Chapter 4

The Chess-man

Subject to the Janus-headed transference in the imaginary, symbolic and critical strata, a decoder may track down the implied speaking subject which is nothing other than "a function of the combination of signifiers" (Miller 33) and the linguistic structuring of the underlying psyche in the text "which is held in language [and]. . .practices the infinite deferral of the signified" (Barthes 75-76) in all works including those of Kamala Das. However we have to factor in an important aspect of criticism in general and structural analysis in particular at this juncture. As Susan S.Lanser notes:

. . .the narratives which have provided the foundation for narratology have been either men's texts or texts treated as men's texts. . . In the structuralist quest for 'invariant elements among superficial differences', for (so-called) universals rather than particulars, narratology has avoided questions of gender almost entirely. . . until women's writings, questions of gender, and feminist points of view are considered, it will be impossible even to know the deficiencies of
narratology (198-9).

It is in the same spirit that the much celebrated death of the author too should be taken care of before reading a 'feminist' discourse. Though it would be preposterous to practise reading work as the essence of a personality, among the elements that determines the reading point of view prominent are indications and knowledge of the sociocultural context and forces that provided the matrix under which the work is moulded and circulated. Cheryl Walker observes that though postmodern feminist critics are almost certain to practise their trade in defiance of authority, often proceeding polyvocally themselves and rarely claiming that a unified, coherent, and transcendental subjectivity lies behind the text, nevertheless the author has never quite disappeared from our practice. Nothing can be proven relevant to a text unless some principles controlling relevance (that is, restricting potential hermeneutic strategies) are posited, a position problematic for those who are committed to radical open-endedness. If the text cannot be closed to effects previously considered extrinsic to it, effects like its repetition, the history of its conventions, the sociopolitical context of its composition, and so on, it also cannot be closed to the biographical contexts of its writing. It is not true that we read
criticism and fiction in diametrically opposed ways, limiting the importance of the author's subjectivity in one while exalting it in the other. Furthermore, the reversal of those positions (erasing the author of fictive work while preserving the author of criticism) also seems misguided (554-9).

Similarly when male/female relations are analyzed only as power relations between consciousness, the concrete psychological reality in which women live is ignored. Women do not struggle against an anonymous other women, but against fathers, brothers, mothers, husbands. Any theory that posits original autonomous selves must in the end present women's failure at self-assertion as weakness of will and bad faith, if it does not revert to real biological disadvantage. Neither result offers much in the way of hope. A woman cannot change her anatomy, nor, perhaps, can she will to be wilful (Nye 115).

Two outstanding instances of the power dynamics and the process of subjectification that does not strictly follow biological gender divisions in Kamala Das are the short story 'The Eunuch' and the much acclaimed poem 'The Dance of the Eunuchs'. The story has its fabula a few kernels and existents fleshed out by the apparently marginalised satellites; an exhausted and demented crone
trespasses on a eunuch ghetto hoping to reclaim her long lost child and leaves the place in vain, consciously or unconsciously, decrying and obliterating the once-deictic ratiocinations of possession and ownership. This bare skeleton is metamorphosed into a discourse entwined with planes both abstruse and sticky.

The *OED* defines eunuch as “a castrated person of the male sex; also, such a person employed as a harem attendant, or in Oriental courts and under the Roman emperors, charged with important affairs of the state”. Linguistic evidence suggests that hijras in India are mainly thought of as more male than female, although females who do not menstruate can also become hijras. The word *hijra* is a masculine noun, most widely translated into English as either ‘eunuch’ or ‘hermaphrodite (intersexed)’. Both these glosses emphasize sexual impotence, which is understood in India to mean a physical defect impairing the male sexual function, both in intercourse (in the inserter role) and in reproductive ability. *Hijra* sometimes implies, but is not culturally equivalent to, *zenanna*, a term that literally means woman, and connotes a man who has sex with other men in the receptor role. It is widely believed in India that a man who has continued sexual relations in the receiver role will lose sexual vitality in his genitals and become
impotent (Nanda 380).

Indian emic sex and gender categories of hijra collapse the etic categories of (born) hermaphrodite and (made) eunuch. While ambiguous male genitalia serve as the most important culturally defined sign of the hijra, in practical terms any indication of a loss of masculinity, whether impotence, effeminate behaviour or a desire for sexual relations with men in the receptor role, may be taken as a sign that one should join the hijras. Much less frequently, women who fail to menstruate take this as a sign that they should become hijras, but masculine (or nonfeminine) behaviour in women is never associated with becoming a hijra.

