Chapter-III

The Descendants

*The Descendants* is the second volume by Kamala Das, it has 23 poems in all. This collection has many poems which are death-conscious, death obsessed. ‘The Descendants’, ‘The Invitation’, The ‘Composition’ are some of the finest poems in this collection.

‘Composition’ has seven units of varying length. In the first section the speaker asserts that she faces the sea, heard long ago as ceaseless whisper in a shell; thereafter heard at nights as breaking surf while she lay beside her grandmother. The house has since crumbled and the old woman is dead. The second unit speaks of the loss of innocence, the tragedy of growth, the discovery of horror, the speakers removal from the sea and the sea’s recurrence in her dreams. The third unit tells of marriage and sexual interactions with both men and women, none of which appease, the most of which require play-acting. It ends with the poetess saying that she misses her granny. The fourth unit reiterates the futility and sameness of all sexual encounters and the indifference of the external world to the soul. The fifth unit recalls the time when the speaker’s grandmother invited her to spend
one night in the old family home, waited for her, burning a lamp, but
she could not go for which she regrets now. The sixth unit presents
the tawdry, jumbled world of prostitution, marriage, friendship and
enmity. It closes with a call for despair on every side and a longing
for a walk into the sea in the hope of rest. The seventh and the final
unit declares this to be impossible. Even the crumbling of the self
brings no rest; the pains continue, the cells cannot escape, immortality
of the consciousness is a certainty. The only freedom is the “freedom
to decompose”, a word that supplies the title ‘Composition’. The
speaker in the poems allows the early memory to surface through the
pain of growing:

The tragedy of life/is not death but growth;

the child growing into adult/and growing out

of needs/discovering/that the old have black

rimmed nails/and scalps that emanate/a sweet,

mouldy smell./In the years that followed/I was

busy growing/I had then/no time at all for the

sea./But, there was off and on a seascape/in

my dreams/in the water/sloshing up/and sliding down.¹
Then ‘Shut Out that Moon’ and ‘Neutral Tones’ have the tone of Hardian pessimism. The title poem ‘The Descendants’ borders on nihilism. In the poem ‘The Suicide’, the sea is a Source of a constant distraction, a raging threat, and invites her to negation:

The sea is garrulous today, come in,

Come in what do you lose by dying, and

Besides, yours losses are my gains.2

The strains of death ruins explicit in ‘A Request’, and in ‘The Invitation’, while the sea offers one kind of death, a complete negation, her lover whom she cannot disobey offers another, metaphorical death—the feeling of “lying on a funeral pyre/with a burning head”. Another poem ‘Convicts’ depicts physical love in the elemental terms of physical labour and heat, and as a physical experience that belongs to no intellectual language. ‘Substitute’ is both poignant and truculent. The need to conform to the conventions of a hypocritical society makes one’s feeling of emptiness more painful. The poem is ironical in tone. ‘Glass’ has the same theme. The poem ‘Captive’ describes Kamala Das’s love as “an empty gift”, “A glided empty container” and herself as the prisoner of “the womb’s blinded hunger, the muted whisper at the Core”. ‘Jaisurya’ combines
the narrative and the meditative with details of whole gamut of feelings preceding and following the birth of her son Jaisurya. The newly born child is set against the background of ‘war’, ‘bloodshed and despair’ in ‘The White Flower’.

Kamala Das is basically a poet of love. Most of her poems deal with the theme of unfulfilled love and yearning for love. ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’ is a good example of a poem dealing with this theme. In the poem she finds an objective correlative in the dance of the eunuchs to represent the theme of suppressed desire within. The dance of the eunuchs with their shirts going round and round, and their anklets jingling is contrasted with their vacant (stazy, suggesting a gulf between the external, simulated passion and the sexual drought and rottenness inside. The contrast is sustained all through the poem. The dance of the eunuchs is a dance of the sterile, and therefore the unfulfilled and unquenchable love of the women in the poet. In ‘The Freaks’ too, the theme is the same. Like Alice in Wonderland, Kamala Das is transformed into a new person by eating her husband’s magic loaf. This helps her husband to play his own games and even to ‘embalm’ her with lust, but lust is not what she is pining for. She wants understanding and sympathy, to mature into a person, to have an identity of her own, and above all, love.
The quest for love, or rather the failure to find emotional fulfillment through love, is the central theme of Kamala Das’s poetry, and her greatness as a love poet arises from the fact that her love poetry is rooted in her personal experience. It is an outpouring of her own loneliness, disillusionment and sense of frustration. Married at the early age of 16 and finding herself tied to a hollow relationship which she could not untie, Kamala Das’s story, despite its sensationalism makes a poignant reading. Marriage and love need not be mutually exclusive, but for her, they have proved to be so. She does not advocate promiscuity, her love poetry merely voice her lifelong yearning for fulfillment through love. Her account of her love episodes, experiences, may not be factually true, but it is certainly true emotionally, which is a higher kind of truth.

