CHAPTER 3

KAMALA DAS'S POETRY

Kamala Das is regarded to be India's foremost confessional poet writing in English today. Her frank utterances and powerful use of words with immediate pin-pointed effects leave the readers overwhelmed. Admittedly, her themes provide a direct contact with the readers confounded with intimate subjects, possessing an intense quality of an impressive writing. Her passions and boiling cauldron of emotions stir deep chords in the mind of readers leaving them baffled and restless. Her poems give voice to several pains and pressures that a modern Indian woman has to face in order to uphold the sanctity of domestic happiness and marital relationship. An imperceptive reader might feel offended by her unorthodox flashes and neurotic obsessions, but her frank, bold and revelatory handling of her actual experiences awaken one's sympathy towards her in the face of a conventional society.

Kamala Das's poetry has been called a "sort of compulsion-neurosis," where her own personality serves as a raw material for her poetry. She has dealt with private humiliations and sufferings. Her poems are concerned mostly with herself as a victim of circumstances and sexual humiliations. Being subjective and autobiographical, she lets us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche relating to the paradoxes and complexities of the female sensibility. Confessional poets are generally concerned with their own disturbed consciousness or disrupted self and its impact on the hostile world. Though the origins of this poetry can be traced to Shakespearean soliloquies, Wordsworth's autobiographies or Browning's dramatic monologues, it was Robert Lowell who practised such writings more effectively and called it "confessional poetry". This kind of revealing inner emotions is
particularly characteristic of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das in the modern era. Confessional poetry in the modern times is "an attempt to present the poet's own naked self and unrationised, uncensored actual feelings and behaviour." Kamala Das, as a true confessional poet, unleashes the psychological pressure that overrides her sensibility. Her poems are marked by effective candour in exploring the miseries of 'self'. Like other confessional poets, Das's 'self' becomes the nucleus of her poetry and the speaker acts as the central character in her poems.

Poems of Kamala Das fulfil all the requirements of confessional poetry. Her themes deal with personal and private experiences, accurately exploring intimate subjects like marriage, love-affairs, sexual life, childhood reminiscences and terrifying incidents of the adult world. In fact all her themes can be coalesced under a single theme of love, lust and frustration. Bruce King discovers a number of important themes in her poetry including marriage and love, man-woman relationship, soul and body contrasts and the need for assertion and domination. He writes that with her frankness and boldness Das has:

... opened areas in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling; she showed how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the poetic world.³

It has been said that it is a predicament of her inner self that manifests itself in her poetry. She believes in reality and writes her poems largely based on the real experiences. In her autobiography My Story, she remarks:
One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inward, will realise that his routes have no end.\(^4\)

Referring to the modernist movement in poetry, she believes in sincere treatment of the material and therefore shakes off the old poetic norms. Regarding 'self' at the centre, she gives unabashed expression to her personal themes and consequently transforms them into the semblance of universal truth. Like other confessional poets, she has a tremendous capacity for ruthless self analysis and a tone of utter sincerity.

Confessional poets speak in terms of an I-emphasised lyricism and the speaking voice of twentieth century English poetry unmistakably becomes that of the poet himself. Such poetry is generally a first person rendition, where the poet tries to fit himself as the sole character. She has described this first person pronoun as:

Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I; in this world.
He is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath.

She views the poet's "I" as self sufficient which fits in the poetry as tightly as "sword in its sheath". This is not true for Kamala Das as her "I" is more exposed to the public eye all the time and does not hide in a sheath. In "An Introduction" she asks each and everyone "Who are you" and "You" is turned into "I", as an echo is heard back or if she is facing a mirror with her own reflection in front.

She projects a psychological equivalent for her mental state and gladly bares her life and personality. She writes:
A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment.\(^5\)

Because of such a predicament, her poetry becomes a reflection of her life in all its nakedness. She deals with private humiliations and her poetic self violates the chiselled, systematic and traditional norms to follow an unconventional and modern point of view.

We find in Das’s poetry a bold treatment of private life in an attempt to redefine her identity through ruthless self-analysis. In “An Introduction” she struggles to keep her identity against “the categorizers” who ask her to “fit in”. Having refused to choose a name and a role, she painfully asserts “I too call myself I” due to necessity to define her struggling identity. She comments on her own writings:

What I narrate are the ordinary  
events of an  
ordinary life.

It is an humble expression because certainly her experiences cannot be considered as common or ordinary. Her truths of life are far more complex and sometimes hard to believe in. Das’s posture of self investigation is tremendous and she feels consoled by sharing her inner feelings with the readers. She writes in “Composition”:

I also knew that by confessing  
By peeling off my layers  
I reach closer to the soul.
Her frightening frankness and candid confrontations lead her to fit in among other confessional poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. Her experiences with ‘self’ are unique and separate. Her poetry is, no doubt, an outcome of her desperate urge to peel off the layers of her self to reveal the terrors, pains, miseries, vexations and frustrations that threaten to engulf her. She distances herself from civilisation and society, and she believes in openness:

Civilisation irks me with its cunning ways
I connect only with candour.

Her poetry has a special force and appeal primarily because of the honesty and candour with which she assert her right to exist as an individual, with a distinctive identity.

