III. ANIMAL IMAGERY

The poetry of Kamala Das is written on the subject of her childhood, her marriage, her dissatisfaction with her husband, her sexual relationship with other men which for her is a consolation for her suffering in love through frustration and disillusionment etc. Her poetry is a kind of psychological striptease. She discloses that the theme of most of her poems is man-woman relationship and the frankness about her own sex life. She appears to be a sex – hungry rebel. Being a poet of love and pain, she writes about the experiences of anger, humiliation, sexual torture, sickness, loneliness, and frustration. Actually her poetry seems to be a rebellion against the male-dominated society. According to Vrinda Nabar:

She began seriously writing verse because of her intense unhappiness in her marriage. She has even claimed that her “love life” was a result of that frustration.¹

She would like to express her personal life, which is full of unhappiness. Her frustrated and unhappy life resulted in the writing of the poems. She confesses what she has done in her life. She never hides the secrets of her life. Devindra Kohli asserts:
All the new poems continue Kamala Das’s central theme, the exploration of the true nature of love and the extent to which the intensity of love, when achieved, is self-sufficient. There is a frequent reference to illness, and the concern with the decay of body and with all sensuous pleasure that is bound up with its physical limitation is more pervasive than before.²

There is more sophisticated organization of the experiences related to her frustrated life. That is why she thinks about the decay of her life. Her experiences are the real motivation for her poetry. She is a conscientious artist who is mainly guided by her impulse and instinct for precise and harmonious words. She is fully aware of the value of words and their finer shades of meaning. Her poems are similar in theme but different in images. Her skill of using images, phrases, words appears to be very effective. She can make subtle distinction in picking up or turning down her words and phrases.

In order to delineate her own sex life she often uses animal imagery which appears to be highly suggestive and impressive. These images interpret the inner meaning of her sex life. Through these images she achieves the goal, which she wants to present before the world. The images can be distinguished into those of the pet animals and those of the wild animals. Her keen observation of the nature of
animal as compared to men and women gives birth to the sameness in their nature. The wild animal imagery stands for the rude, cruel nature of her lovers, especially her husband. The pet animals broadly symbolize the bound, subordinated, dependant and pathetic life of women in general and poetess in particular. Some of the specific pet animals like ‘a sparrow’, ‘a cat’, ‘a dog’, ‘a horse’, ‘a dove’ and ‘a puppet’ are generally used by Kamala Das. These animals are weak creatures, which are overpowered by their masters. They have no choice to decide their way of life. On the contrary ‘a lion’ stands for kingly command, the strength of body and cruelty equated with her husband and therefore she questions her husbands comprise with the lion. These powerful images strengthen her poems and thoughts. Her idea about life is very clear to the reader due to the appropriate use of different images. She deserves high praise for her choice of words and images for the writing of her poems.

According to Kamala Das women are like these pet animals in the houses of their husbands. They are over-ruled by their husbands. Women don’t have any freedom to ask any question. This is the experience of Kamala Das in her married life. She is like a doll in the hands of her lovers and husband. For her husband she is only an
object of sex. He never cared for her feelings. His manner of making love to her is disgusting like “a libertine” who crushed her innocent body without understanding her emotions. She is surprised by his strong attack. She tried unsuccessfully to come out of his embrace. He made sex with extreme brutality. His hand sways like “hooded snake”. She becomes fearful. The entire brutal behaviour makes her bold. She hates her husband and his inhuman ways of sex. She never hides her own sex experiences and those of her husband. She expresses her anguish with harsh sounds. She asks herself why she behaves like this? Why does she use bitter words for her husband. She writes about it in her poem “The Stone Age”:

Ask me, everybody ask me

What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like hooded snake.

…. Why life is short and love is shorter still.(Op,51)

The torture of her husband that she experiences during the act of sex is very painful for her. Her condition is very pathetic. She has a feeling of frustration in the arms of her husband. For him such a
body is an embarrassment. She loves him but her body is not ready for lovemaking in the manner that he likes. Love comes out of fear and pains. In the opinion of Kaur:

Kamala Das did display tremendous courage in revolting against the sexual colonialism and providing hope and confidence to young women that they can refuse and reject the victim positions, that they can frustrate sexist culture’s effort to exploit, passivise and marginalize women.3

Her husband neglects her emotions. What would a wife do when the husband is “indifferent” to her emotional needs. The husband is a perpetual irritant an unwelcome intruder into the privacy of the wife’s mind and body which is also haunted by other men.

Her agony is that every man seduced her but no one loved her. She accompanies many men whom she likes. She identifies the difference between the male psyche and the female psyche dealing with love and sex. She concludes that the woman loves and the man seduces. ‘Love’ has no meaning in the life of man. Every bed-partner uses her for his physical satisfaction. They are selfish and lack emotions. They leave her for silent weeping. No one has taken time out to ask about her pains and emotions. They are merciless. They never know the importance of love. Kamala Das suggests it in her
poem ‘The Losing Battle’, that men are ‘worthless’ and a woman should use the cheapest bait to trap them:

How can my love hold him when the other

Flaunts a gaudy lust and is lioness

To his Beast? Men are worthless, to trap them.