The term hijra also collapses the two different analytical categories of sex and gender; the Western social scientific distinction between these two terms is no part of Indian discourse. While hijras talk about themselves as neither man nor woman in physical terms, defining themselves as 'not woman' because they cannot bear children, they go on to add criteria that are clearly also those of the feminine role in India, such as their preference for women's clothing and women's occupations, their liking for children, their gendered erotic fantasies and experiences, such as their desire for male sexual partners, their tem-
peraments and their gender identity, as either women or hijra.

As eunuch-transvestites, a major identification is made between hijras and Arjun, hero of the Mahabhrata, who lives for a year in the guise of a eunuch, wearing bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire and teaching the women of the king's court to dance and to sing. In this disguise, Arjun participates in weddings and births, providing legitimation for the ritual contexts in which the hijras perform. The portrayal of Arjun in popular enactments of the Mahabharata in a vertically divided half-man, half-woman form highlights this identification. This form of Arjun reiterates the sexually ambivalent Shiva, who appears as Ardhanarishwara, also a vertically divided half-man, half-woman, representing Siva united with shakti. Ardhanarishwara supports the identification of Arjun with Siva and of both with the hijras. Siva is an important sexually ambivalent figure in Hinduism, incorporating both male and female characteristics. He is an ascetic--one who renounces sex--and yet he appears in many erotic and procreative roles. His most powerful symbol and object of worship is the linga, or phallus, but the phallus is almost always set in the yoni, the symbol of the female genitals. Although sometimes ambivalently regarded, these mytho-
logical, dramatic and historical roles nonetheless give positive meaning to the lives of the many individuals with a variety of mixed gender identifications, physical conditions and erotic preferences who join the hijra community (Nanda 377)

From remote antiquity, eunuchs have been employed as guards and servants in harems or other women's quarters, and as chamberlains to kings. Eunuchs were considered the most suitable guards for the many wives or concubines a ruler might have in his palace, and the eunuchs' confidential position in the harems of princes frequently enabled them to exercise an important influence over their royal masters and even to raise themselves to stations of great trust and power. Some rose to become bodyguards, confidential advisers, and even ministers, generals, and admirals. Most eunuchs underwent castration as a condition of their employment, though others were castrated as punishment or after they had been sold by poor parents.

In English there is the common word 'hermaphrodite' to describe organisms with the characteristics of both the sexes. In the story, however, the word 'napumsakam' is used to denote those beings without a clear sexual identity. The word is translated as 'eunuch' though the word 'hijra' is used in the translation of the same story in The Sandal
The word 'castration' defies confinement both in psychoanalysis and in its critical incarnation as an unconscious trace "that is established without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes, and which by this very fact, makes any interpretation especially difficult in the case of women" (Ecrits 282). To accept this as veracious purports to view of the phallic signifier as one with no signified as such but only as symbolization of the learning of difference as an effect which posits a materiality in language which differentiates the word 'qua' meaning from the word as the sense of its meanings. Logically eunuch is destitute of a signifier and signification like a woman (than a man) who too misses the phallus (than a man)-- "the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier" (285) -- and who "in order to be the phallus... the signifier of the desire of the Other... reject(s) an essential part of femininity, namely all her attributes in the (sexual)masquerade" (290). She eventually runs short of it in the unconscious and by dint of the same experiences foisted xenosis in addition to metaphysical unbelonging in a hierarchized male gazing system where the irreducible biological gender or sexual difference is
read as a facilitating pathway to glorified servitude.

Most paradoxically these creatures who "describe the beauty of those ladies' limbs in obscene words" (Palaayananam 85) are invited to bless (or not forbidden from) auspicious occasions like the birth of a child. They are simultaneously scared and sacrilegious like a corpse or a whore is considered a good augury in Kerala:

Hijra performances are surrounded by ambivalence, which parallels the ambivalence towards hijras themselves. The treatment of the hijras rests on a combination of mockery, fear and respect. Although hijras have an auspicious presence, they also have an inauspicious potential. The loss of virility the hijras represent is a major specific source of the fear they inspire. The power of hijras to bless a family with fertility and fortune has an obverse side: they are also believed to have the power to curse a family with infertility and misfortune (Nanda 392)