Kamala Das’s major poetical works were published in the form of three collections entitled Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967) and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973). Apart from these, another unusual book entitled Tonight, This Savage Rite (1979) was published in collaboration with another Indian poet Pritish Nandy, interacting on a common theme of love. Das contributed thirty four poems to this volume. Kamala Das is considered at her best in a separate collection of her new poems, published as Collected Poems in 1984. The themes of most of her poems circle around the variations in respect of man-woman relationship. The intensity of her love-poetry arises out of the duality of her existence. Unlike those of Emile Bronte and Emily Dickinson, her poems are intense, individual in her sexual obsession and in dealing with the themes of marital love and lust.

Kamala Das May be said to be probably the most ‘feminine’ among Indian women poets writing in English. Her feminine sensibility is manifested not against the male oriented world but in her eagerness to
receive pure love and security. She attempts the deepest and the most permanent aspirations and doubts of the woman. Her feminine self articulates her awareness of her surrounding, its sordidness, boredom, ugliness, horror and hurts received in an insensitive, largely man-made world. She has tried to reconcile the world of flesh and that of spirit and has found herself destined to seek a definition of her self as a woman and as an artist. Writing about her role as a female poet and a writer, Feroza Jussawalla remarks that "Das's 'self' as a woman and... her 'self' as an artist are tied together". Her feminine sensibility revealed in her poems is related to her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution from a teenage bride to an adulteress and then a mother-figure. Das is, essentially, a poet of modern Indian woman's ambivalence, giving it a more naked expression than any other Indian woman poet. Her poems possess a good deal of conventional make-up. They are filled with orthodox references and traditional images, projecting a state of culturally bound traditional South Indian married woman.

It will be worthwhile to discuss variations of themes in her poetry. Each volume of poems may be discussed separately in order to bring out the confessional element in her poems. She speaks with a confessional urgency on behalf of her woman-persona. "Her poems", says Kohli,

"...have more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role from the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity."

Her first volume, *Summer in Calcutta*, projects the identity crisis that her feminine and poetic self encounters. The poet's childhood memories are attached with the city of Calcutta but she is afraid of this metropolis life and longs for an escape. She writes in her autobiography:
it was from Calcutta that I lost my faith in the essential goodness of human beings.8

She, however, drew an inspiration to write sad poems from this city. In her autobiography she writes:

... yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad 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.9

The poems of Summer in Calcutta, not only describe about the city Calcutta alone, but also relate the traumatic experiences of Das's childhood and early married life and also her agonised response to the external world.

The opening poem in this volume, “The Dance of the Eunuchs”, dramatises the crisis emerging from the sense of persecution, reluctant inadequacy and a quest for fulfilment of love, which lead to an awareness to the barrenness of the passion and vacant ecstasy.

Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn - - -
Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy.

The appalling aridity is suggested by the hot weather and “fiery gulmohur” enhances the impression of dryness, drought and rottenness in them.
It was hot, so hot; before the eunuchs came
To dance.

In this poem, the feminine self of Kamala Das is caught in a helpless situation where her man fails to fulfil the craving of her heart for tenderness and love beyond desire. The poem objectifies the poet's strangled desire within, through an external, familiar situation.

Another poem “The Freaks” holds the poet in a rather helpless situation when the minds of herself and her lover:

... Wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire...

She identifies love with nothing but a sort of ‘a grand, flamboyant lust’, and she remains:

An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence...

She declares herself in a shamefully helpless situation “I am a Freak”, mocking her feminine integrity. The woman persona is filled with utter disgust, isolated in despair due to an incomplete love. The poem deals with the theme of disillusionment in love, and an unfulfilled love and a desire of lust are suggested by a series of metaphors like “sun-stained cheeks”, “mouth like a dark cavern”, and “stalactites of uneven teeth”.

The poem "In Love" brings the poet face to face with the haunting memory of her unfulfilled urges. Her love is merely a "skin-communicated thing":

This skin communicated
Thing that I dare not yet in
His presence call our Love.

This awareness intensifies her identity crisis and makes her realise that she is nothing but an object of mistrust and humiliation at the hands of her own man. In deep-rooted anguish, she describes the state of her heart and soul as follows:

My heart -- the wretched being is today
Cold, like those pale green mirrors
One sees in corridors . . .

In "In Bats", a poem on a similar theme, she writes:

My soul today is on its blinded most
Frightened flight, like a bat, that finds itself
In an alien zone of light . . .

For Kamala Das poetic character, physical love and the loyalty of the body are mere abstractions, and she realises that "she cannot surrender to such abstractions which have at best, only utilitarian value." Her experiences in love and marriage become traumatic and her poems "...[a] fierce expression of the emotionalism caused by frustration when love turns into its opposite solely because of male insensitivity and self-centredness".
Kamala Das's poetry becomes a protest of feminine self against husband and also against the constraints of married life, fever of domesticity, male-domination and male-egotism. In this protest, the feminine self seeks physical love outside marriage and desires to be independent. She tries to:

... enter other's
Lives, and
Make every trap of lust
A temporary home.

"A Relationship" is a poem which explicitly identifies love with physical desires and by 'entering other's lives' she tries to satisfy her own growing personal need. She

... groaned
And moaned, and constantly yearned
For a man from
Another town...

in order to distract herself from the mood of sadness and loneliness. But in spite of her efforts to pull her feminine self to her desires, she could not escape from the sense of frustration: and the awareness of being a prisoner of her own loneliness surrounds her. She reached to a conclusion:

* It is a good world
Packed with distractions.
She realised that those attempted distractions were an unpleasant aspects of life, which her true self could never accept sincerely:

... and then my hunger for a
Particular touch waned
And one day I sent him some roses and slept
Through the night.

