Chapter-IV

The Old Playhouse

‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems is a collection that came out in 1973, and contains 33 poems of which 14 are old poems taken from Summer in Calcutta and six from The Descendants. The title piece ‘The Old Play House’ tells that love is perhaps no more than a way of learning about one’s self of the completion of one’s own personality. It is addressed to the husband whom she accuses of hurting her mind. The old playhouse. A protest against the fanaticism of religion is found in ‘The Inheritance’. The poem is bitter, ironical, but not cynical. ‘Blood’ is the best and longest poem in the volume. It is autobiographical, revealing the poetess’s nostalgia for the old house and for the great grandmother who lived in it. The poem ‘Nani’ is also based on memory. The pregnant maid, “the dark plump one, who bathed me near the well” and who hange herself, is the chief subject, ‘Gino’ starts on a note of warning and fear, comparing the kiss oft a lover to the bite of a krait who “fills the blood stream with its accursed essence”. The poem ‘Glass’ focuses on the fragility of love experience and also of the body. Here she searches for the misplaced
father figure in every male. She moves from man to man in search of her true home but there is a sense of waste in the search. And in the poems like ‘Vrindavan’, ‘Radha Krishna’. ‘Lines Addressed to Devadasi’, she falls back to the mythical past of India to search for her eternal lover Krishna. In ‘The Prisoner’, like a convict, she searches for a way out to escape from her present state. ‘The Stone Age’ deals with the reality of love being offered to the poetess by another man other than the husband. ‘After the Illness’ was written after the poetness’s recovery from a prolonged illness. It is concerned with the theme of survival of herself as well as of the lover’s love for her. ‘The Millionaires at Marine Drive’ is meditative in nature. Its subject is the incurable loneliness of the woman. The warmth which her grandmother gave her still haunts her because no man has been able to give her such a love. The grandmother is presented as an embodiment of tenderness and warmth.

The main motif of all these poems is recollection--recollection of both sweet and bitter memories. The crux of her poetry is a search for an identity. In this process of self-search she sways between a nostalgic past and a nightmarish present. The past symbolises security, love, freedom, and the present stands for insecurity, dualism and the bondage of the society. Her consciousness is drawn
spontaneously towards the positive past but is checked again by the negative present.

Das’s personal frustration finds voice in the struggle between inherited values and acquired knowledge, and is characteristic of the confessional poet’s attempt to heal the schism in personality in order to end the war of passion and reason, flesh and spirit, body and soul. In her past, amid all comforts, pain peeped in the rough various creeks. In her early childhood she was very sentimental, wrote “sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity.” The rift between her father and mother also left a permanent mark on her personality. Her mother’s timidity, only created “an illusion of domestic harmony”. The society then tried to clip off her wings of freedom by saying “Fit in”,

She turned rebellious and wore shirts, trousers of her brother, cut her hair short and ignored her womanliness. And when she asked for love, not knowing what else to ask

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door.
The closing of the door was like drawing iron gates on her childhood days. Even with this pain, time till managed to provide her soul a sense of security through the love of her grandmother. But the last episode of happiness slipped from her hands when:

I’the red house that had

stood for innocence

Crumbled

and the old woman died.  

When she comes to her present self she finds that there are ‘selves’ beyond her ‘self which prop up from within and pain oozes from each self. She identifies herself with all that suffers. Out of utter pain, she confesses:

Deep deep pain / To be frank / I have failed.

The poetess still tries to have a compromise with her present, and pleads before her loveless husband at least to try to love her a little:

From the debris of huge-wrecks

Pick up my broken face,

Your bride’s face,

Changed a little with year.
I shall not remember

The betrayed honeymoon;

We are both such cynics,

You and I.

If loving me was hard then It’s harded now

But love me one day

For lark

Love the sixty-seven

Kilograms of ageing flesh.4

But all this is of no use at all. Her husband was “nearly all the time away touring in the outer districts. Even while he was with me, we had no mental contact with each other. If at all I began to talk of my unhappiness, he changed the topic immediately and walked away.”’

When she no longer could bear loneliness, she became ‘Carlo’s Sita’, or the beloved of some other man. Her parched self, in search of love, steps outside marriage to her many lovers:

I am every Woman who seeks love ... in me

the ocean’s tireless/Waiting5
Soon experience took the place of innocence, betrayal of virginity, and indifference of involvement. Now the only solace in life left is memory, the recollection of her golden past, her Nalapat house, grandmother, great grandmother, father, mother, brother, childhood innocence, and of course a surrender to Krishna, her timeless lover.