This unfathomable contradiction is tantamount to the state of women as she is virtually relegated to the backyard or defied to stagnancy, never allowed to self-realiza-
tion despite her half (or more) share in our biological existence. At this level the predicament of the eunuch can be seen as identical to that of a (any) woman. Consequently in the story the structural myth of the eunuch strikes an emphatic note of linguistic (and thus social and cultural) insecurity laced with other emotions featured in a restrictive repository braced by rigid forms of agency. The feminine is never a mark of the subject; the feminine could not be an attribute of a gender. Rather the feminine is the signification of lack, signified by the Symbolic, a set of differentiating linguistic rules that effectively create sexual difference. This masculine linguistic position undergoes individuation and heterosexualisation required by the founding prohibitions of the Symbolic law, the law of the Father. The incest taboo that bars the son from the mother and thereby instates the kinship relation between them is a law enacted in the name of the Father. Similarly the law that refuses the girl's desire for both her mother and father requires that she take up the emblem of maternity and perpetuate the rules of kinship. Both masculine and feminine positions are thus instituted through prohibitive laws that produce culturally intelligible genders, but only through the production of an unconscious sexuality that reemerges in the domain of the imaginary (Butler 270).
Many argue that the very notion of identity has served to constrain the political possibilities for transforming current gender regimes. Traditional feminist appeals to the identity of women have unintentionally served to reinforce a binary gender order which ruthlessly colonizes and controls dispersed identities and fractured subjectivities; that is gender is a repetitive performance. Individuals model their gender performances after fantasies, imitations and idealizations of what it means to be a man or woman within current gender regimes. In this view gender performances are analyzed as copies, imitations and repetitions of cultural stereotypes, linguistic conventions and symbolic forms governing the production of masculinity and femininity. Subverting the repetition of male-dominated gender regimes is the key task of a critical feminist ideology.

In the story the old woman who herself experiences lack—physical lack of the phallus, the linguistic lack originating from this and finally the missing daughter—steps into a world of lack embodied—the eunuchdom—in her search. As Teresa Brennan argues the phallus is the mark of lack, and difference in general and sexual difference in particular. As the mask of lack, it refers to the fact that the subject is complete unto itself. It is here that the
symbolic father and father connect: the former breaks up the illusion of unity, the latter represents that break. As the mark of difference in general, the phallus is allied with the Logos, with the principle that the recognition of difference is the condition of logic and language alike. That is to say, thinking as such requires difference. This brings us to a critical Lacanian claim that sexual difference is the crucial one in being able to speak, thus think: and that speaking is critical to sexual difference. The visual recognition of sexual difference is a channel connecting the heterogeneous experience of the feeling sensing body to something that is alien to it: the differential structure of language: in turn, the language lets its name the difference (4).

That is, she craves for the object of maternal love and impinges on a spiritually distant domain functioning on a radically different order as reiterated in the story; "Only eunuchs are here. . . . We don't like your kinsmen and police coming here after you. This colony is only for us" (Palayananm 87-89). As we know hijras lead their daily lives within their own social communities, and "their position in Indian society shares features of both a caste within society and renouncers outside it" (Nanda 373). The uninvited entry of the old woman, hence, is a meteoric inter-
section of two concentric circles, decentred for a while, having much common hidden substance. Within these circles of superficially different redoubts of law is perceived the recurring pattern of lack and the follow ups viz. desire, demand and the inevitable frustration; hence the desultory stagings of paradigms like the physical loss of the penis, loss of motherhood, loss of the desire of mother, loss of symbolic order and loss of fertility. Desire is the essence of human beings and his desire concerns a lack in being and is apparently not so far from the etymological sense of the pedantic English 'to desiderate': "Feel to be missing, regret absence of, wish to have".

But desire in Lacan is more fundamentally something lacking: the unconscious which is itself built up around loss. Desire is also a principle of structation in the genisis of the subject. It points to that void or real in human existence around which interpretation in the registers of the imaginary and/or symbolic grows up. Desire-as-lack, in other words, is contradictory to human representation and the making of meaning. The adventure of making meaning of their existence-as-lack is what drives human populations to fashion imaginary and symbolic representations into the uneasy cohesiveness of culture.
Anchoring itself on this structuring point of view the story explores textuality of culture—a set of men and women and the representations which inhabit them—and 'culturality', so to say, of text which jointly travail to express the human sexual difference.

The aforesaid phases are to be found in the various mixers of registers, or in popular parlance 'characters' whose place lies somewhere between syntax and discourse, exactly the way in which they appear in the unfolded, or more appropriately in an idiosyncratically deciphered, work. The eunuch veils the physical lack of the penis. This lack is revealed only as an outlet of wrath and as a desperate means of authentication. In the former instance, however, it is an intransitive unveiling—a parading of nothingness, the presence of an absence, the show of an invisible and invincible curse: “The eunuch would raise its skirt to expose the otherwise hidden curse” (Palayanam 85).