Her love poetry is unconventional and shocking to the orthodox, for her treatment of the sexual love and the human body is free, frank and uninhibited. She was unconventional in life, and is equally unconventional in poetry. She refused to conform to the traditional role which a woman and a wife is expected to play. A revolt against social norms carries with it its own punishment. One has to pay the price for it in terms of suffering, and hence it is discontent and melancholy that mark the life and poetry of Das. Revolt against the
male-oriented world has given her an individuality, a gusto, courage, and above all, poetry, but deep down there are also the dark whispers of mortality, intimations of the truth that “our loneliness is eternal”, and that “we are born with great hollows that need to be filled, for us to feel to be complete.”

Kamala Das has the urge to withdraw from the world of quotidian business and escape to some other region. And it is nowhere better expressed than in some of the love poems. In poems like ‘Love’ ‘In Love’, ‘The Prisoner’, the man-woman relationship is described as assuring a pleasant escape from the trivialities of day to day life. Though the concept of ‘happy prison’ is a recurrent notion of Romantic literature, yet Kamala Das decisively gives it an un-Romantic twist. She does so either by setting her prison in Indian mythological landscape or by yoking it with an elementary humour

Your body is my prison, Krishna.

I cannot see beyond it

Your darkness blinds me

Your love words shut out the wise world’s din.\(^3\)

And again,

As the convict studies his prison’s geography
I study the tappings
of your body, dear love
for, I must some day find
an escape from its snare. 

She is very human about love sometimes, and a realist while dealing with her lover for she has understood ‘what is love’:

While I wait for your phone call, I do not
know who to believe, You, who say who love,
Or the voice that tells me no, no, no ...
... What is the use
of love, all this love, if all it gives is
Fear, you the fear of storms asleep in you
And me the fear of hurting you? 

Until I found you
I wrote verse, drew pictures
and went out with friends for walks.
Now that I love you,
curled like an old mongrel
my life lies content

in you...

Memory of her lovers of various moods and kinds find dramatic expression in her poetry:

At my door step I saw a pock-marked face, a friendly smile and / a rolliflex. We will go for a drive / he said. Or go to see the lakes I have / washed my face with soap and water, brushed / my hair a dozen / times, draped myself in six yards of printed / voil-e. Ah ... does it still show, my night of love? /You look pale, he said. Not pale, not really / Pale. It’s the lipstick’s / anemia. Out in the street, we heard / the sirens go, and I paused in to talk to / weave their wail with the sound of his mirthless / laughter. he said / they are testing the sirens today. I am / happy. He really was lavish with words. / I am happy, just being with you. But you... / you love another, / I know, he said, perhaps a handsome man, / A young and handsome man. Not young, / not handsome, I thought, just a filthy snobl It’s a one-sided love! I said. / ... I want your photo, lying down, he said,! against those rusty nineteen-thirty four guns, / will you? Sure. Just arrange my limbs and tell / me- when to smile. I / shut my eyes, but inside eye lids, there was / no more night, no more love, or -peace, only / the white, white
sun burning, burning, burning, burning ... / Ah, why does love come to me like pain again and again and again...?7

During her severe illness she remembers her lover and then frames a new philosophy, the philosophy of love, which is essentially sarcastic:

At the present state, memory makes all her lovers of youth so similar to each other that she fails to distinguish one from the other, to mark anyone superior, different. So she prefers to be content rather with an unclean memory:

At my age there are no longer
Any homecomings. Nothing can
Bring back a twinkle in these eyes
that took root in memory
During those innumerable
Trips behind a dear one’s hoarse. No,
I cannot recollect the face
Of the man who told me he loved
My poetry, just yesterday,
At someone’s party, or his name
I see only those faces that.
Have returned of dust, or my child's
As it looked fifteen years ago.
My mind sleeps, I watch the road lights
Of vehicles love on the dark
Looks of night like woman's shuttles...