Use cheapest bait at all, but never

Love. Which in a woman must means tears.

And a silence in the blood (TTSR, 12)

As a wife, she feels nervous against the enormous ego and brutality of her husband. She becomes fearful whenever she is in the arms of her husband. The central theme of her poems is her painful experience of being a woman. What has stirred her sensitive psyche is the dehumanization of the woman as a being. She is an object of her husband’s game of sex. Sex for him is nothing but a game for his personal enjoyment. He has used her to satisfy his sexual hunger. She has had a painful experience during the sex. Her marriage floundered right from the start due to her husband who according to her devoted all his time to the official files and no leisure to spare for his sensitive wife who used to hanker for a fulfillment in love, for an emotional attachment. Lack of this emotional connectivity in sex is
unbearable for her. Her own bed has not given her solace either. The pangs of her body during the sex and after are inexpressible. The wife in Barche’s words,

“groaned” and “moaned” and constantly “yearned for a man’s loving and healing touch”.

Her invisible grief is mute for others. The sound of her heart refers to her expectation of love, which never materialized. In ‘Cat in the gutter’ she writes that in the act of love-making her private part is wounded. The body was crushed by him and he slept. He never thought about her wounds. She was just like “a high bred kitten” in his strong arms. He fully enjoyed her body. She regards herself as a weak pet animal:

Cowardice was his favourite diet

So who would tell him that when he made love,

Grunting, groaning, sighing, with no soul to overpower me,

Only his limbs and his robust lust

I was just a high bred kitten

Rolling for fun in the gutter. …… (Cp,99)
There is too much anguish and suffering in her life. The poem is remarkable in that it rises above the considerations of physical decay and frustration in the mind of Kamala Das. Since she is now loved for her body alone, and not for her spirit, she is in search of love outside her married life. Dwivedi, A. N. aptly says:

She moves from man to man in search of her true home, but there is a sense of wasted effort in the prolonged search.\(^5\)

She has failed to get love outside her home. She had studied the behavior of her husband and his lust. Then she had studied the other men as well. The result of all is that there is no freedom from the imprisonment of the world of lust. Only sexual humiliation and frustration are present in the world. There is the inevitable pain and defeat in her life. She had really loved her husband in the hope that he would love her too. But she no longer loves him because he proved to be a selfish man. He showed himself to be a keen and relentless observer when in sheer desperation, she acquired other lovers and went to bed with them. She calls her husband “a ruthless watcher”. Being fed up with her husband because of his lack of love for her, she turned to other men. He never uttered any word after watching her
with other men. She never hesitates to confess her illicit relations and even offers a close description of her lovers’ sprouted hair on chest. She compares it with “great winged moths” in which she hides her face as like small animals digging into the earth in order to hide themselves in it. She is conscious that what she is doing is shameful.

On Kamala Das’s search for ideal love and lover, Sunanda Chavan rightly observes:

Kamala Das’s search for ideal love and the resultant disappointment seem to involve the psychological phenomenon of “the animus” struggling to project the masculine imprint as interpreted by Jung. The attempt to seek in every lover the perfection of masculine being is destined to end in failure because of the impossibility of realizing the ideal human form.6

In “The Sunshine Cat” she speaks of the injustice meted out to women where again the dominant motif is suffering. She believes that the society is hostile to women and that they are humiliated in all possible ways. Her own husband whom she loved, did not love her in return.
She loved, who loved her not enough being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great – winged moths, burrowing
her Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh to forget … and, they said, each of
Them. I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you ……
They let her slide form pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears ….  (TTSR. 22)

The same poem again contains some vivid imagery of her
sexual experience. After a description of the hairy chest of young
lovers who had allowed her to slide from “Pegs of Sanity” into the
bed made soft with tears, the poem then follows the vivid picture of
her husband’s cruel nature. Locking her inside a room of books every
morning before going to office and unlocking the room only in the
evening. She recalls herself “a yellow cat”. A ray of sunshine fell at
the door of that room, and the ray of sunshine was the only company she had. Time passed, winter came and then she lost her “sunshine”. This appears to be symbolic:

Her husband shut her

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

With a streak 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

Lone, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when

He turned to take her out, she was a cold and

Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men. (TTSR, 22)

After repeated encounters like this and also as a result of her husband’s continued ill treatment to her, she lost her capacity for enjoying the sexual act. Her condition is described as that of a “half-dead woman” who is of “no use at all to men”. She becomes useless for the men with whom she might have slept for sexual pleasure. There is a predominant feeling that she has been used as a sex object by every man with whom she was on intimate terms. Her emotions
form a cage with herself as the caged animal. She is not ashamed to call herself ‘a bitch’ in the world of lust. Her husband is responsible for this condition.