Kamala Das's poems emphasise and explores her frank confession of her sexual life. Such physical desires are an integral part of her feminine sensibility. Frustrated by the unprecedented love, she surrenders her will to her man:

... while your arms hold
My woman-form, his hurting arms
Hold my very soul.

The same feeling recurs in "A Relationship":

That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My Betrayer's arms.

Critics consider these records of the poet's love-hate relationship with her lover as one which she cannot either shake off or bear permanently, a true confession of the inescapable. Devindra Kohli calls such love-hate relationship as "Indian woman's ambivalence", while Robert Phillips regards such confessions as "revelations... about the personal vexations and predicaments of her feminine self". Kamala Das's true feminine sensibility is expressed in a form where two aspects of her - as a woman
and as an artist — coalesce into each other. The hopes, struggles, desires,
disgust and pain are all part of her poems, yet the quest for an emotional
liaison and her frustration to establish a communion with herself becomes
the central burden of her poetry. It has been termed as a "conflict between
passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe".15

We can observe two different sides to her poems. At one side Das
depicts a deep exaltation which epitomises her powerful sorrows and
failures. She finds in her husband a "burning mouth of sun", and "his
limbs are like pale and carnivorous plants". In "The Freaks" each of her
lover’s aspect is presented scorn fully:

He talks, turning a sun stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where the stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam . . .

Many a time with utter disgust, Das views a male body as an agent of
corruption, a symbol of corrosion and as a destroyer of feminine chastity.

Ironically, against total contrast of her expressive mood which
abounds in of Kamala Das’s, poetry, her poem "A Relationship" depicts
the mood of confession and revulsion that takes possession of the poet.
She admits:

I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must some day find
An escape from its snare.

But following this reversal of all expectations, there is not an escape but a
submission which ultimately amounts to a victory over pain and defeat, a
sort of gloss on the triumph of life and the celebration and happiness over
this triumph is expressed in the poem of "In Love":

Now that I love you,
Curled like an old, mongreal
My life lies, content
In you...

Regarding her sensibility, Devindra Kohli remarks:

The conflict between love and lust is so much
interrelated that... it is difficult to say whether
Kamala Das succeeds in resolving her tension
between physical and spiritual aspect of love.16

In her "Foreword" to Kamala Das's anthology Summer in Calcutta,
Sophia Wadia comments:

I cannot enter into some of the moods and
sentiments conveyed in these poems but all the
same find the literary artistry of much interest.17

Das's poetry is basically a confessional act where irremediable 'Self'
becomes the poetic nucleus. Her description of physical love is so intense
that many critics describe her as a love poet. C.N. Srinath, for example,
comments:

Love --- desire, genuine love, love on various
planes is Kamala Das's main preoccupation, her
obsession.18
She reveals her typical feminine persona by being love-lorn and in her poems, she illustrates the garb of Radha waiting for Krishna to redeem her suffering in love. "The Testing of Sirens" is a proof of her endless search for an eternal and perfect lover which is among the central themes of her poems.

The poem "Summer in Calcutta" derives its poetic and aesthetic meaning from the poet's intimacy with the torturesome Indian Summer. The April sun brings a warm intoxication:

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass?

The warmth of the April sun flows into the poet's veins providing a temporary triumph over life's despair. The simile of the sun providing warmth and energy in the form of juice which provides happiness and satisfaction is contrasted with here pain and despair. This poem has a Keatsean style of blending of moods or sentiments. Devendra Kohli has noticed some similarities between "Summer in Calcutta" and Keat's "Ode on Indolence" where the sun works as a complex symbol of indolence and inspiration. The lines "my worries / Doze" and

... Wee bubbles ring
My glass, like a bride's
Nervous smile, and meet
My lips—
Inspire the poet and relax her worries. Similarly, in Keat’s world we have disturbing images of Love, Ambition and Poesy, and

... ripe was the drowsy hour
... the blissful cloud of summer indolence
Benumb’d my eyes: my pulse grew less.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar feels that Das “Scatters its fall-out of heat, sweat and weariness over the entire volume of Summer in Calcutta”.19 According to Kohli, Keat’s “Ode to a Nightingale” is about the beauty of the nightingale’s song and Das’s poem is an Indian poet’s creative reaction to the torture to the Indian summer.20

The sun acts as an obsession to most Indian poets, and in Kamala Das’s poetry it represents drabness, hostility and lust. Summer in Calcutta, most of her poems ooze the summer heat and dust and the symbol of sun fills the veins with “noble venom”. In the poems like “The Conflagration” and “Convicts”, the lustful lovers meet like “hot sun”, raging to burn. The “touch of sun” in “Forest Fire” is the resurgence of sensual passion, while the “angry sun” in “Drama” foreshadows the sense of hurt caused by the derisive laughter of the audience:

A red, red lamp above
Like an angry sun.

The sun here is a symbol of passion, heat and painful lust in youth.

Poetry may be communication of an abstract feeling or a direct presentation of an individual experience. Kamala Das believes in an honesty of expression and sincerity to one’s own feelings and emotions. She writes in English, because it comes naturally to her “as cawing is to crows and roaring is to lions”. Despite regular protests from her critics,
she continued to write in English, because she considered it "as a human speech, a speech of mind". She further says that

... The language one employs is not important.
What is important is the thought contained by the words.21

In her well-known poem "An Introduction" she forcefully maintains:

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

Then, again, more she emphatically replies to the protesters:

... Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.