Even if throughout her youth she had searched for sexual and spiritual fulfilment in extra-marital relationships with other men, yet she is never ashamed of it for she feels her husband was responsible for it:

... Y let me toss my youth like coins
Into ‘arious hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in other arms.6

Again she feels the necessity of adjustment, compromise in the same poem:

Perhaps I lost my way, Perhaps
I went astray. -How would a blind wife trace her lost
Husband, how would a deaf wife
hear her husband call?7
As Helen Cixous says, “A woman writes herself, she puts herself into the text, and thus enters the world and history. All aesthetic constructs used by women are directed towards the realisation of this objective: to write oneself. Memory often becomes a vital strategy in this’ projection of self.” The role of memory has always been a vital force for creative writers. For Wordsworth, “Poetry is emotions recollected in tranquillity.” And in Indian context, memory acquires a special place in post-colonial poetry, since it is often turned into a strategy deliberately employed to revive an idyl past from the shackles of colonial oppression. Memory is the only link of the writer with a past, which the poet wishes to revive and recreate in verse. Recollection helps them to move from the immediate regrouping of experience to a more and more mediated reshaping and predisposition of experience. Poetry, for Kamala Das, is not just a ‘recollection in tranquility’, but acts as the vehicle and tenor of her intense urge for freedom. Her ‘memory’ has double purpose-as a repository of the past, and as a source of profound experience of time, loss, incompleteness. Memory becomes her invaluable aid in perceiving the meaning of her own personal experience. Often it is the memory of some experience of pain, suffering, loss, failure, and a sense of inadequacy and incompleteness which surfaces insistently in the mind
of the poet demanding recordation in verse. She lets her mind travel freely down the memory lane to relieve some intense moment that belongs to the past. She says:

I journey while alone just backwards,

taking secret steps

inward and

choosing roads none has walked before.\(^8\)

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Again, Das moves back into the mythic past by falling in love with Lord Krishna, by associating herself with Radha. She seeks redemption in surrendering herself to Krishna, and this retreat into the past takes her back into the mythological world, which symbolises the return of the wayward human to the powers of the Divine.

On being asked whether her poems are “emotions recollected in tranquillity”, she asserts and says, “I think the emotional turbulence served as soil for some of my writings. When I look back I feel grateful to destiny for having provided this turbulence” (in an interview with Iqbal Kaur). Regarding love, hatred, disillusionment, hopes and emotions of her life, her past, she says, “I was a vessel
overflowing with emotion. Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which sought for it a receptacle. At the hour of worship even a stone becomes an idol... I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed like a blue lotus in the waters of my dreams. It was to get closer to that bodiless one that I approached other forms and lost my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination.” In chapter 29 of My Story “I Still Yearned for my Grey-eyed Friend”, the memory of her most dear lover who had deserted her, becomes apparent. She begins the chapter thus with a poem ‘Gino’s:

It was July, a July full of rain, and darkness

Trapped like smoke in the hollows of the sky, and

That lewd steamy smell of rot rising out of earth.

He walked one step ahead of me, the west wind leafing

Through his hair, and I thought, if I could only want,

Really, really want his love, I shall ride happiness,

Great white steed, trampler of uncared laws,

If I could only dislodge the inherited.

Memory of a touch, I, shall serve myself in
Bedroom mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter,
While he lies watching, fair conqueror of another’s
Country. I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes,
And in jealous moods, after, bitter words and rage
I shall wail in his nerves, as homeless cats wail
From the rubble of a storm.

Male chauvinism and subjection of woman has been a typical subject in Kamala Das’s poetry. She herself has been accused by many feminists of entertaining views that might encourage continued male-domination. Whatever the accusation might be, when contrasted with the pre-independence Indian English writers for whom the novel was the only medium of creative expression, the lyrical mode of the poets like Kamala Das seemed to offer new possibilities of ironical resistance. The resistance in Kamala Das’s case was marked by the construction of a new terrain, a landscape of the self.

In Kamala’s poetry, two aspects of love have been suggested and depicted with clarity: the real, fulfilling love and the pure carnal or commercial love. The women’s voice coming from the two kinds of love amply clarifies that mere carnality is never fulfilling. Man may enjoy it but not woman and in such situations the woman merely feels
used, and she is shocked, humiliated, her whole womanhood trampled by the hasty aggressiveness of the male. The description of her wedding night, her pathetic recollection of the happening makes one aware of male-chauvinism in our society. She writes in her autobiography:

My house was emptied itself of people and I found myself alone with my husband who told me it was not his intention to see the Kathakali. Let us stay at home, he said pulling me to the bedroom ... Then without warning he fell on me surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack. I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace. Then bathed in perspiration and with my heart palpitating wildly, I begged him to think of God. This is our wedding night, we should first pray to Krishna, I said. He stared at me in disbelief. Was I mad?15

The defloration is always a traumatic experience for the woman, as she defines her personal experience:

... He did not beat me,

But my sad woman body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.,

I shrank/pitifully... 16

The commodification of woman is always intolerable for Kamala Das. She accuses her husband of using her body neglecting her consciousness, participation, and her very soul;

On sedatives! I am more lovable! says my husband... / My speech becomes a misladen terrain / the words emerge, tinctured with sleep! they raise from tile still caves of dreams! in unhurried flight like herons/

and/my ragdoll limbs adjust better/to his verna tile lust. / He would, if he could, sing lullabies/to his wife’s sleeping soul/sweet lullabies to thicken its swoon./On sedatives/