The two main themes of Kamala Das's poetry are love and the woman's identity and through them comes the woman's voice. Dove is certainly the perennial theme of poetry but its handling by the woman poet has a distinction of its own.

In Kamala Das’s poetry, the definition of love is entirely different from that of other poets as she thinks that the basis of ideal love is in its experience beyond sex through sex:

We played once a husband me, my lover and I,
His body needing mim
dis ageing body in its pride needing the need for mine And
each time his lust was quietened.

She remembers one of her childhood incidents when she learnt for the first time that love was a deep emotion from her aunt Ammini who had idealised love as a tapasya. Again she recollects Ammalu her great grandmother's younger sister who was a poetess, and a spinster.
Even if she was physically diseased, she was fresh in her minds and eyes, used to write poetry, which nobody bothered to read.

But she got herself separated from him. Because she felt physical relationship with this man was becoming a prison for her. Years after all of it had ended, I asked myself why I took him as my lover, fully aware of his incapacity to love and I groped in my mind for the right answer. Love has a beginning and an end, but lust has no such faults. I needed security, I needed permanence, I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear. Physical integrity must carry with it a certain pride that is a burden to the soul. Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change. ... He said you are a mad girl, but long live your madness.

Kamala Das sometimes exaggerates her emotions, like

‘What is love’? I asked a lover.

liken it, he answered, to weeping,

To a flood unchained and sweeping. 10

O sea, I am fed up I want to be

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

just dead.\footnote{11}

The conclusion of each of her poems modulates from cynicism into a bitter lament. However vain and egotistical the lover, his departure leaves the speaker’s life blank, empty, meaningless, ‘drab and destitute’. Cool observation of male limitations offers little protection against love’s desolation.

Other poems, however, associate marriage with constraint rather than freedom. In the ‘Sunshine Cat’, the husband locks his wife in ‘a room of books’ and in the poem ‘I shall some Day, where she wishes to take a wing from the cocoon he has built around her with morning tea and tired lust, she threatens to take flight into a freedom not unlike that afforded by the dancing shoe, only to return one day seeking shelter “Here in your nest of familiar scorn”. In another poem ‘The Stone Age’, the husband is compared to spider, he is not portrayed as cruel, merely comprehending and indifferent to his wife’s emotional needs, making the flight impossible by transforming her into a stone bird, which is yet another image of emotional deadness within marriage. This immobilising anguish of such a loveless relationship is a krill of crucifixion. Another image which she repeatedly associates
with the dissatisfactions, disappointments and constraints of love is theatrical performance. She seems to be bored with a pretending lover as the rank and file with that of a political mountebank. In a bitter tone, like Hardy, she sardonically hints at the rotten love in this nonchalant stinking world:

    God is in his heaven and all

    In right with this stinking world.¹²

Kamala is primarily a poet of feminine longings. Her poetry and prose reflect her restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male-dominated society, and in this she appears as a champion of woman’s cause. She is unquestionably a poet of love and sex. As such, she is not so much preoccupied with the metaphysical quest of a restle: soul, nor with the formulation of any theory of poetry. She WI ces almost invariably about the power of love and the appeal of the body. She confesses that spe wrote the poems in the book Bummer in Calcutta to make a man love her, to break down his resistance. As an honest poet of love, she looks very frank and naive, without the intellectual pride and domestic air. She has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity. The love
poems of Kamala Das usually breathe are air of unconventionality, agency, and then have a mood of revolt.

A social rebel as she is the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe emerges as a major theme in her poetry. The poetess celebrates it in one poem after the other. Her poetry is in final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman. She is essentially a poet of the modern Indian women’s ambivalence, giving expression to it more nakedly than any other Indian woman poet with the possible exception of Amrita Pritam in Punjabi. She was a social rebel, and like all rebels against the accepted social norms, frustration and disillusionment were her lot in life, and her self-express in poetry is therapeutic. Her poetry mirrors her life in all its nakedness—that of experienced horrors and the rare joys of love.