Kamala Das does not have any intention of giving an Indian flavour to her language. She possesses an unmistakable instinct for words and phrases that would correctly reflect her inner turbulence. Nissim Ezekiel once wrote that "the best poets wait for words"22, but words in clusters waited for Kamala Das. She has also disproved T. S. Eliot's contention that "it is easier to think in a foreign language than it is to feel in it".23 Without any hesitation she uses Indian terminology and phrases when occasion demands their use.
"An Introduction" is considered to be one of the best known poems in *Summer in Calcutta*. It also serves as an introduction to the poet. Intensely autobiographical, it presents two significantly interrelated themes, i.e., of isolation of self and attempt to express them in human terms. The style of the poem adopts a confessional tone and rhythm throughout, and its short lines indicate an abrupt and annoyed reaction to the burden of growth. The poet struggles to keep her identity against "the categorisers" who ask her to "fit in". Having refused to choose a name and a role, she feels it necessary to define her identity:

It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels in strange towns
I am sinner
I am saint, I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours
I too call myself I.

In "Forest Fire", Kamala Das projects herself as a forest fire which envelops everything. The images of "bald child", "slim lovers" and an "old man", represent infancy, youth and old age respectively. With a Whitmanesque super-human attitude she internalises the passions of the world.

The poems in the collection *Summer in Calcutta*, bring out the process in respect of progress of the poet through several stages. She struggles for love and security, faces agony and frustration in search of an ideal lover and finally realises the perceptions of the world, discovering spiritual peace in Lord Krishna.

Kamala Das’s frank and bold treatment of her themes gives her poems a separate status. Exemplifying the various characteristics of the
confessional poetry, she struggles to relate her personal feelings and private experiences with the outer world as they are. She concentrates particularly on the sexual love of her woman-persona with a confessional urgency. The spontaneity and the uninhibited treatment of a woman's passion in her poetry is unique because they are written against a conservative background and a tradition-bound culture.

Das's second collection of poems *The Descendants* (1967) also projects the same themes of love, lust and disillusionment. Besides, some of her poems are preoccupied with loneliness and a corroding sense of futility. They show a greater concern with physical decay and with the forces of disruption than the poems in *Summer in Calcutta*. The previous collection of poems has an optimistic note and the poet possesses a sense of faith in the continuity of life. In "Death Brings No Loss" she writes:

... I

Shall lose not a thing. Each

Little thing shall wait for

Me . . . .

In *The Descendants*, we come across a note of pessimism and a sense of guilt. The opening poem itself suggests the guilt born of sinning and questions on the validity of a renewal:

We are never going to be

Ever redeemed or made new.

Titled "The Descendants", this poem defines the impossibility or redemption: — None will step off his cross or show his wounds to us . . .

The poem ends with a ring of finality where the lovers are nailed to beds:
We have lain in every weather, nailed, not
To crosses, but to soft beds and against
Softer forms . . .

The syndrome of lust, torture and loss of love is paralleled by that of sin, punishment and lack of redemption. The same image is repeated in "The Proud One" suggesting the agony of a jilted lover and betrayed husband:

. . . I saw him that day
Lying nailed to his bed, in imitation
Of the great crucifixion, . . .

In Kamala Das’s poetry ‘sea’ is the most recurring and seminal symbol of peace. Her association with sea was natural because major part of her childhood days was spent near the Arabian Sea, where her ancestral home was situated. Devindra Kohli has aptly pointed out her immediate “shift from the sun-image in Summer in Calcutta to the sea-image in The Descendants”.24

The poems “The Invitation” and “The Suicide” are directly related to the sea. The poet prods towards suicide by the haunting pains of disillusionment. In these poems there is a dialogue between the poet and the sea. The poet prefers to “Shrink or grow, slosh up / slide down” in the sea. She desires to merge into the sea and be immortal:

The sea’s hostile cold
Is after all skin deep.

In My Story also she admits her weakness for the sea:
“Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements.”

In “The Suicide”, the sea is represented as a temptation to return to simplicity and innocence through death. A preference for the soul is expressed in the following lines:

I throw the books out
I cannot stand their smell.
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.

The vortex of the sea which refuses to accept anything less than the soul, reflects the poet’s tortured psyche. Bereft of love, she even wishes to die:

I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead.

The sea comes here as a main source of comfort for her dead soul. The sea invites the poet: “Come in, what do you lose by dying”. The image of the sea dominates the whole poem, although we come across joint images of sun and sea in the end:

There must be sun slumbering
At the vortex of the sea.
This connotes a resurgence of life, and the poet asserts for a life after craving for love, settling the choice between life and suicide.

"Substitute" is another poem of Das which opens with vague images of sea and death. The frustration due to unfulfilment of love is suggested through the image of "the poor crows with the raucorous cries". There is absolutely no understanding or mental bond between the poet and her lover:

Our words began to sound
Like clatter of sounds in flight.

Love becomes a mechanical affair—only a "physical thing", and lovers become a series of substitutes:

After that love became a swivel-door
When one went out, another came in.