In her loneliness and frustration no one is interested in consoling her. In this pathetic and unbearable situation she needs emotional support by her husband but it doesn’t happen in her life. Dwivedi writes:

At this moment, when she needed love and consolation of her husband, he treated her with cruelty. He used to lock her up ...... before he went out for his official duty. 7

Kamala Das is always waiting for the love of her husband as well as that of others. Unfortunately she has bitter experiences in the world. Her husband treats her cruelly which she never forgets in her whole life. Sex for her is an unavoidable phenomenon leading to her infidelity. Her husband is responsible for it. A critic, Dhar T. N., writes it in appropriate words:
The husband is not merely a cowardly and selfish person, but a jealous and ruthless watcher. When she goes out in search of love to young people. She is frankly told by them that they cannot give love to her, but only lust. The husband punishes her brutally till she returns into a “cold and half-dead woman”. Whether she is in a house or on a corridor, acutely conscious of her need for love.

Kamala Das experiences exploitation of woman as a wife. Regarding this subject she calls herself “a swallo” in the poem “The Old Playhouse”. Her husband had planned to tame her. The image of swallo and flight is appropriately used to express her feminine experience particularly as a wife. She is bound by the rules of her husband and that of the society. She is trapped in a cage of her husband like a bird. Her urge to fly and her pre-occupation with self, both are reduced gradually for she becomes the victim of male lust.

You planned to tame a swallo, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. (Op, 1)
In an unhappy marriage, wife may quarrel with the husband and suffer it till death, Kamala Das, a dominant woman, chooses the commanding nature. It is her personality. At the same time her husband is also responsible for it. Vrinda Nabar states:

It doesn’t seem likely that Kamala’s extra-marital love life had its roots only in spite! It is more plausible that the rationale for it may have been helped by her husband’s conduct. Kamala was probably able to enter into relationships with other men without any overt feelings of guilt because her husband had done nothing to sustain either her loyalty or her respect.  

Kamala Das’s failure in married life, her extra-marital relationship, her revolt and pathos is depicted in the poems through varied images. Her sex experience with each one of them is unsatisfactory. She realizes that all men are the same by nature. They like the body of woman rather than her feelings. In one of her poems, ‘Gino’, she refers to her western friend whom she has gifted her womanliness. She loves him, feels secure in his arms but afterwards she knows the reality. He likes to seduce her not for love but for bodily pleasures. He is a moody person, uses bitter words to her. She obeys his demands without uttering the word. He enjoys the sex. He
never heard the silent weeping of Kamala Das. Her search of love outside the home is unsuccessful. Everyone plays the game of sex with her. Accompanied by the white English lover, Carlo, she feels herself to be a pathetic creature of the world. Her unsound weeping is like “a homeless cat’s wail”.

I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes,
And jealous moods, after bitter words and rage,
I shall wail in his nerves, as homeless cat’s wail
From the rubble of a storm. But one only gets
The life one deserves and dreams only such dreams as
The old soul can comprehend. (CP, 23)

Kamala Das’s past memories of her grandmother and her childhood memories can never be separated from her poems. Whenever the persona feels alone, her past days console her. Her grandmother was an ideal woman for her. She recalls the house where she once used to live with her grandmother who was quite fond of her and from whom she received a lot of love. The poem “My Grandmother’s House” offers a striking contrast between her
childhood days with grandmother and her present life as a grown up woman. As a little girl, too young to read, she enjoyed her grandmother’s love, while now she gets no love from anybody and therefore feels as if she had lost her way in life. Her sense of loss is intense. So she has a feeling of deprivation.

Once she had visited the deserted house of her dead grandmother, all that the poetess remembered of the visit are her past sweet memories. She felt that she would gather a heap of darkness and silence and to take it to her city residence where she would only lie down in her bedroom in a contemplative mood, looking like “a brooding dog” which seems to be lost in contemplation.

There is a house now far away where once
I received love …….. That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
………. pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog ………you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved …….. (OP, 32)
The house boasted of a great personal library and her incapacity to read the books as a child brought only regrets to her mind. This is certainly an agonising thought to her as far as the poet is concerned. The comparison with a brooding dog is not a happy one. This is a descent from the sublime into the pathetic. She deliberately used this imagery with full consciousness of what it implies.