Lying both beyond and before demand, desire transcends it and sets the physical apparatus in motion. Desire is for the impossible real, for jouissance or the expulsion of the law; for being, not for knowing. The eunuchs manipulate the facade of lack as a tool for the tantalizing end of desire gratification. They derive pleasure from others' conster-
nation, keeping others from their word/world order—a counter obstracism intended to body forth protest and indignation. Their feminine dress and manners are often exaggerations, particularly in their aggressive sexuality, and indeed are designed to contrast with the normative submissive demeanor of ordinary women. What their actions try to body forth is a strong sense of transgression of boundaries, frustration and authentication.

We can meet them reversing the conventional roles ascribed to man and woman in a rape or sexual harassment out of the desperate urge to thwart disparagement in terms of subject positions laid by language. Scarcely dithering, they invert the relative perspectives of the hunter and the hunted only to have the same physical experience as in any act but to have her existence or to mock herself. We come across some kind of imitation in such instances:

Hijra performances do not attempt a realistic imitation of women but rather a burlesque, and the very act of dancing in public is contrary to ordinary feminine behavior. Hijras use coarse and abusive language, both among themselves and to their audiences, which is contrary to the ideal of womanhood in India. In Gujrat, hijras
smoke the hookah, which is normally reserved only for men, and the many hijras who smoke cigarettes acknowledge this as masculine behavior (Nanda 382)

Consciously or unconsciously the eunuchs sense and use the viability of a tacit but all-pervading order. Rugma, who answers the descriptions by the old woman about her lost child, is in a state of ecstasy and excruciating thirst as evident from her simmering ritual-like dance: “Oh! Deity Yellamma, protect me’, Rugma sang, ‘My body burns. Who lit the fire between my legs? Who dammed the rivers of my blood?’” (Palayanam 92). Obviously what she chants is more metaphorical than ordinary language, where fact—not the Real—and fiction are melded. Unlike the usual practice, the anonymous person who has built dams across the rivers of her blood becomes a conduit of alienation. By all good reason, that generic ‘who’ that encodes the dialectics of emancipation and suppression is a social structure. Rugma is not alone but is a symbol of a universal state:

...numerous eunuchs were marching like silhouettes from the huts roofed with tutnag sheets. There was a drought in them. That drought stared at the world from those eyes darkened with lin-
ers. Crimson dust soared around those stamping feet. It rained suddenly. A drizzle which lasted for one or two seconds. The old woman felt it smelt of the urine of mice. . . (92).

The dance is symphonic with the ambience of a 'yaga' presumably meant for fertility—the ability to copulate and procreate—as suggested by drought which is of crucial significance in Occidental and Oriental myths, like the episode of Rishyasringa in the Mahabharata. Any way the desire for being, expressed through the demand for love which does not seek concrete objects of gratification, comes to disappointment as the rain does not suffice to quench the perennial thirst. What follows is a phase of realization. The old woman clearly takes note of the mole above the lips of Rugma:

Rugma’s nose-stud twinkled in the moon light. Every one could clearly see a pretty mole above the lips. The old woman went on gazing at Rugma. . . . The old woman got up and stood by the coir-cot. She asked Rugma, looking keenly at her face.

'How old are you child?'
'She is twenty-four', Sakku said, 'she belongs to Mysore. It's only four years she has been here. She is not your beautiful daughter'

'That mole...' muttered the crone (90-1).

But despite the identification of the mole, the old woman drops the early claims: "She nodded, 'Right, you are not my child. Mine was fair', she said, 'your skin is of soil-tint. Certainly you must be the daughter of Earth'" (93).

This residue of intellectual dishonesty left by the old woman highlights her altered mind obsessed with the ultimate self-discovery of the eunuchs displayed through the dance. Whatever be the degree of truth in her claims of motherhood, they do not remain in force. Rugma feels, or is forced to feel, that she is the daughter of earth, the universalized personification of patience, endurance and vegetation. The world Rugma lives in is radically different from the world of the old woman. As mentioned earlier the position of hijras in Indian society shares features of both a caste within society and renouncers outside it. She leaves Rugma's world defined by negation with a realization--for which she had to wait eighteen years in toil and hibernation--provided by her (supposedly) formerly extended
but presently severed self which is an intimately living creature yet to find a place in our lexicon. For this new species also something will remain a mirage--the Real, the impossible, limping somewhere in the intricate web of language or in the replacement of reality with the image that can be termed the first cultural act otherwise called the origin of expropriation of desire.