The last part of the poem acquires a conspicuous ironic tone and the irony is directed towards society as well as to the poet herself. The repetition of the line "I will be all right" communicates her sense of agony and reminds as of T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, where he expresses the same dilemma: "It is impossible to say what I mean", and the repetition of lines

That is not it at all
That is not what I meant, at all—conveys the same plight.
K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar critically examines this meditative refrain “I will be all right” in Das’s poem “Substitute” and feels that the repetition “has a telling effect.” To Linda Hess also the lines are not merely a “quick solution to the problem of filling up a line,” but rather help in unfolding the structure of the poem by externalising the emotional and intellectual dilemma of the speaker.

“Composition” is the last poem in the collection The Descendants. With intense autobiographical insights, it progresses from the childhood innocence to the state of self-consciousness and age. It is one of the longer poems of Kamala Das in which the thematic intensity sometimes flags off because of sheer length. The poem opens with a symbol of sea and the lines suggest the poet’s matured understanding of life:

Ultimately
I have come face to face with the sea.

She replaces “love with guilt” and finally comes to a realisation that:

The tragedy of life
is not death but growth,
the child growing into adult . . .

This poem is divided into many sections, each coalescing into another thematically. The poem begins with the recollection of the poet’s childhood in her grandmother’s house where “the sea is only two miles away.” The image of sea is perfectly blended with her thoughts when she dreams for survival and has “no time at all for the sea”.

Eventually, she grows into adulthood with all the “freedom” and fear of her “loss of innocence”. She even tries to console herself:
My innocence is not
All that lost
If stones still endure
And pieces of mortar lie scattered
In the field.

Unlike Lowell's poetry, in which the poet takes upon himself the guilt of an entire race, Das's poetry seems to be limited to her personal suffering in love, while the lost childhood innocence and other humiliations receive peripheral treatment. In "composition" there is neither a concerted effort to recall or reconstruct the childhood experiences at length, nor is there any attempt to come to terms with her adulthood. Her tussle with love, sex and femininity is endocentric. She confronts herself with the general truism that

Love,
I no longer need,
With tenderness I am most content.

This poem is written in an entirely confessional tone, and the lines are marked by frankness about family life and married life. It also reveals the confessions of her private humiliations of varying degrees and abounds in literal self-exposure. She retains her identity as a woman and honestly exposes herself:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
Autobiography.
Kamala Das's words live up to her expectations and her poetry, indeed becomes a psychic "striptease" or an expression of "sweating self". Relating all the incidents candidly she discovers that:

... by confessing
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul.

The last part of the poem "Composition" may aptly be called "discomposition" because by the end of the poem, the poet fails to accept the trials of life and shows her uselessness:

I feel my age and my
Uselessness.

With the last word 'discompose' she loses her energy to bear her tragic life and lingering problems:

I must linger on,
trapped in immortality,
my only freedom being
freedom to
discompose.

Free from all involvement, she desires to reach the tranquil state of detachment. What sustains her is her thought of immortality of soul:

The ultimate discovery will be
That we are immortal
The only things mortal being
Systems and arrangements.

The 'discomposition' referred to in this poem, not only describes the poet's peculiar experience with life but also unfolds the unique structure of the poem.

In spite of its expressive thematic presentation and expansive imagery, this poem suffers from a drag of prolixity. Eunice de Souza thinks that The Descendants is marred by the excessive length of the poem "Composition", which she finds full of "a totally formless stream of unhappy consciousness." Another critic Kirpal Singh, however, describes this poem as:

"a very telling poem in its revelation of its technique used by Kamala Das, to infuse into her poetry that unique but irritating pattern of involvements-dis involvements which appear to characterise her own life".

While resorting to open self-criticism—peeling off the layers of pretense, and adopting a clipped ironically edged tone of objectivity, Kamala Das as a true confessional poet attempts an aesthetic reconstruction and the transcendence of the fragmented self. In her struggle for an enduring insight, she constantly asserts the validity of personal feelings which seem threatened and victimised. Most of her poems in The Descendants express her anxiety and anguish. Each poem describes the poet's poignant emotional stance, such as, her sense of loss, contempt for society, anger, self-pity, defiance, disdain and so on. Two of her poems, "The White Flowers" and "Jaisurya" evince the poet's concern for her baby son born in the age of bloodshed and despair. In "The White
Flowers” Kamala Das craves to protect her son from war and destruction and wishes him to grow with a universal concern for mankind:

Today some of us will rise and sing of love
In voices never as sweet before, for love like life
Is sweetest just before its end.

“Jaisurya” is, again, an acutely personal poem of Das. Named after her son, it is a narrative meditation on childbirth. There are repeated references to “darkness and night”, suggesting an unpleasant conjugal relationship of her parents. The birth of her son coincides with the stoppage of rain and arrival of the afternoon light.

Out of the mire of a moonless night was
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of
The wrong is born the right and out of night
The sun-drenched golden day.

This poem brings together the lightness and darkness, fire and water, to weave a pattern of feeling which holds itself with the joy of creation. The symbolism of light and darkness helps to identify the son as “a streak of light thrust into the faded light”. The child is like a day that is “Separated from the darkness that was mine/ And in me”. Similar symbols of light and darkness are also seen in Judith Wright’s love poems like “Woman’s song” and “Woman to Child”, also dealing with childbirth. Like Das, Judith Wright rejoices “the womb’s blinded hunger”. Another poet Ingrid Jonker also projects the same desires and symbols of light and darkness in “Pregnant Woman”.

The sense of death which seems to dominate Das’s second collection, generates an authentic humility before the unredeemed fate of
man. In *The Descendants*, life is seen as a slow process yielding to the "cold loneliness" of death which is too perfect to be disturbed by the memory of 'unsubstantial love' or of being hurt in love. The assaults of time develop a frustration and a sense of unfulfilment. In "Captive" she runs crazily in search of security and love: My love is an empty gift, a gilded empty container, good for show, nothing else.