Marriage is an institution, which is based on the mutual understanding between the husband and the wife. But in the Indian context it is ruled by the husband. Both, men and women are socialized to the basic patriarchal policies with regard to the status, role and temperament. Women cannot get equal status and dignity from the men. They are not ready to change their attitude. It must be changed when they have concrete relationship in any condition and respect one another as a man or woman and also as a human being. Kamala Das is also a victim of this patriarchal society. She faces many problems like other women. She recognizes that love is a very weak instrument to keep the marriage alive. The woman’s body is a powerful weapon to hold her husband strongly. Her faith in marriage and husband is lost.
In the absence of any pleasure whatsoever, the poet is reminded of the old grandmother in whom she identifies all the lost love in her life. She pleads to all women to kneel down before the male ego since it is implicit in the institution of marriage. In her opinion the house of lust is nothing but “a merry dog house”. She writes in her poem entitled ‘Composition’,

Husband and wives,
here is my advice to you.
Obey each other’s crazy commands,
ignore the sane.
Turn your home into a merry
dog house,
mariage is meant to be all this
being arranged in
most humorous heaven.  (OP, 8)

The ‘Composition’, ironically, throws light on one’s existence which one suffers endlessly without any hope. The Indian believes marriage is being arranged in heaven. But for Kamala it is arranged in
‘humorous heaven’. It symbolizes the humour of her married life. It is one’s growth and consciousness that causes the tragic catastrophe. This concept of Kamala Das appears to be closer to Hindu belief in Karmik cycle according to which one suffers one’s prescribed share as a result at the wrongs done and sins committed during myriad cycles of births and deaths. The poem finds extension of meaning, acquiring, new dimensions of thought and feeling.

Loveless marriage of Kamala Das is very painful for her. Her desire of sex is not fulfilled by her husband. Sex with love seems to be the need of her heart. Germaine Greer discusses about love and marriage:

Loveless marriage is anathema to our culture, and a life without love is unthinkable ….. it is axiomatic that all married couples are in love with each other.10

She thinks that she has been living with her husband for a long time but he has failed to give her love. Other persons with whom she was linked did not love her. So she becomes fed up with her husband, lovers and her life as well. A. N. Dwivedi rightly asserts:
Kamala Das in her poem expresses her ideas against arranged marriages, which are usually inspired by the parent’s conveniences more than those of the couples. The poetess therefore, paints an abhorrent picture of her man, with whom she has to enter into sexual intercourse willy-nilly for his satisfaction …. Except for physical contact, it offers no emotional contact between the man and woman.\textsuperscript{11}

Her poems focus on the double standards of social morality, on power politics and power imbalance in sexual relationships and on a number of related social issues. It attempts to highlight the problems women face in a sexist culture. In a man’s world a woman is little more than an object that plays a marginalized role. Marriage, thus, came to Kamala Das as a punishment. She is well aware of the subordination of a woman in the world of men. She changes her love partners to bring change in her life but it doesn’t work. To show her pathos in this bitter world, she uses the imagery of dog in her poems like ‘Composition’, ‘My Grandmother’s House’, ‘In Calcutta’ and others.

Kamala Das becomes upset due to the social set up which brings no value to women in the family and the society. She is not treated as a human being. She says that every woman is trained by her family members as well as her husband to follow up their rules.
Kamala Das is one of them who had trained herself to carry out the duties of a wife in a subservient manner. She has no freedom to express her inner feelings that she wants. She is compelled to live under the control of her husband like the pet animals do as per their master’s wish. This appears to her to be the condition of each and every woman. Therefore Kamala Das compares a woman with “a trained circus dog” in “The Moon”:

It is a trained circus dog
That shall never miss its hoop.
Endlessly healing, it waits for
The new day’s wounds …… (CP,21)

She depicts her husband as a brute seeking, the gratification of his lust and of course, satisfying her sexual desire also in the process and yet leaving her sorely dissatisfied and frustrated because of the complete absence of emotion from his manner of performing the sexual act. Now there is a large gap between them. They haven’t any attachment. Their husband – wife relation is nominal. For the society Kamala Das and her husband are a couple like any other married
couple. She is far away from him and involved in other men. Now she doesn’t need his company for sexual satisfaction. She ironically says in ‘My Dog’:

The poodle, a solitary fruit
On the top branch of our bed,
Just a pearly glow against the pillow.
I told him, my husband for thirty years,
Father, the children are all grown up
And gone. Only the dog sleeps between us now.(CP,20)

For Kamala Das, the lover is an acme of accomplishment and perfection. Love brings an endless contentment in “Love”. It is an all fulfilling experience, which seems to end all quests of the poet:

Until I found you,
I wrote verse, drew pictures,
And, went out with friends
for walk ……
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel

My life lies, content,

In you …………. (OP, 23)

Now her life is meaningful because of her lover. She is involved in him. She has had mixed experiences with lovers and husband. Few of her poems expose her anger and hatred about male partners. But sometimes she is satisfied with her lover. Her mind is unstable.

