonies and sufferings of the self in being a woman-in-the-world, even risking an existential conflict with the immediate social surroundings.

Chaitanya recalls an instance where Ignazio Silone suggests at two different roads in life in the context of “post-Nietzschean and existentialist literature”: one ends in killing oneself, “the recognition that life is not worth the trouble . . . . The other road leads to the discovery of some valid meaning to existence” (223). In the modern context the suicides of Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath can be accountable to their accepting the first road. Even according to Kamala Das this ‘life is not worth the trouble.’ But what holds her back is an empathetic psyche towards the world and its beings. Looked from this angle, Das comes very to the ‘metaphysician Camus’ who said, “The world in which I live repels me, but I feel with its inhabitants” (qtd. in Chaitanya 223). To Das, death offers no great solution, for, as she says in the poem “A Requiem for a Son,”

Death is

Ordinary To live on an earth built upon layers and
layers of bone requires an extraordinary
Courage, to walk the corridors of this prison and note with
A quiet joy the saplings bursting from the cracks in stone and
Know for certain that life will go on (CP 29)

Kamala Das’s love poetry is absolutely down to earth and comprehends the very grassroots of being human. The par excellent humanistic instinctive phenomenal forces of being-in-the-world compound in her a psychological tendency to
aesthetically exact for her rightful properties as a living being, and she ventures to channel her psychic energy towards self-elevation and aesthetic expression of all the suffering, anxiety, and violence. It is evident from the above discussion that all the aesthetic dimensions of Kamala Das and the violence thereof are emerging out of her inner most personal agonies and questionings that have no available answers or solutions.

Having discussed at length about the formal and spiritual aspects of Kamala Das's poetry in the foregoing chapters, it is necessary to offer a resume at the end. The same is being taken up in the next conclusive chapter.