The rhetoric of alienation surfacing through the astute and acute presentation of alternate sexual behaviour is a developed tongue in which even positions in lovemaking bear curious denotations/connotations.

The affective constitution of the story having the pattern of a dream pastiche renders itself through the deliberate shadows or nuances of words--eclectic but convergent, and elentic--decanted into an organic (and most ironically loose) structure. The stinking garbage, the dance of the eunuchs, the eunuchs singing in a crow-like voice, the teeth of Ramkinkari looking like tombstones, the moonlight falling on Rugma, the golden attire like ebullient waves, the drumbeat that disturbs the old woman like a mild headache, brass changing itself into gold, trees with jewels hanging on them are all images belonging to the class already referred to. In other words the number of condensations or metaphors exceeds that of displacements
or metonymies for the outward motley emotions are monolithic sans many story lines. Here images do not engender asunder values or combine themselves to give a prolonged chain of events. Instead they provide imperceptible and intangible antinomies pertaining to alienating identifications. The kaleidoscopic weaving of frenzied dance, dammed blood, red dust and rain culminates in a dream like structure. As mentioned earlier, with the entry of the subject into the language of the signifier--into verbal language in this case--it enters into a structure of articulation in which direct identification no longer functions: the subject can never again hope to find itself in the signifier, because the latter only receives its identity by virtue of their difference. The subject is thereby split between the 'said' and the 'saying', between the enunciated and the enunciation: it is inscribed in a structure of representation that cannot be traced back to an original presence, but is instead constituted by an irreducible movement of repetition.

This irreducible movement of repetition assumes added significance against the backdrop of the ways in which the female self is constructed in the symbolic order. According to Kristeva female subjectivity seems to be linked both to cyclical and monumental time (eternity), at least in so
far as both are ways of conceptualizing time from the perspective of motherhood and reproduction. The time of history, however, can be characterized as linear time: time as project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival. This linear time is also that of language considered as the enunciation of a sequence of words.

As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable jouissance. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word 'temporality' hardly fits: [and which is] all-compassing and infinite like imaginary space.
In the Lacanian view, the unconscious (as opposed to the ego or internalized object relations) is the fundament of psychic life, and this linguistically constructed and structured unconscious is our sexuality. Subjectivity emerges out of unconscious sexual drives. This sexualization and subjectivity are by definition constituted in terms of difference, or opposition, between the sexes, an opposition that is structured linguistically and not biologically. We are also born into this sexual/linguistic setting: it preceded us and makes inevitable our developmental situation (Chodorow 187). It is the same all-pervading unconscious that determines the understanding of the eunuchs too.

In one sense the poem 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' is the poetic equivalent of the story 'The Eunuch'. However the presence of the absent and silent signifiers endows the poem with more semantic pliability, structural coherence and textual space for more perceptive readings into the nuances of the process of signification. It is the combined landscape of repetition, barrenness and lack that is unveiled in the poem. Repetitions provide the poem with a wild rhythm, create an ambience of in/fertility and resemble the incremental repetition of a traditional ballad.
or literary ballad like 'The Highwayman' ('The highwayman came riding, riding, riding'). For example the constructions like 'It was hot, so hot', 'skirts going round and round', 'anklets jingling, jingling, jingling', and 'they danced, oh, they danced'.

Many images in the poem signify lack in every sense of the word. A closer reading of the antithetically balanced line- "Some beat their drums: others beat their sorry breasts"- shows that they are mere paradigmatic configurations of lack: one on a physical plane and other psychic. Similarly the felling they derive from dance which is a perfect synchronization of the body and the soul is equally void—a "vacant ecstasy". The telling images of half burnt logs taken from a pyre, rottenness and drought shed light to the motif of incomplete and fluid sexual positions. Unlike the poems examined in the last chapter 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' has a highly detached third person narrative perspective and the craving for the imaginary order is absolutely absent. On the contrary the most unambiguously expressed desire is to achieve and sustain womanhood as the condition of the eunuchs who nullify the construct man/woman is often identified with that of woman.