One of her poems ‘Grey Hound’ expresses the confusion in her mind. Her mind is not constant. She thinks about life in different types. Her mind is like a racing dog. She says:

Mind

Lean greyhound,

Awaking

And leaping up (CP, 19)

Most of the animal images in her poetry are connected with her dissatisfied life, agony, disillusionment and her anger towards men
specially her husband. She portrays the realistic picture of her life. She has the pressures on her mind, which are generally found in a woman. Every married woman has a depressed psychology. But she doesn’t have the courage to open it to society. She hides her suffering because of the traditional impact on her mind.

Kamala Das, the poetess, has to face all the feminine problems without any hesitation and fear. Sex relations, consequent quarrels, and likes and dislikes are secret issues, making them a public issue is immoral and unconventional in the Indian context. But in the opinion of the poet, it is the universal problem of every woman.

Her husband fulfils his desire at his will, and she must surrender to him every time. She is like a bird in the cage of marriage she has an urge to fly in the sky of freedom. But she turns into “a bird of stone”, “a granite dove”. Her husband builds the net of rules around her. Her mind weeps for freedom. Her wounded mind becomes tired and soulless. Her body is a body without soul. Her husband does not create any hurdle regarding free love-sex. Das boldly and honestly states in ‘The Stone Age’:
Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind, you turn me into a bird of stone, a granite Dove, …………… (TTSR, 51)

Kamala Das’s failure to establish an eternal bond and realize the meaning of existence is at the root of her existential despair. Her painful and emotional life is torn between dual loyalties to the self and non-self.

The epithets “ancient settler” and “old fat spider” are too much pregnant with scorn to shake the web off which a spider, by implication weaves around itself. This is ironically preceded by a better sounding address “fond husband” which heightens the irony through the device of contrast. Indeed her own identity is expressed as a “bird of stone” and a “granite dove” which gain in effect through the collocation of opposites, innocence and tenderness in contrast to hardness and granite. This is a juxtaposition of the symbol of peace with that of death.

Her internal urge to fly cannot be fulfilled. It is an endless torture which she experiences in her life with her many lovers. She
has to accept it. She can’t escape herself from this world which is formed by men in a manner suitable for them. This experience generates the realization of the real life, in a poem entitled ‘Composition’:

…..Even

oft-repeated moves

of every scattered cell

will give no power

to escape

from cages of involvement. (OP, 10)

Once a woman married, she has no choice regarding her likes and dislikes. It is unavoidable for her. The definition of marriage in social context is the way of physical satisfaction. Love comes after sex. Kamala Das has a bitter experience about it. She ironically advises women in a poem entitled ‘Composition’:
fall in love

fall in love with an unsuitable

cperson,

Fling yourself on him

like a moth on a flame.

Let there be despair in every move.

Excavate

Deep, deep pain.  (OP, 9)

These lines appear to indicate the reality of life and husband-
wife relationship. It is the duty of a woman to devote herself
completely to her husband. She advises women to switch of their
personal feelings and love him even though he is unsuitable to them,
destroy the life like “a moth”, which knows the death before it and
burns. A woman is in a similar condition, knowing the reality she
accepts it.

The poetry of Kamala Das must be viewed in the light of
feminine consciousness. She is almost exclusively concerned with the
personal experiences of love. She is aware of her husband’s deceptive
nature. She can’t believe in his words when he flatters her. She asserts in a poem entitled ‘Heron’:

On sedatives
I am more lovable
Says my husband
My speech becomes mistladen terrain
The words emerge tinctured with sleep
They rise from the still coves of dreams
In unhurried flight like herons…. (CP, 105)

It appears that Kamala Das was already informed by her husband about his variegated sex life that is why she delineates in a newspaper article:

…….. he had other women before and could talk with rest about their sexual skills. He spoke admiringly of several sluts and nymphomaniacs. At times he talked himself into frenzy and when I lay near him, I was merely one or other of those attractive women. This was the first unpleasant discovery I made about men. It changed my life. 12
Her thoughts arise from the darkness of her heart. He never heard her nor praised her but when he called her ‘loveable’ she could not react. Her words are very poor to come out and take the wings. Her feelings, thoughts and the words are like the condition of “herons”. It suggests the incapacity of the poet and her tragedy.

Terror of sex, its attraction and revulsion are powerfully expressed in a poem entitled ‘Gino’ using the imagery of krait for her lover.

You will perish from his kiss, he said as one must
Surely die, when bitten by krait who fills
The bloodstream with its accursed essence, I was quiet,
For once, my tongue had fainted in my mouth.(OP, 13)

She expresses a sense of disgust of the male habits and treatment. The lover’s kiss is compared with a krait’s bite in order to express the horror of sex. The lover is like a reptile who keeps on sucking female body. Love as it is manifested in her life generates a sense of death thus one feels that it is very difficult to draw a demarcation line between life and death as well as love and lust.
There is a desire to experience love but it turns poisonous even outside marriage. A line “I was quiet” symbolizes her defeat in love.