Kamala Das's personal frustration finds voice in the struggle between inherited values and acquired knowledge and values. She makes serious attempts to heal the schism in her personality, in order to end the war of passion and reason, flesh and spirit, body and soul. However... urgency and immediacy that mark the presentation and incarcerations of Lowell, Roethke or Sylvia Plath, miraculously evade Das's psychological probing. The manic-depressive states, the centrifugal spin towards madness, the increasing propensity towards suicide, the precarious balancing on the razor's edge, the gritty determination to pull through a dangerously depressive state that lend strength, credibility and intensity to their poetry are conspicuously absent in Das's poetry. Her poetry is largely a private complaint against the other and her reconciliation is as incredible as her incarceration. It does not mean that her poetry is only a private lament; it also explores the true nature of love and the intensity of woman in love-making. The confessional voice of Das stretches beyond the personal to include womanhood in culturally dichotomised societies.

The next collection of Kamala Das's poems *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), contains only thirteen new poems, while the rest have already appeared in previous collections. All the new poems continue with the same central theme, i.e. exploration into the true nature of love and lust and, to an extent into her own anguished self. There are frequent references to illness and death and decay of the body. The poems are more disciplined in structure and more effective in the
organisation of material and controlled expression. As against "Composition" and "The Suicide" which are long poems of earlier collection, "Blood", in the new volume shows an admirable restraint in tone and tautness of line. The poem is touchingly autobiographical and relates the incidents of her childhood house and her nostalgia for her great grandmother. The house is described as old and decrepit, with the walls "cracked and torn and moistened by rains". A comparison of this old house is made with her old grandmother who is "really simple" and "fed on God for years", and is proud of her "oldest blood". But the grandmother is hurt to see the house die:

Our great grandmother said one day,
You see this house of yours
Now three hundred years old
It's falling to little bits
Before our very eyes.

There is a touching pathos and solemnity of tone and a gravity of mood which express the intense feeling of the poet for the death and decay of her grandmother and her house. Devindra Kohli has this to say about the structure of the poem and Das's pathetic treatment:

Even where Kamala Das speaks of defeat and emptiness and the inevitable darkness which is imminent, the assured clarity of outline, the somber control of nerve, and the poise of movement which is at once graceful and firm, show that the poet is in command of herself in a moment of personal reckoning.33

A sense of guilt and somberness of mood continues till the end of the poem:
I have let you down
Old house, I seek forgiveness.

Letting down the house means letting down its great tradition and memories. "Blood" can be called as a requiem for a time-tested tradition.

Another poem "The Inheritance" is a protest poem; it is bitter, ironical, but not cynical. The poem is inspired by the poet's disgust with everyday religion and the lack of faith and belief makes the poet's mind murderous.

... this ancient
Virus that we nurtured in the soul so
That when at sundown,
the Muezzin's high wail sound from
The Mosque, the chapel-bells announced the angelus,
and
From the temple rose the Brahmin's assonant chant, ...
... Slay them who do not
Believe, or better still, disembowl their young ones
And scatter on the streets the meagre inners.

The theme of unfulfilled love or a fragile love experience dominates most of her poems. "Gino" and "Glass" also acquire the same theme. In "Glass", fragility of love is analogous to the fragility of glass:

I went to him for half an hour
A pure woman, pure misery
Fragile glass . . . .

She enters in others' lives in search for a loving home:
I enter others' 
Lives, and 
Make of every trap of lust 
A temporary home . . .

The juxtaposition of 'trap' and 'home' illustrates the irreconcilability of her love experience with genuine pleasure. The poet's restlessness is voiced through a Freudian search for the misplaced father-figure.

In her early poems, Kamala Das is mainly obsessed with her own restless and agony in the face of . . . turbulence. However, the growing diversity of her poetic vision and maturity of response to the milieu are clear in some of the poems dealing with social and interpersonal themes. Her poetry is marked by a degree of discontent which is described with candour and spontaneity. Courage and honesty are the strength of her character and her poetry. In an interview she admitted:

At times, a strange cowardice stalks me, makes me want to deny my past, deny my nature and to tell my relatives and friends that I wrote lies and that I need money, the brave books provided me with . . . But this ageing without grace . . . If I do such things I shall be totally lost to myself.34

Her courage and honesty deserves our commendation. Kohli rightly appreciated her honesty:

. . . The courage lies not in merely being able to admit that one has aged, but in also being able to
assert in the face of it that in the final analysis one
has no regrets... 35

It is Kamala Das's desire to keep her honesty in tact. She boldly declares:
"For deep inside I know well that I have lived beautifully in this beautiful
world..." 36 Her frank explorations of love are bound up with the
explorations of her 'self'. Poems like "The Motif in the Mirror" and "The
Old Playhouse" show how love is perhaps a clear way of learning about
one's self:

... Love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirror
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water. 37

"The Old Playhouse" is an autobiographical poem addressed to her
husband and protests against the constraint of the married life... the
fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort, and "male
domination," which Kamala Das had known and found abominable in
her life.