'The Feeling of Kindness' is a story that highlights the long, painful and intricate processes of subjectification
through previously determined gender roles. In it the hero Sivaprasad, despite his physical existence and being as a male finds himself entangled in a network of concepts and constructs that define what the masculine is and what it is not. He finds it extremely difficult and virtually impossible to cope with the popular perceptions of gender differentiation. Sivaprasad has physical features that are considered feminine in plenty. Naturally he is accorded the status of a girl by his own brothers and even parents. One is often not born, but rather becomes, a woman or a man socially assimilating the attributes of the gender in question. No ultimate and absolute biological, psychological, or economic factor determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces gendered roles—man, woman or eunuch.

It is through an extrinsic perception offered by the mirror that Sivaprasad realizes himself:

He took the mirror that had been laid inverted to examine his face.

Plump cheeks, red lips, locks that hang on to the forehead, eyes with long lashes (Ksthakal 42).

Just like the case of primary perception, it is from an external point of view that Sivaprasad sees his social
dimensions through images created, propagated and reinforced by popular media like the television. The feminine features are coupled with physical deformity and language casualties. He is handicapped and does not have good command over language like his poor but smart and competent friend Vargheese. So Sivaprasad is outside the domain of language like a woman who too faces the same predicament as a result of the absence of the phallus. His desire is to get hold of that ability, to wield that weapon and redefine himself. His greatest object of desire those qualities owned and displayed Vargheese:

Sivan often would wish he too knew literary words like Vargheese. Vargheese has got everything—father, mother and a happy life. He is brave and knowledgable. What about me? *(Kathakal 42).*

It is only inside his room that he gets emotional solace and security in the beginning of the story. It functions as an Imaginary Order for him, a world that he himself has designed and built, despite its shortcomings and relative defects:

It is his little heaven once the door is closed.

It was inscribed 'No Admission' on the threshold with red chalk. Blue mixed lime of the walls had
begun to come off as a result of hammering nails on to it to hang pictures. There was only one picture then—that of a ship. Red ink had been spilled over on the partly soiled table cloth. Still it was with a sense of pride that he looked around (41).

This cozy state of affairs does not last long but culminates in a convulsive act of breaking free from the existing order following a string of illusionary and real identifications and contrasts with the rest of the world. It is through the binary opposites like healthy/fragile, talkative/taciturn, plane picture/gaudy pictures of cine artistes, sophistication/rudeness, literary in English/illiteracy in English that he sees himself. These binaries cannot sustain themselves beyond a point and collapse and lead the boy to a state of utter pessimism, despondency and frustration. The immediate cause to this reaction is a cultural interdiction on the part of the literate and sophisticated mother who imposes a restriction on him by rebuking for reading others' letters, an action that epitomizes the strong cultural law that braces privacy, writing and need. At this moment everything breaks down. Even his room that was a safe nest for him earlier does not salvage his self:
"Don't read others' letters"

Said the mother. Slowly, very slowly, he ascended the stair and went to his room, dragging the right leg. He locked the door behind, took the mirror stared into for some time and then broke it by throwing it on to the floor. She lay on the coat for a time looking at the pieces of glass glittering in the dark.

"I hate all these... I strongly hate..." (48).

The last words of Sivaprasad reveal the extent of faceless subjectification. It is in the framework of signs that this process takes place. As Lacan opines the character of a set, in the mathematical sense of the term, possessed by the play of signifiers, and which opposes it for example to the indefiniteness of the whole number, enables us to conceive a schema in which the function of the obligatory card is immediately applicable. If the subject is the subject of the signifier--determined by it--one may imagine the synchronic network as it appears in the diachrony of preferential effects (Four Fundamental 67).

Constructs, social conditioning and subjectification are the traits of the poem 'The Old Playhouse'. The poem has an unmistakable female sensibility and is redolent with
elements of flux and the connotations of the mirror. It is with an absolutely free swallow that the speaker compares her pre-linguistic days. This conditioning is neither accidental or arbitrary but one carried out in accordance with a well though about strategy: "You planned to tame a swallow" (Only the Soul 30). The new order that is decided by the husband is fully dominated by him and is capable of obliterating any trace of memories. The tragedy of the woman is that it is because of an irrepressible urge that she approaches him and finds herself helpless in his world illuminated by artificiality. She loses her command over language and thus the only way to express herself. She becomes alienated and her subjectivity becomes shattered. Benveniste's insights into the discontinuous nature of the linguistic subject have many similarities with the Lacanian notion of the subject as a function within a symbolic order, as structured by language as difference, instead of as a unified autonomous consciousness:

Before strictly human relations are established, certain relations have already been determined. They are taken from whatever nature may offer as supports, supports that are arranged in themes of opposition. Nature provides--I must use the word--signifiers,
and these signifiers organize human relations in a creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them (Four Fundamental 20).