Her insecure life and disgusting love show her a way of infidelity. She wandered from one place to another but her journey of searching love is unsuccessful. O. J. Thomas writes:

Thus, one can see that there is a search for security, understanding, shelter and happy home. Love always meant something more than physical to her. What she actually wanted from her husband was sympathy, understanding and companionship. She lived all her life in search of illusive love and company.  

Description of these experiences indicates her isolation, turbulence and depression. She is trying to discover, her own self and ideal love. Love is a tragic game for her even though she changes her partners like a bird migrating from one place to another. It is her nature. She rightly asserts in a poem ‘Ghanshyam’:

In love when the snow slowly began to fall
Like a bird I migrated to warmer climes
That was my only method of survival
In this tragic game ….  (CP, 94)
The sexual companionship gives a temporary sense of security and shelter because it saves her from loneliness. She feels that the kind of solitude she suffers from turns her house into a desert. Her lovers are like “seasonable insects”. Once her heart was dancing in the company of lovers. Her adulterous sex experiences are sweet but deadly. But sometimes she feels it to be concrete and sometimes as an unpleasurable thing. This one makes her a poor creature of the world. Regarding this the following lines from ‘The Survivor’ are highly significant:

Her friends were romantics, they watched her survive
A certain love and became her secret foes
Like seasonal insects her kind were required
To die when the singing was its best, and
The dance was sweetest frenzy. Kill, if you must
But in a tender way this moth that escaped
The legitimate holocaust. (CP, 61)

It highlights the miseries of a forlorn woman. The men treated her badly. She has not received love from her illicit orbits; she is
totally alone and frustrated. Those who claimed to be kind towards her had only subjected her to humiliation and injury. Act of love with them is a meaningless sexual encounter.

According to her a woman should be honest about her wants and requirements and then it would be easy for her to get a man to love her. But it is very torturous for her. She began to feel a great emotional vacuum. She is disappointed with these bitter experiences of life. This short-lived love harmed her. She loses her mental balance. It is her anguish of life. She has violated these social norms due to her husband.

Indian women are placed on a pedestal for worship on the one hand and treated badly and enslaved on the other. They are happy to live in the four walls of the house, looking after the kitchen and the children. But Kamala Das is not a woman of this category. She throws out these traditional norms. She chooses the way of freedom. She has a firm desire to move towards liberation. She seeks her own place. It is a captivity in the domestic set up that the poet finds dissatisfying. Her mind moves to freedom from those bondages. In ‘I Shall Some Day’ she says:
I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love words flung from doorways and of course,
Your tired lust. I shall some day take
Wings, fly around as often petals
Do when free in air. (OP, 48)

She says that she is the victim of the patriarchal society and her husband. She aggressively tells her husband that one day she will leave the bonds that trap her.

In her autobiography ‘My Story’ she writes about her serious illness when she was admitted in the Willingdon Hospital. She was looking thin and pale. Later she was discharged. She sincerely writes about the thought that came to her mind at that time:

Like the phoenix, I rose from the ashes of my past. I forgot the promises that I had made to God and became once more intoxicated with life. My lips had without rest uttered the sweet name of Lord Krishna while I lay ill, but when I recovered my health I painted them with pink lipstick. On moonlit nights once again I thought wistfully of human love …..
The path which she has chosen is not admired by the society. She never cares about it. She forgets these things in her sickness but again her mind is on the way of love. Her Nair family is a bundle of paradoxes. Sex, in that community was not mentionable or a matter of discussion. But Kamala Das never hides any page of her life. Her writing is an album of her personal life. She confesses her deeds without hiding her real issues.

She feels unhappy and angry due to the deceptive nature of the persons of society. She bitterly comments in her poem ‘Composition’:

Reader
You may say,
now here is a girl with vast
sexual hungers,
a bitch after my own heart.
But,
I am not yours for the asking.
Grovel at my feet,
remove you monkey – suits and dance
sing Erato, Erato Erato,
yet I shall be indifferent.

Not because of morality

but because

I do not feel the need…. (OP, 6)

A close reading of her poetry reveals the fact that most of her poems are full of anger and scorn. Her poetry oozes from every word and every line. She admits her adultery but her anger against the society is expressed in the line ‘remove your monkey – suits’. She never finds honesty in the nature of man. She does not call herself immoral because her search for love is carried out on a different kind of morality like that of Lord Krishna.

Kamala Das never finds love and sympathy in the society. But people are selfish. She revolts against these norms of the society.