I am more lovable/says my husband ... 17

He has tamed and dominated her whole being:

You planned to tame a shallow, to hold her /
in the long summer of your love so that
she would forget / not the raw seasons alone
and the homes lift behind, but / also her
nature, the urge to fly, and the endless/
pathways of the sky.... You dribbled
spittle into my mouth, you poured/
yourself into every nook and cranny, you
embalmed/my poor lust with your bitter
sweet juices. Yo’u called me wife, / I was
thought to break saccharine into your tea
and / to offer at the right moment the
vitamins. Cowering/beneath your monstrous
ego I ate the magic loaf and I became,
a dwarf.18

Anyway, she made a compromise with her life and tried to cope
up with her husband. But unluckily, he was not at all satisfied with
her, neither could he satisfy her.

At the end of the month, experiencing rejection, jealousy
and bitterness I grew old suddenly. ... I lost weight rapidly.
I did not get enough sleep at night, for my husband took me several times with a vengeance and in the day there was no food for twelve hours after that chilli-laden meal of rice and curry. 19

After marriage when her father visited her for the first time, he was surprised to see her pathetic condition. Then he even wished that she should divorce her husband and go back with him. But she felt it would be a disgrace to herself and her family. Anyway, she could no longer love her husband, and searched for consolation in Krishna.

Even after the birth of their first son Monoo, her husband remained unchanged, unkind. Perhaps in this context she writes:

Perhaps it had begun as a young man’s most normal desire to subjugate a girl

but when she, being silly, spurned him, he took

the country as his bride and rode her for thirty years. 20

She gradually became extremely self-centred, confined herself within her cocoon of music, friends, nature, books, memory and Krishna. Das remembers:
That was perhaps the most bewitching spring of my life.
The bhajans of Meera on my gramophone, amorous cousins and the clusters of Nirmatala at the snake-shrine. And in the night the moon gazing at the out!hes of my baby sons face and his fingers at my breast. My husband faded into an unreal figure, became a blush on the horizon after the Sun has set. I had stopped loving him. When his letters came I put them away in a drawer. He wrote mostly about a friend of his who stayed at the Y.M.C:A. with him and was his constant companion.21

When she was back home to her husband she found it very difficult on her part to cope up with him. She writes, “At night after all had slept I sat in our tiny sitting room, sobbing and trying hard to believe in a destiny that might change for the better.” Then when she learnt the art of silent suffering and tried to be content with her lovers, one after the other, even’ there she got only dissatisfaction, disillusionment. None of her lovers could satisfy her inner urge to be loved intensely

... my love and I
His body needing mine.

His ageing body in its pride needing the need for

And each time his lust was quietened

And he turned his back on me

In panic I asked don’t you want me any longer don’t you want me

Don’t you don’t you. 22

In utter frustration she describes how she became a “Cold and / Half dead woman” and “Withdrew into the cave I had made for myself”:

I shall build walls with tears

She said, walls to shut me in. Hey husband shut her

In, every morning, locked her in a room of books

With a steak of sunshine lying near the door, like

A yellow cat, to keep her company, but soon

Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he

Noticed that the cat of sunshine ,was only a

Line, a half-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to man.23

This kind of situation later became habituated, tasteless, marital sex leading to disillusionment and constant search for fulfilling love experience, making love with the body of the husband while the mind was somewhere else phantasmising about some other partner:

Another vice haunts my ears, another face
My dreams, but in your arms I must today
Lie, and find an oasis where memories
Sad winds do not so much blow...
Another’s name brings tears, your
A clam, and a smile, and yet Goutama,
The other owns me; while your arms hold
My woman form, his hunting arms
Hold my very soul.24

She has a secret desire to flee, to take a flight, to escape from this male-dominated world, has a wish to fly like a bird from these bindings and impositions: “Like a bird I migrated to warmer climes”. Bird imagery is a favourite with Kamala Das:
I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love words flung from doorways and *ot* course
Your tired lust...
I shall someday take
Wings, fly around, as often petals
Do when free in air...25

The husband makes it impossible by turning the bird into a stone bird, building a cocoon around it with a drawing room, social identity and she is scornful about him:

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, waving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind, you turn me into a bird of stone, a granite Dove...26

Even if Das always laments over her loss of identity, yet her female ego is vulnerable to male-dominance. She distinguishes between the masculine and the feminine words:

Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights. your windows always/shut, Even the air conditioner helps so Httle/All pervasive is the male scent of your breath\textsuperscript{27}
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6. Kamala Das, A Man is a Season, p. 135.
7. Kamala Das, A Man is a Season, p. 135.
8. Kamala Das, The End of Spring, p. 120.
13. Kamala Das, A Man is a Season, p. 35.
14. Kamala Das, The End of the spring, p. 120.
17. Kamala Das, Herons, p. 52

19. Ibid.


25. Kamala Das, I shall some day, p. 27


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