Images drawn from the human body are used most frequently by her. The male body is an agent of corruption, a destroyer of female chastity and individuality. Thus in the ‘Freaks’, the male anatomy furnishes her with images of terror. It is represented as repulsive and destructive. The mouth is a ‘dark cavern’, the cheek is ‘sunstained’, and the teeth are ‘Teaming and uneven’. Her reactions against male body is symbolic of her revolt against male ego. She is conscious of
the beauty and the glory of the human anatomy and is attracted by it, but its raging lustfulness disgusts her and hence the use of images like the above. She is also conscious of disease and decay to which human flesh is heir to, and this awareness colours her imagery. In the lines from ‘The Looking Glass’, she ironically suggests the weak women sector to surrender before the sensuous male:

Notice the perfection
of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinates. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.13

The images concretise her fond awareness of the intimate human details. They express adequately her abiding love for the human body as also her aversion to it. Indeed, images are her themes as well as
modes or expression. They dramatise her passion and impart certain
depth and resonance to her feelings. She seem to be in love with pain,
supreme suffering is her selfadopted fashion

    I tell myself / and all of you... / fall in
    love, / fall in love with an unsuitable /
    person./ fling yourself on him / like moth
    on a flame / Let there be despair in
    every move / Excavate / deep, deep pain.14

    Kamala Das describes the male ego in a rather ironically
humorous voice with this piece of advice to women:

    Turn your Dome into merry / dog house / marriage
    is meant to be all this / anyway !being arranged in
    most humorous heaven.15

    And regarding herself, she decides the ways of satisfying her
desire of taking vengeance in this male-dominated world. She decides
to remain indifferent to anyone who tries to come closer to her
thinking her to be a girl with vast sexual hanapers:

    Reader, / you may say / now here is a
    girl with vast / sexual hungers! a bitch
after my own heart, / But I am not your
for the asking / Grovel at my feet, / remove
your monkey suits and dance / sing Erato,

Erato, Erato, / Yet I shall be indifferent. 16

Regarding the lines Suguna Ramanathan says,

In this strong interaction neither party is satisfied. The women victim in a blinding rage of domination spurns male offers, reversing roles, subject turned oppressor, furious with lack, and scorful of ‘that which is produced and maintained here’. The male is here the grovelling victim, naked and ridiculous, with no chance of his luck being appeared. Whatever he dots, says the speaker, is not enough: ‘Yet I shall be indifferent’. The anger and futility woven into interlocked sexual activity, the wrestling attempt to attain hermaphroditic wholeness, is doomed to failure.

In a number of poems, Das registers her sense of suffocation as a result of her loss of liberty, after marriage. In ‘Of Calcutta’ she vehemently criticises her family members for putting her in a most unwanted situation called marriage:

I was sent away to protect family’s
Honour, to save a few cowards to defend some
Abstractions, sent to another city to be
A relative’s wife, a horserace from- his
home. and / A mother for his sons, yet
another nodding / Doll for his parlour,
a walkie talkie one to / Warm his bed
at night.17

Not only in her verse, but in prose narratives also Das describes
the unhealthy atmosphere and sufferings of her childhood and early
youth:

I was born in a family of frigid women. They were all so inhibited
that I was not told what would happen when a girl entered puberty.
Then one day while the blood flowed between my thighs I wept out of
fear, assuming that some internal organ had ruptured and that I was
going to die. Nobody had ever told me of a woman’s menstrual cycle
and of her magical secretions, to prepare me for womanhood. And at
fifteen as a bride, wearing braces on my teeth, I saw a man’s nudity
for the first time and was shocked. It was so horribly menacing like a
snake about to strike. I envied then the nuns, their security, the
privacy of their genitalia. Of course I had no courage then to talk of
the exercise in bed. Or of the sourness between the legs which burned
when I bathed the morning after:

While her sensibility seems to be obsessively preoccupied with
love, it finds love invariably petering out into lust, and lust merely
eating itself to the poet of nausea:

his limbs like pale and / carnivorous plants

reaching / out for me ... 18

She finds herself reduced to a mere archetype, a ‘finished’ woman.
Her marriage demanded a surrender of personal desires. Love and
marriage seemed to her to be two opposite poles. She wondered “Was
every married adult a clown in bed, a circus performer?” And
concluded that “I hate marriage”. By writing so boldly, openly, she
created a new ethos, new heritage and of coure a lot of criticisms for
herself. She has a life of her own, IT smerised by the memory of
remembered sins that flows and I peats itself over and again. Her
encounters in her search for love fail and she feels forced back to a
life of futile pretence finally:

It will be all right when I learn

To paint my mouth like a clown’s.
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. 19

The repetition of the phrase ‘it will be all right’ suggests exactly the opposite. In fact, she described the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life. It was because of her husband’s failure to understand her psychic and emotional needs that she could not get peace in his arms. Her restlessness to be loved and valued for her own sake let her run to others. So she justifies herself:

Is it any wonder that

He felt hurt when the old wife turped whorish and /

withdrew from under him. 20

Anyway, finally she dismisses any kind of physical pleasure as nothing better than death and burial under a man’s six-feet frame. She urges herself to come alive and find true happiness in the world beyond this restricted confinement. The realisation of the futility of
sensual pleasure and the need for higher planes of happiness make her lines maturer:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried

Beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive

The world extends a lot beyond

his six foot frame.21

What a confessional poet gives us is the psychological equivalents that we always get in the poetry of Kamala Das, Her frank admissions and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional about them and are perfectly in keeping with the nature and themes of confessional poetry. Her repeated references to ‘her Nair heritage and her Dravidian skin are part of a persistent attempt to define her identity. As creator of a personal mythology, redefining of one’s identity forms a major concern of the confessional poet.

Confessional poetry is all autobiographical, it is rooted in the personal experiences of the poetess. T. S. Eliot stressed the impersonality in poetry, but confessional poetry is intensely personal. However, a great confessional poet like Kamala Das achieves impersonality in another way. From the personal and the particular, she rises to the general and the universal. She transforms her intense
personal experiences into general truth. Her own predicament, suffering become symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. Herein lies her greatness as an artist. She is both intensely personal and universal, confesses of a life lull of lust, yet asks for a future full of sanctity:

... all that I would ask for / In my old age;

I shall retire from youth without a murmur/
Fold up my lust neatly like a wedding gown,
Put it away for good; And keen my dream gate always shut.22

Her confessions are far-reaching, meaningful and verging on the point of revolution in the poetic world. She confesses a number of things, exclusively related to herself, self as a woman with her strong feminine sensibilities, self as a persona with powerful proclivities and antipathies, caprices. She does not feel shy of exhibiting her frailties and virtues as a woman, her superior self as a mother and her unavoidable exploitation as a wife, her delicate position as a daughter and grand-daughter, her weakness as a companion to her husband. She feels happy “by confessing; by peeling off layers”, by reaching “closer to the soul; and the bone’s; supreme indifference.” She boldly
confesses “As the convict studies; His prison’s geography; I study the trappings I of your body my dear love; For I must some day find I An escape from its snare” (‘The Old Playhouse!). Her poetry is replete with a powerful force of catharsis and protest. While dealing with the cathartic effect of tragedy in his ‘Poetics’, Aristotle regards the most perfect tragic pleasure is possible through a purgation of feeling like pity and fear. And Kamala Das’s poetry attains Cathartic effect due to her confessional poetry.

Kamala Das’s poetry mingles the physical with the spiritual. She knows of extramarital love and is not ashamed of socially accepted marital love. This is remarkable that a married woman in a rather traditional society speaks of an admits extramarital and premarital love. She questions and probes what kind of woman she is—frigid, nymphomaniac, or lesbian, but such questions cannot be answered by anyone, not even the husband, the answer must come from within one’s own self:

I asked my husband, / am I hetero / am I lesbian / car am I’ just plain frigid? / He only laughed./ laughed. / For such questions I probably there are no answers/ or else/ the answers
must emerge; from within.23

She admits, the quest for fulfilment takes her to others’ house. The facade of social norms breaks down and she “runs up forty’ roisy steps to knock at another’s door / Through peep holes the neighbours watch” (‘The Stone Age’). But for all this promiscuity she accuses her husband for it is he who could not satisfy her heart’s hungers, and granted her the freedom which she had never asked for. Like Auden, Graves and Yeats, she does not keep a privacy in her writings. Her tussle with love, sex, lust, deprivation, unfulfilment, and separation can be seen in the context of her relation with her husband and with other men in her life. In ‘Composition’ she says:

When I got married, / My husband said/

You may have your freedom, / as

much as you want. / My soul balked at this diet

of ask, / Freedom became my dancing show/

how well I danced, / and danced without

rest, / until the shoes turned grimy

on my feet / And I began to have doubts.24

And then,
After that love became a swivel-door,

When one went out mother caolcire.\(^{25}\)

Das’s love poetry embodies a very subjective personal, idiosyncratic tone. We are swept along by frequently alternating moods of frustration and celebration. Das shows to the reader her ferocious frankness. On reading the poems of The Descendants one lands into the golden world of her memories and the sufferings of the present state that she consciously and painstakingly explores. The volume begins with the expression of death wish and thereafter takes from one substitute to another through a tiresome journey of procrastinating relationships in search of true love. ‘Substitute’ implies a profound dissatisfaction with the existing state. Love lures irresistibly but fails to satisfy. It becomes a ‘swivel door’ rejecting one lover, admitting another still:

Then I lost count, for always in my arms

Was a substitute for a substitute.\(^{26}\)

A guilt-consciousness for these thoughtless, confused relationships always wrangles her, but all this was unavoidable. This schism in her nature, however, does not mean that she advocates promiscuity. In fact, promiscuity seems to horrify her. The substitute thus assumes the
function of a leitmotif, quintessentially ‘reflective of the lost woman’s search for spiritual consummation as well as a longing to recover a lost state of childhood innocence symbolised by life with her grandmother in her ancestral home.