'The Lunatic Assylum' is a poem that exhales the Lacanian notion that the Real is what which is radically extrinsic to the process: on of signifiers, the irremediable and intractable 'outside' of language: the indefinitely reading goal towards which the signifying tends, the vanishing point of the Symbolic and Imaginary alike. In the view of Lacan:

The real is beyond the automation, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is that which always lies behind the automation, and it is quite obvious, throughout Freud's research, that it is this that is the object of his concern (53-54).

The poem begins with the description of an endlessly burning electric light that chases "moody shadows" from the inmates and thus makes them remain with open eyes. However, distinguishing itself from the general notion of
the demented as a group that calls for our sympathy and empathetic listening, the narrative voice sees them as a brave section happily free from the conditioning mechanisms of the society through signs, symbols and other signifiers of subjectification, and thus nearer to the Real than others who are still engendered by language:

Do not pity them, they

Were brave enough to escape, to

Step out of the

Brute regiments of

Sane routine, ignoring the bugles, the wail

Of sirens and

The robot’s stern bark... (Only the Soul 31).

'Insanity' is a story has structural similarities with 'The Lunatic Asylum'. It is replete with ambiguity and ambivalence achieved through the deft handling of the first person focalisation. The narrative voice, presumably in the absence of a better source, depends on hearsay and comes to believe that her long standing intimate friend Aruna has gone nuts. Willingly she takes the words of the hostile house maid that Aruna has been bed-ridden for quite
some time now for granted, consolidate and concretise the earlier cognitive mis/recognition formed out of the earlier shreds of information and thus approaches her with a coloured attitude as any other member of the society is apt to do. What awaits the narrative voice is not a violent or eccentric soul but one who exhibits the features, expressions and emotions of a marginalised woman. Aruna has completely lost the ability to locate herself in terms of a framework provided by time and space but coherently and convincingly relates the circumstances under which she was stamped mad. For the narrator, however, these words that portray the depth and width of marginalisation, alienation and sexual oppression sound less cogent than the deeply entrenched views inculcated by the faceless society. Instead of trust what dominates the speech of the narrator is logic and doubt (Kathakal 114).

This disbelief appears to be natural when we realize that the world order that Aruna belongs to is one that is above and beyond the sense, sensibly and comprehension of the narrator. Aruna finds it impossible to leave her husband because his face assumes childish innocence and purity when he sleeps. This apparently silly and absurd reason that precludes the liberation of Aruna and perpetuates her slavery is deceptive as she is contend with her state of
affairs. She is like the Slave in the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectics which Lacan depends on. In this model Desire is the preconditior for the existence and appearance of the word 'I' and it is by virtue of desire that the subject becomes aware of himself and is moved into action which is capable of satisfying desire only by the negation, destruction or transformation of the desired object. The 'I' of Desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content by a negating action that satisfies Desire in destroying, transforming and assimilating the desired non-I. Desire is different from the desired thing and is directed towards another Desire, another greedy emptiness, another 'I'. Desire is human only if one desires not the body but the Desire of the other; that is to say, if one wants to be 'desired' or, rather, 'recognized' in one's human value. To desire the Desire of another is really to desire 'recognition'. If there is a multiplicity of desires seeking universal recognition, it is obvious that the action that is born of these desires can--at least in the beginning--be nothing but a life-and-death fight. It is assumed that the fight ends in such a way that both adversaries remain alive. Now, if this is to occur, one must suppose that one of the adversaries, preferring to live rather than die, gives in to the other and submits to him, recognizing him as the Master without being recognised by
him. The Master, unable to recognize the other who recognizes him, finds himself in an impasse. The Master makes the Slave work in order to satisfy his own desires. To satisfy the desires of the Master, the Slave has to repress his own instincts, to negate or 'overcome' himself. The Slave transcends himself by working, that is, he educates himself. In his work he transforms things and transforms himself at the same time. In becoming master Nature by work, the Slave frees himself from Nature, from his own nature, and from the Master. It is because work is an auto-creative act that it can raise him from slavery to freedom. The future and history hence belong not to the warlike Master, but to the working slave. The Slave changes himself by changing the world.