One notices a remarkable development in Das's range of
expression and thought since her earlier collections Summer in Calcutta
and The Descendants. Yet one can still come across some abrupt
fluctuations in mood in her new poems, which may be due to the result
of an emotional inadequacy and disturbed mental balance. Critics are of
the view that:

The world of her powers is thoroughly Indian, or
a world she has made her own. There is
something Indian about her very music, though it
is hard to say what precisely it is.

Das is fascinated so much by the Indian mythology that we come across in
her poems the references to mythological figures such as Krishna and
Radha. Most of them are related to Radha-Krishna myth, which provides
an 'objective co-relative' to her own passionate yearnings and repressed
desires. "Ghanshyam" is a poem with an ardour of love and eagerness of
self-surrender:

    Ghanshyam,
    You have like a koel built your
    Nest in the arbour of my heart.

The poet's eternal craving for love and peace finds its echo in the mythical
figure of Ghanshyam. It is her devotion to this elusive figure that gives
her peace, silence and wisdom:

    You come in strange forms
    And your names are many.

Her disgust in failures of love led her to a frantic search for the mythic
Krishna, the ideal lover, with whom she has established her eternal bond.
Her unfulfilled desire and the experiences of loss and longing represent
her quest for ideal love and also with the soul's desire to merge with
beateous Krishna. The poems "Radha", "Radha Krishna", "The
Maggots", "Lines Addressed to Devdas" and "Ghanshyam" describe her
muted desire and her surrender to the unexpressed yearnings which find
a strange correlation in the Krishna myth.
Her fascination towards her Mohan is expressed through the execution of mythopoetic images and religious symbolism. In ‘Radha’, she surrenders herself to Krishna and through tradition-bound images, she expresses a true rhythm of reverence:

Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains
But you . . .

Stressing the sense of suffering and redemption she seeks to realise her dream and her union with Krishna. She writes:

I was entirely without lust. . . I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna. 39

In these poems, feelings of love, ardour and self-surrender becomes the mode of expression. She is aware of the futility of the task of redefining her feminine self, yet she continues her constant search for a relationship which would give her both love and security. She says:

I was looking for an ideal lover, I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. . . subconsciously. I hoped for the executioner whose axe would leave my head in two. 40
What these poems project over and over again is the self's confrontation and desperate attempt to transcend itself and "seek an end, a pure total freedom" by breaking through the barriers of physical and spiritual.

Kamala Das's poetry contains voices of human sufferings and social imbalance. Though she is essentially an introvert poet, yet she responds to such pain and distress with great sensitivity and compassion. The ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and the terror and horror faced by a common man after 1983 created a compassionate stirring of indignation in Kamala Das. She was touched by human, spiritual and cultural aspects of the tragedy. She visited Colombo in 1984 and was hurt by the magnitude of the killings and sufferings. The poems "The Sea at Gall Face Green", "Smoke in Colombo", "After July", "Shopper at the Cornells" and "Colombo" centre around the tragedies in Sri Lanka. She describes Colombo city as a "half burnt corpse":

The city was gray
And every window was
Shut. Fear was in the air
As the corpses smouldered.

Kamala Das is at her best as a poet of private sensibility. She possesses a modern Indian Woman's ambivalence; and her world is characterised by ecstasy, pain, love and despair. Most of her poems are woven around the theme of lost love and the search for an ideal. There is at times a morbid concern with death, suicide and funeral. Her poems bring out the horrified aspects of notorious world and show her concern with the male-tyranny. The self-mythification present in some of her poems gives an impression that for Das, it is death which helps her in getting an escape from the trap of lust and frustration, loneliness and abandonment. In the poems "Words and Birds", "A Holiday for me" and
"The Ancient Mango Tree", she cherishes the mystical desire for death, which "is revealed as an obscure parallel to life". But later her poems become more philosophical. She herself writes:

I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance.

Realising the futility of her efforts and "devouring sensibility", the poet absorbs "all that comes her way", and accepts "all the sights and smells and sounds", ranging from the sad songs of the dancing eunuchs to the hope of her dying mother, from the innocent to the vile, from joy to pain, in fact, the whole panoramic chain of diverse perceptions weaving one single conviction:

"... love
this gift of life, more than all".

Das writes in her autobiography:

I wished to escape from my home and walk on and on until at last my feet reached the end of the world. I did not think, then, that the traveller would only reach ultimately his starting place and that our ends, our destinations are our beginnings.
Her obsession with death is an important part of her feminine self and she articulates frankly:

I have reached my age in which
One forgives all.

Her preoccupation with love is replaced with guilt, and some of her poems acquire a philosophical realisation:

That in my heart
I have replaced love with...  
And discovered
That both love and hate are
Involvements.

As a true confessional poet, Kamala Das reveals acutely personal experiences, touched by the horrors of the ruthless world. To mould her poetic art, she employs the most discernible and powerful structural devices, which help her in revealing the innermost feelings and state of mind. While the impact of dramatic and narrative poetry depends on incidents, plot and character, lyrical poetry depends on the employment of the figures of speech and a distinct idiom. Das's poetry, which is immensely personal, employs simple language, recognizable images or symbols and a perceptible idea or notion to bring out the truthful nuances of the inner world. Her poems are essentially conventional with recurring symbols of nostalgic associations. Nalapat House with all its feudal associations, attractions and traditions is one such central symbol in Das's poetry. She had spent most of her life in distant urban centres and always had a wistful desire to return to her family house. In many of her poems, she has used this recurring symbol to show her emotional
attachment with this house. In "The Suicide", for example, she relates the childhood memories:

I had a house in Malabar
And a pale green pond
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months.