The poetry of Kamala Das, with its honesty, courage and willingness to reveal the most intimate aspects of her life, marks a turning point in the history of modern Indian writing. Her poetry removes skin after skin from over her psyche. Even many Indian poets very often are thought to be ‘Confessional’ poets, yet the catholic element of confession of the West is missing in India. Anne Saxton who has been compared with Kamala Das, took to writing poetry because it was prescribed by her psychiatrist. She attempted suicide in November 1956 and in December, started writing poetry. The therapeutic element is missing in confessional poetry written in India. In India, confessional poetry is mainly love poetry which reveals intimate details and complex emotions, love overshadowing confession. In Kamala Das’s ‘Freaks’ the ‘indifferent’, ‘callous’, man, his ‘head already on her knee’, is described thus:

Can’t this man with / Nimble finger tips
unleash / Nothing more alive than the / skin’s
lazy hungers? Who can / Help us who have
lived so long / And have failed in love?\textsuperscript{27}

But the poem ends with the lives:

I am a freak, It’s only / To save my face,

I flaunt, at / Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.\textsuperscript{28}

In ‘The Relationship’, she is anti-feminist in her stance, talking of
the “blind kindness of his of lips’ and admitting that her peace lay
only in her “betrayer’s arms”. She changes her tone in some poems
about the male who does not see woman with his eyes, “but with
hands” (‘The killing of Chameleons’) and criticises women who feel
their perfection “laying buried beneath a man”. She assumes a
pioneering role to caution other women of their biodegradation and
commodification by the male-dominated Indian society. Throughout
her poems, images of constraint and confinement are associated more
powerfully and frequently with extramarital relationships than with
marriage, and she confesses:

I enter others’ I Lives and I Make of every trap

of lust I A temporary home. (‘Glass’)\textsuperscript{29}
And in ‘Captive’, the speaker express relief at breaking free from her most recent lover, “so long so long sweet I slavery”, but she is forced to recognise that the labyrinthine spider web in which she remains trapped is of her own choosing:

For years I have run from one
gossamer lone to another, I am
now my own captive.30

Her secret desire to escape from the world of her husband is a question, because her “mind in an old playhouse with all its light put out”.

Kamala Das’s poetry is controversial and, at the same time spiritual. She has brought the forbidden fruit right at the centre of the stage to be exposed. Her poems have copious references to her early life, to herself, and to womankind in general. The words get lyrical intensity and athletic strength under her touch, The stortling qualities of her poetry-earnestness, sincerity, frankness and a deep love of the past-are evident. Past is never a luxury for Das. Rather recollection, memory, redeem her aching soul and supply her with enough critical materials to create incessantly.
If this gives her an individuality and a personal ‘meaning, it also leads her to lapses of tact and a general looseness in verse structure. Otherwise in her poetry we have an expression of female sensibility at its best. She feels that women experience the similar blight, they are the same emotional, silently suffering creatures:

We are all a like, / We women, / in our wrapping of hairless skin. ! All skeletons are alike, / only the souls vary / that hide somewhere between the flesh / and the bone. \(^\text{31}\)

Kamala Das has always felt herself alone, even amid a crowd, and she broods over her entire life in a symbolic poem:

... from each city I lived in, each dusty small town I stole out often to walk this winding road, laying a side my poor body that has perhaps no borne, no territory to call its own. Mine’ was a somnambulistic tread ...

There was none to see me or recognise ... \(^\text{32}\)
And she understands the suffering, the difficulties of the phenomenon called living through an inward journey:

The longest route home is perhaps
the most tortuous, the inward path you take that carries you step by weary step beyond the blood’s, illogical arrogance ... Other journeys are all so easy but not the inward one, the longest route home and the steepest descent...