Kurup P. K. J. says:

It is in this perspective that the rebellion Das’s poetry voices against the masks of hypocrisy, male tyranny, and the existing moral codes and even the human predicament and the human destiny has to be viewed. In fact her poetry is the sum total of her quarrels with the human destiny of all kinds.\textsuperscript{15}
She further, feels unhappy about her marriage, as she appeared to be a puppet, which is being held firmly by her parents. She had no freedom to select an ideal lover for her. Others did all the planning for her marriage and she was not even consulted on the subject. In her own words, “My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives.” what hurt her most was this indifference to her individuality from her relations. As a modern woman she never liked the way in which they moved about and fixed her marriage without, even trying to know her ideas and aspirations. This attitude of her relations actually hurt her and she considered herself a helpless victim:

I was a victim of a young man’s carnal hunger and perhaps out of our union, there would be born a few children. This sense of helplessness and alienation promotes her to become a rebel and creates a feeling of loneliness. She would not mix with that mismatched husband. Her life is a burden of agony and isolation. There is a horrible silence in the bedroom, which is unbearable for her. Her heart is like “an empty cistern”. She writes in ‘The Freaks’:
Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence …. (OP, 11)

The heart which has been waiting to be filled with “flamboyant lust” is forced to reconcile itself to merely ‘coiling snakes of silence’. It expresses the woman’s impatience and frustration with the man as well as the moment with the man because of his sexual incapacity and slackness. And thus if she has done the masculine role, if she flaunts “a grand flamboyant lust” (The Freaks, 11) it is to save her face, to redeem her feminine face.

She discovers that, after all, the pleasures, her body offers are of cloying and ephemeral nature. A love, which flourishes and thrives on body is bound to wither with it and the search for true love in a world of philanderers is a futile exercise. So she turns to the mythical world of Krishna and Vrindavan to seek lasting love and fulfillment.
She imagines herself as Radha and finds comfort in the arms of imaginary Krishna.

She addresses Ghanshyam and tells him that he has built a nest in the garden of her heart and that her life, which was till now a silent and sleeping jungle, is now stirring with the sounds of music. Ghanshyam, she says, has been leading her along a route which she had never known before. In ‘Ghanshyam’ she recalls him:

Ghanshyam,

You have like a koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart.

My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music.

(CP, 93)

The detachment from the world of reality and venturing in the world of imagination, the eternal longing for true love is the main concern of her poem. The persona waits along for Krishna, the ‘eternal lover’ like the mythical ‘Chataka’ bird that waits for ever for the celestial water to quench thirst. The ‘koel’ building nest in the arbour of heart and her sleeping life being caressed with music are beautiful analogues stressing the sense of suffering and redemption through the tradition bound images. The same poetic behaviour is
discernible in the image of fisherman’s net in the following movement of the poem:

Shayam O Ghanshyam
You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows
Of my mind
And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like enchanted fish …… (CP, 95)

The imagery of the “fisherman” and “enchanted fish” comes full circle. She prays to Lord Krishna to control her thoughts and feelings. She wants to live in his net of pure love. According to her God is a permanent lover of the woman. He is universal. He is the great fisherman, who cast his net in the depths of her mind and her thoughts are rushing towards him like a fish, which briskly enters the fisherman’s net under some mysterious urge. Thus this poem reveals Kamala Das’s spiritual longings which have been dormant in her and which have come to the surface as a consequence of her sexual frustrations.
Many of her poems highlight on the theme of death. When her life is unbearable for her she thinks about her death. Understanding of life includes understanding of death and in any attempt to understand and solve the mystery of human existence comprehension of death is highly imperative. She understands that the body is troublesome in so far as it is matterbound and hence subject to many limitations. It is a destructive thing. She admits the limitations of the body. She also wants to underscore purposelessness of life, which leads to suffering, and thought of death.

Now the poet has no capacity to continue the tragic game. She is depressed. Her age does not help her to proceed her affairs. Search of ideal love in a materialistic world is impossible. All the ways are closed. Her mind desires to take rest. Her condition resembles “an old horse”. She has a negative attitude about her life.

Of late my words have worn
Thin, my speech resembles
The tagged gallop of
A cart horse that needs to
Be reshod and perhaps
Given rest, for, poor thing
Its roads were arduous
And its burden always
Too heavy. An old horse,
If lucky, dies on road…. (The Cart Horse. CP, 62)

At the same time Kamala Das compares her words with birds:

Words are birds.
Where have they gone to roost,
Wings, tired,
Hiding from the dusk?

…………………..

When I lie down to sleep
I am not sure
That I shall see
The blessed dawn again. (Words are Birds CP, 25)

Her poems are her personal topics of life in general but some of her poems focused on social set up. She is also conscious of the
social problems. The hierarchical power structure of the city is masculine in its authoritarian disregard for human sentiments. She speaks about the brutalising aspects of the urban experience. She highlights the social, political and patriotic issues in the poems like ‘The House Builders’, ‘Nani’, ‘Flag’, ‘Visitors to the City’ and ‘Pigeon’ etc.