This family house and environs of childhood survived as a symbol of innocence and often she regretted leaving them for the dubious pleasures of urban life.

I should never have walked out of my red-tiled home in Malabar around which the Westerly wind and the trees weave silken music . . .

. . . The process of change, the imitation, the city type was itself a long illness, a nausea in the brain.

She feels proud of her family house in "A Hot Noon in Malabar" also: "I lived in such a house and was proud." Other poems related to Nalapat House are "Home in Malabar", "No Noon at My Village Home" and "Evening at Nalapat House".

Other symbols used frequently in Kamala Das's poems are the symbol of 'sea' and 'sun'. She has been associated with the 'sea' from an early age, as most of her time was spent in the cities beside ocean. She was fascinated by the Arabian Sea which was only "two miles away" from Nalapat House.
‘Sea’ has been as an old symbol of timelessness. It is a symbol of peace and spiritual detachment and the poet often wants to escape in its cool chambers. She writes in “Composition”:

All I want to now
Is to take a long walk
Into the sea
And lie there, resting
Completely involved.

It is an open-ended symbol that recurs with several significances such as life and immortality, hope and reality and dream and eternity.

Another dominating symbol in Kamala Das’s poem is that of ‘sun’, which represents drabness, hostility and lust. “Summer in Calcutta” begins with a symbolic representation of sun:

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass?

The warmth of the sun flows into the poet’s body like juice. In “The Conflagration” the passion of the two lovers is described as two suns meeting:

We came together like two suns meeting and each
Raging to burn the other out . . .
The symbol of sun mostly represents its 'hot', 'fiery', 'dry' and 'warm' nature.

In Das's poetry, 'human body' in its various shapes and shades is also a leading symbol. She has been conscious of her own dark skin and poor features:

I hated to see myself as I really was
In mirrors which threw back at me the pathetic
Contours of my thin body and the plain face.
With the protruding teeth.

The is set to be besieged with male lust and a consequent emotional corruption. It is also related to death and decay, which is one of the main themes of Das's poetry.

For a confessional poet, images and symbols are the useful devices to relate to the outer world. Das describes her private experiences, personal agonies and ideas which are projected through various images and symbols. K.R. Ramchandran Nair comments on her use of such devices:

In Kamala Das's poetry coherence is achieved around articulated themes by the artful enlistment of symbols, images and other figurative devices.45

Kamala Das is able to forge a language which would carry her emotions and feelings in the white heat of experience. Her advice to writers is significant:

... Write without
a pause, don't search for petty words
Which dilute the truth, but write in haste of
Everything perceived, and known and loved.

She knows that words are a nuisance and can be depositories of disturbed feelings:

But I tell myself, words
are a nuisance, beware of them. They
can be so many things, a
chasm where running feet must pause to
'ook, a sea with paralysing waves,
a flash of burning air, or
a knife most willing to cut your best
friend's throat.

Words grow on the poet 'like leaves' and bring out the inner sensations in a composed manner. Her language becomes natural and colloquial, which is moulded by a confessional urgency. She uses simple and natural speech more common in the day-to-day life. 'A Request' is a good example of controlled rhythmic structure.

When I die
Do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up
And let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth
What love was worth
In the end.
The lines are harmoniously matched with the rhythmic movement of the poem. The powerful unity of thought and feeling in "The Dance of the Eunuchs" creates an excellent musical structure:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round,
cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling. Beneath the fiery pulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced
and
They danced, oh, they danced . . .

An important feature of all confessional poetry is its constantly shifting moods. Kamala Das's poems embrace diverse moods of passionate attachment, agonising guilt, nauseating disgust and human bitterness. "Composition" is a good example of such shifting moods. The poem progresses from a composite state of innocence to a passionate state of youth and finally reaching to a matured state of adulthood and age. "The Old Playhouse", "In Love", "Gino" and "Glass" also contain images of physical love, which bring out the disgust, sickness and decay enshrined in the poet's experience. She possesses a unique flair for words and a remarkable fluency with the language. Sometimes this natural literary voice becomes its own victim, making her protests and cynicism her obsession and her poetry merely a clever verbiage. Commenting on the poetic structure of Kamala Das, E.V. Ramakrishnan writes:

Her poems are wanting in a patient waiting and delivering of thoughts in a spontaneous rhythm.
At the level of ideas, her poems are extremely compressed dynamic wholes on the verge of bursting. 46

Kamala Das’s poetic art is devoid of humour. Her poetry is tense and serious and lacks in light satire and amusing incidents. Ironical statements are used occasionally to explore the social conditions. She has a mature sense of verbal irony. In “Composition” she advises married couples in an ironic way to “obey each other’s crazy commands”. She defines marriage in an interesting way:

... marriage is meant to be all this anyway, being arranged in most humorous heaven.

Irony is also used in other poems like “The Inheritance”. In “Nani” she writes some capricious lines:

... They are lucky who asks questions and move on before The answers came...

In “The Fancy Dress Show” a tinge of social criticism is directed towards corrupt people.

Kamala Das’s voice is a voice of anguish, with no traces of pessimism or maudlin sentimentalism and possesses a vigorous sense of life and virile faith in human endeavour. She is honest and frank, and keeping herself at the centre of her poems, brings out the sense of violence and guilt of the world in a truly confessional way. She rightfully
describes with a legitimate sense of pride: “Deep inside I know well that I
have lived beautifully in this beautiful world.”47

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