Even if recollection of her past acts as a mode of redemption to her, yet the poetess questions whether memory, and reflections over sorrows and happinesses may be a way to redemption:

We have spent out youth in gentle shining exchanging some insubstantial love and often thought we are hurt, but no pain in us could remain, no bruise could scar or
even slightly mar our cold loveliness, ..,

None, will step off his cross
or show his wounds to us, no God lost in
silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
claim us, no, we are not going to be

ever redeemed or made new.35

When enquired about the forcible imposition of , bur qua’ system on woman, Das vehemently expressed her note of dissent. And in. same vein she protests against rape. Her My Story, her poems and interviews invariably give a clue to the feminist perspective in her poetry. In her poetry there is no attempt to idealise, glorify, or celebrate the sublime human experience. Quite the country, through icy, stony and dark images, she succeeds in projecting the feelings of her agonising heart:

When I die / do not throw the meat and bones away /

But pile them up / and / let them tell / By their shell That
life was worth / On this earth/ That love was

worth / In the end.36
Spontaneity and flow give Kamala Das’s poem a kind optical and pictorial quality which is effective and touching. For the sake of expression she exploits various images drawn from nature, and from all dimensions of life. The images are not limited only to the scenic background, rather these recurrent images present the rootlessness and despair in man-woman relationship. She is aware of the conscious flow of life, a flow which is running through the veins of every mortal being. Her love is not just a spiritual love, but a vital life-force, a beautiful and painful experience. It appeals to the heart more than the mind, in a sense, her poetry is a revolt against the poetry of high order, which always goes to the mind and never to the heart. Her love poems have sources in her own experience of love. She investigates the tremendous emotional experience exerted by the male. Her most artistic love poems are those which present her outlook as a progressive artist. She has revived and modernised the old concept of love.

The poetry concerned with personal matters and relationships, or private fear and dream, can become a gesture for an entire sex, a community or a people, Thus, Das’s private voice too is not personal, it is universal, like that of Lakshmi Kanan. For her, childhood becomes a garden of Eden, like Dylan Thomas in ‘Fern Hill’.
Grandparents are idealised and idolised, Adulthood is equivalent to the ‘Fall’ and living is the original sin. In her, innocence and bliss, knowledge and guilt go together.

Das’s poetry is lucid, honest, accurate, sincere and original without any hyperbole, hypocrisy. Her tone is conversational, attitude in bold and defiant, voice is clear and direct. Courage, and conviction and truthfulness are the hallmarks of her poetry. She experiments with a feminine sensibility that demands equality with man and examines love and life from a woman’s point of view, for which the candidly admits that leer scope of writing is narrow like that of Jane Austen. Without imitating the Anglo-Americans, she uses a native accent. Cultural, social, mythical and familial past of herself and of her country are her stuff. She writes as an Indian speaks and understands, It is in this sense that she is the greatest modern Indian English poet to write poetry in a subjective, individualistic and recollective mode.

With the passing time, particularly in her latest volume of poems, *The Descendants*, Kamala Das has shown an increasing concern with disease, sickness, decay and death. In ‘Gino’, for example, we get a string of images of sepulchral journey of the hospital trolley. The cumulative burden of domesticity, routine, sickness and the anticipation of death are sensitively portrayed in the poems, concern
with disease, illness, decay, and death is at the centre of ‘After the Illness’. Apparently inspired by recovery from a serious illness, the poem is concerned with the theme of decay and ageing:

... There was

Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger,

the blood had

Weakened too much to lust, and the skin, without

health’s Ointments, was numb and unyearning.\(^{37}\)

In ‘The Sunshine Cat’, the poetess grows old and becomes “a cold half-dead woman, of no use to men”, In ‘The Looking Glass’, her body grows ‘drab and destitute’ and in ‘The Invitation’ the poetess is preoccupied with thoughts of suicide. In ‘Composition’ the poetess associates death with love:

I have replaced love with guild and discovered/

that both love and hate are / involveinents/But

this only signifies growth / and, growth is natura/

The tragedy of life / is not death but growth.\(^{38}\)

Life’s obscure parallel is undoubtedly with death, as :Mrs. Das presents it:
Life’s obscure parallel is death. Quite often
I wonder of what I seem to do is living
or dying.39

And in another poem, like Donne, she treats death as something
quite mediocre:
... Death is / So mediocre, any fool can achieve /

It effortlessly.40

Das seems to be in deep love with death because “Death seems
less turbulent than life. The dead people seem quiet, tranquilised. She
loves a “delightful death which removes, before it stabilises itself, all
anxieties connected with this world”. In extremely beautiful poetic
terms she defines death:

When a man is dead, or a woman,
we call the corpse not he

Or she but it.41

So she too prayed the sun God to grant her a heroic son like Kama.
In her devotion of Krishna, she shifts her attention from passion to
purity, from body to soul, from matter to spirit, Tom mediocre ideas
to knowledge, wisdom, and from perception to confirmation. In My
Story Das associates her search for love with longing for the God. Describing her association with a man who failed to live up to her expectation She writes, “I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blosstled like a blue totes in the waters ‘or my creams. It was to get closer to the bodyless one that I approached other forms and lost my way.” The breaking of local ties through adultery could also signify the soul’s readiness to abandon all social considerations for the sake of God. In her poem ‘The Maggots’, she again uses the Krishna legend, this time to express the suffering and disappointments of love together with the emptiness of the marriage relationship:

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna

Loved her for the last time and left...

That night in her husband’s anns, Radha felt

So dead that he asked, what is wrong,

Do you mind my kisses, love? she said,

No, not at all, but thought, what is

It to the corpse if the maggots nip?42

Writing about her last lover, she refers to the 18 mirrors in his room as if they were 18 ponds into which she dipped her hot brown
body. In the thousand reflection of herself and her lover while lovemaking, she imagines the vision of Krishna multiplied into a thousand bodies to satisfy each gopi. She searches for her ideal lover taking queue from the mythical past of India:

I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl in reality is wedded to Lord Krishna. \(^43\)

Das conjures up visions of Brindavan with flowing rivers and spreading leafy trees under which Radha and Krishna reaffirm their love every evening. The poems also operate at a deeper level. The river where Krishna makes love to Radha, its ceaseless flow of life becomes the possession of Radha and Krishna, for which each succeeding generation experience the perpetuation of love that Radha and Krishna had for each other. The Kadamba tree, a symbol of the human body, into which homeless souls are reborn, is also the possession of the Divine lovers for the physical regeneration of their love.

‘Anamalai Poems’ are a series of poems that Kamala Das wrote during her sojourn at the hills of Anamalai in Tamil Nadu following her defeat at the parliamentary elections in 1984. History operates
both on the visible, and the invisible levels of ‘Anamalai Poems’. In these poems, her ‘Self has gave historical and political implications:

There were nights when I heard
my own voice call me out
of dreams, gifting such rude
awakenings, and then
expelling me from warm human
love, unaccustomed
fare for one such as I,
a misfit when awake.

The ‘Anamalai Poems’ are different from her earlier poems in the sense that the poet now overcomes her anxieties, and allows herself to luxuriate, even amid a crisis for the self. And the poems have a deep undertone of nostalgia for her entire life, rather the poems are an analysis of her life.

Like most Indian poets writing in English, Kamala Das is also bilingual. She writes both in Malayalam and English. Once when asked why she chose to write in English, she replied that English being the tongue most familiar to her, she used it to express herself. Her choice of English was by no means a deliberate one. One of her better-known poems, ‘An Introduction’, which has often been
regarded as her poetic manifest, throws considerable light on her use of English.

Kamala Das uses words effortlessly and imaginatively so that they are adequate to express her emotions. She sounds Keatsian, as Keats says, “If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves come to a tree, better they come not at all.” Sometimes a powerful verbal drama is enacted through her use of emotionally charged words. In a passage from ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’:

Kamala Das’s diction is marked by simplicity and clarity. It is the language of her emotions, and she speaks to her readers as one human being to another. In this lies her originality and her distinction. There are no abstractions, no complexities, and no intricacies. Her images is always functional, never merely decorative, and is drawn from their familiar and the commonplace. Often her images are symbolic and thus the increase the excessive range of her language.

She chose to write because she wanted to falsify the male view that women are incapable of intelligent tasks, that all that they can produce is a body and that too not without male contribution. So she cannot accept the male idea of the intellectual inferiosiy’and irrationality of women.
Kamala Das’s poetry is controversial and, at the same time spiritual. She has brought the forbidden fruit right at the centre of the stage to be exposed. Her poems have copious references to her early life, to herself, and to womankind in general. The words get lyrical intensity and athletic strength under her touch. The strolling qualities of her poetry—earnestness, sincerity, frankness and a deep love of the past—are evident. Past is never a luxury for Das. Rather recollection, memory, redeem her aching soul and supply her with enough critical materials to create incessantly.
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