In her poem ‘The House Builders’ the masculine authority of the city manifests itself in its corrupting influence which turns its inhabitants into victims. The poet sympathizes with these workers. These workers are the victims of the rude society. They have no shelter, nor sufficient clothes and food. There is nothing in their life. They are exploited by the higher class of the society. Her poem ‘Pigeon’s is the best example of it. She writes:

Pigeons on the ledge
Of an afternoon dream
Sit strangely silent,
The hot dust rises
Falls on sun-peedal beaks …. (Cp, 107)
She compares these poor people with ‘the pigeon’, which sit on the edge silently. They have no shelter to protect them from the heat of sun. No one cares for them. When she has seen this poverty in India, she had commented on Indian Government and their policies. She has depicted a very pathetic condition of poor women. They have no security of their life. The poor woman is always raped by the people of upper society and never gets justice.

One of the important poems where Kamala Das draws the reader’s attention to the suffering and humiliation which women are made to experience is ‘Nani’. The focus of the poem is a pregnant housemaid hanging herself, due to the shame and moral austerity of the society in which she lived. The spectacle of Nani hanging from a rope is heart-rending which raises unanswerable questions:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself
In the privy one day. For three long hours
Until the police came, she was hanging there
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope,…..(OP, 40)
The image of clumsy puppet performing a comic dance is noted for its vividness and also its suggestiveness. Nani, as is made evident by the poet, has been a puppet in the hands of fate and the real culprit who has subjected her to such humiliation is of course the society and also its moral codes. She hangs from a rope as a helpless victim to the designs of an “unknown citizen” and the effect produced in the eyes of children is comic.

K. V. Surendran writes about it:

Maids become pregnant before they get a chance to get married and the choice left before them is to hang themselves or consume poison and thereby end their lives.18

These poor women have only the way of suicide. Many questions are raised in the mind of Kamala Das regarding this poor creature. After passing some years the poetess asks unpleasant question to her grandmother about Nani. She asks her whether she remembers Nani or not. Her grandmother replies she never knows Nani. It is very inexplicable to Kamala Das. The Grandmother avoids to speak about Nani. Why does she neglect this pathetic creature? Death of Nani is meaningless for the society. So Kamala
Das has a readymade answer to explain this reaction. In ‘Nani’ she writes:

Each truth

Ends thus with a query. It is this designed

Deafness that turns mortality into

Immortality, the definite into

The soft indefinite. (Op, 40)

This bitter experience appears to have been one of initiation. She moves from a world of innocence to a narrow, conservative way of life which prefers to suppress what is unpleasant and “inexplicable”. The tragedy of Nani is not that of an individual but it appears to be universal one. The woman is one of the victimized groups of society. Nani, a woman of lower caste, and the poetess, from rich Nair family, are similar in the eyes of the society. She writes that Nani is the comic subject for them because she is the clumsy puppet for the society. It is a major problem of womanhood.

To put it briefly, suffering and humiliation are undoubtedly the dominating themes in her poetry. Women’s exploitation in a male
dominant society is the major part of her poetry. She airs her views with a boldness unparalled. Dependent life of woman is a cause of her tragedy. Her parents and husband are the makers of her life. Her awakening about this reality makes her weak. Due to this she is ridiculed by a hostile world. This condition of woman is described through the image of pet animals in the poetry.

Kamala Das has a good skill of using appropriate images in proper places. She is fond of nature so she discovers similarities between varied animals, and woman. In the Indian context once a woman married she is a guest for parents. Whatever the problems she has, she will not be back to her parents home. She has no right to live in parent’s house even if she likes. The same thing happens in her life when she lives with her husband and bears unhappy moments. She cannot express it to her parents and lives with them. In the social context the husband is the master so she has to follow the rules under his guidance otherwise she has no place. She cannot express her sufferings to her parents. To her live with him till death is a compulsion for her. So the poet compares this with “a brooding dog”, “a homeless cat”, “a sparrow” to highlight its intensity. Her images have deep meaning. Using the images of beast, poisonous snake for
lovers and husband the poet draws the brutal selfish and merciless nature of the male. Her husband and lovers are as cruel as the lion and the poisonous snake. The husband is the master of his wife. He has treated her as per his own wish. He imprisoned her in his cage of lust. Her powerful images show it.

Kamala Das has emotions arrested in glowing words, phrases, expressions and she has a skill to turn out brilliant images and similes. Her images are expressive and spontaneous. Phrases like “hooded snake”, “a ruthless weather” are suggestive and remarkable. Some of the negative images showing her frustration and helplessness are more authentic in comparison to the images of freedom that she tries to draw. These images highlight the fact that a woman has no location. Bird images convey the image of hurt woman and her urge of freedom from the cage of her husband, a brutal animal. No doubt the animal images in her poetry are dominant and impress the reader.

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Reference


7) Dwivedi, A. N. Kamala Das and Her Poetry, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors. 2000, 100.


17) My Story (Ibid) 90.


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