Aruna, who appears to be enslaved by the husband and the society as a whole as represented by the narrator, servant and her child, transcends her status, achieves a state of elation that others never get and ultimately elevates herself to another order which is beyond ordinary grasp. It is with a problematic question that remains a disturbing poser for the narrator and the reader that the story comes to an end:

"You understand me Vimala, don't you?" (114).
The answer to this rhetorical question is destined to be negative. It is from a vantage point that we can't feel, let alone comprehend, that Aruna perpsepctivizes events and actions. As a woman who has already traversed the hazy lanes of marginalisation and subjectification, her self becomes all the more fragmented and split.

'Walls' is a story that sees life from a point of view that has completed many phases in life. The male narrative voice finds himself fixed and glued in grooves of life so inexorably that he feels alienated and begins picturing him as an intruder to the safe and happy life of the rest of his family:

Sheer habit had compelled him to speak. No one listened to him any way. .. He leaned back, exhausted at the discovery that he no longer loved his family. Quite often in recent times he had felt, while near all of them, that he was the lone intruder (Padmavati 102).

It was his quest to become sophisticated and thus launch himself into another order that brought about the alienation. He and his wife now belong to two different worlds with virtually nothing to share between. He goes through the tantalizing dreams of an extended imaginary
order that supposedly gave him peace and satisfaction, becomes unreasonably scared to see his own subordinate who personifies sophistication and this drive culminates in an uncontrollable desire to break the existing laws and to look for the extraordinary:

...when the soft-spoken young man entered the room and moved about noiselessly, he began to feel uncomfortable.

The rain lashed at the glass-panes. He felt a perverse joy in opening the windows to let the rain wet the tiles. He remembered the thatched house in Palghat where the rain leaked into brass vessels all laid out to catch the water. Rain plopped against the metal with a twang (105).

It is a somewhat similar motive that informs the story 'Nashtapetta Neelambari' too. It is the irrepressible urge of a woman for a lost youth that functions as the drive in the stroy. After the death of her husband, this childless woman visits Madurai, the town full of associations and memories for her, after a lapse of thirty-three years. Though she is not in a position to say for sure what she is searching for, the impulse is so strong that she leaves for Madurai neglecting the concerns voiced by her
well-wishers. What follows is a series of events in quick succession like a cinematic montage which according to Lacan is the best and most effective method of representing drives:

Let me say that if there is anything resembling a drive it is a montage. It is not a montage conceived in a perspective referring to finality. This perspective is the one that is established in modern theories of instinct, in which the presentation of an image derived from montage is quite striking. Such a montage, for example, is the specific form that will make the hen in the farmyard run to ground if you place within a few yards of her the cardboard outline of a falcon, that is to say, something that sets off a more or less appropriate reaction, and where the trick is to show us that it is not necessarily an appropriate one. I am not speaking of this sort of image.

(The Four Fundamental 169)

The heroine Subhadra reaches the dilapidated house of her former teacher-cum-lover Sasthrikal who had married his own niece and her companion Jnanam. From her Subhadra
comes to learn Sastrikal died more than an year before. Utterly shattered, she leaves the place and after refreshing herself reaches the Meenakshi temple clad in dazzling sarees and jewellery like a robust bride. There, in a dream-like experience, she meets the man she has been longing to see. He tells her that Jnanam is incurably demented and relates her about the poor life he has been leading. She wants to spend some time with him. However the man reads her mind like a wizard and plays the role of a conditioned human being by trying to sensitize her about the need to play the respective roles given to us by an invisible form of agency:

Every one of has certain responsibilities. Our aim in life is to perform them. Don’t destroy the fame and name of your husband. I have to live here looking after my insane wife. Another path is not destined for us in this life (Neelambari 92).

Ponderings of a woman who submits herself to conditioning form the subject matter of the poem ‘Substitute’. It quickly moves from a sense of loss to a sphere of compromises and adaptation. The loss is not personal but impersonal, primal, universal and primordial: “Lost all, lost even / What I never had” (Only the Soul 53). The acute sense of loss renders life vapid, meaningless and absurd. The knowledge that no amount of struggle is going to save
her pushes her into a resigned condition. Instead of liberation, she starts searching for an opportunity of playing the tailor-made active roles earmarked for women in society:

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

Stand near my husband to make a proud pair.

It will be all right if I join clubs

And flirt a little over telephone.

It will be all right, it will be all right

I am the type that endures (53).

This is a frequent strand in the works of Kamala Das. Sharmila Sreekumar observes that most women who inhabit her workd occupy embattled terrains and those who emerge as survivors by becoming active subjects; woman's agency here involves an appropriation (consciously or otherwise) of the discourses and identities that have been produced in the sight of their female bodies (33).