Chapter-III

Kamala Das' Poems

a) Summer in Calcutta
b) The Descendants
c) The Old Playhouse and Other Poems
Introduction

The fame of the Kamala stands unique in the literary world. She is one of the great Indian poets writing in English. Her writing emerges with a peculiar sweeping force whenever she pens her artistic works, or stands on the dais of Literary genre, and this peculiarity has attracted a vast magnitude of readers. The unusual characteristics in her is not far to seek since she is frank, bold and controversial.

The boldness that she associates may also be attributed to the choice of the English language as her medium of expression. After all, English language is an alien medium. But she uses it daringly and with confidence. Her affinity for this medium is neither artificial nor superficial. The infatuation that she possesses for this language is explicitly voiced in "An Introduction" shown below:
... I am Indian, very brown born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
 Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware.

The critics who oppose the use of English by Indian writers are of
the view that mother-tongue interference will jar the writer's linguistic
representation of his imagination and the product would be an intellectual
jumble. But the above view may not be applicable in the case of Kamala
Das because her use of the medium is as powerful as of any Native
speakers. Let us have a look at her major works given below:

Summer in Calcutta: Poems of Confessional Tone

The poems of Kamala Das are fused with her love-experience
purported by a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving tensions of
different kinds. The complex nature of these poems may be properly apprehended by focusing on some of the most important dimensions as defined in terms of her relationship with her husband, the lovers, the grandmother's house and the society as also in terms of her identities as a woman and as a poet. The blatant honesty which she employs as a yardstick gives a quality of uniqueness to her poetic exploration.

Kamala Das' love-experience is ejected from her encounters with her husband which also form the basis for all other rapportts that follow at a sequential order with other men in her later life. This love-experience, therefore, provides the most important dimension for her poetic exploration. Her life is interwoven by a juxtaposed situation of trying to find spiritual fulfilment on the one hand, and physical fulfilment on the other. She is often seen being bogged down due to her husband's inability to offer her complete spiritual fulfilment. It is because of the urge for spiritual fulfilment that she tries to flirt and to develop some extra-marital affairs. "She even tries adultery for a short while". All these are found expressed in her poetical oeuvre.

Kamala Das' Poems are found to be concerned with the external as well as the internal worlds, and her response has its inclination to the call

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1 Kamala Das, "My Story" (Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1976), p. 193. All the subsequent page references are to this edition.
of the external world in particular despite her inner restlessness. Mrs. Das' landscape, though it is a part of the inner landscape, can still retain its objective contours. She lets the aesthetic details speak for themselves before they speak for her. These facts are shown by the following study of her poems:


   This work of poesy opens with the poem, "The Dance of the Eunuchs", which has a tone of irony and temper of the entire volume. There are many poems based on love, but few of which speak of the grandeur belonging to a really exalting love-experience. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" clearly shows, through an external, familiar situation, the poet's strangled desire within. It finds its background on the poet's sudden contact with 'a man who had hurt me when I was fourteen years old;' she wanted 'to get him at any cost'. This poem is powerful and courageous and it displays an admirable sense of proportion in the use of imagery and metaphor.

   The next poem, 'The Freaks' is a confessional poem where the speaking female voice unburdens the torture of her heart. It paints a rather helpless situation where the man is passive and the woman is burning with desire and thereby becomes helpless. This poem is depicting the lack of human communication and the failure of man-woman relationship. They
have lived together for long but like islands unto themselves. While they intend or pretend to make love, their minds never meet, like the East and the West, their minds wander apart. What she grudges most is the man's shallowness, his physical hunger and his lip-love. He could never cross the skin's surface as she clearly shows it in the following lines:

*Can't this man with
Nimble finger tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hunger?*

Though there is unison of the physiques, the hearts never met. Her heart remained an empty cistern. Her flamboyant lust is a defence-mechanism rather than her inner urge. There is an obvious sense of void created spiritually despite their physical commingling.

Another poem, "In Love", brings the poet face to face with an inquiry whether she could call her sexual experience 'love'. It radiates with heat and passionate experience. "In Winter" also carries the emblem of the warmness of sexual act, of her soul groping for roots in his body. The identification of love with physical desire is also found in her poem, 'A Relationship'. It was my desire that made him male and beautiful. The poem " Spoiling the Name" mocks at the significance generally attached to

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words and, figuratively, to abstractions. A name is an abstraction, and in a woman's case borrowed from someone else, it is a weight and a burden, as all abstractions are. She, therefore, asks:

... why should this name, so
Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room
where I go to meet a man
who gives me nothing but himself, who
calls me in his private hours
By no name... .

This poem shows Mrs. Das' craftsmanship, but is rhetorical in tone.

Human significance of the restlessness and bewilderment or disappointment and gloom experienced by women folk in our society is much greater since the contradictory pressures are present in their life in heightened form. The conscious identity won by these women through education cannot find any meaningful expression in the roles thrust upon them by our society. While men could cultivate the realm of personal relationships as a reserved area for their liberal ideals, women are said to have denied this privilege. There has been hardly any opportunity available to a gifted female who wants to assert her freedom and individuality in the restricted field of man-woman relationships.

Kamala Das, therefore, defies the sensibility mentioned above and her poetry has a special force and ringing appeal for us primarily because

3 Ibid., p. 28.
of her honesty and candour with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual with a distinctive identity and to be her genuine self in the midst of all the restrictive pressures even if this involves breaking the moulds of traditional ethics and propriety. Her poetry voices a vehement protest against the senseless restrictions which compel a sensitive and intelligent woman to suffer. She, therefore, raises her voice high which is one of the important tenets of feminism, and is solely to add to the rhapsody of the readers.

The other poem, "An Apology to Goutama" also constructs a dialectical opposition between the ascetic and the sensual, between Goutama and her own man. The opposition is actually between two kinds of eyes, two kinds of voices and two kinds of faces, and rather two modes of living:

... while your arms hold
*My woman-form, his hurting arms*
*Hold my very soul.* [p. 19]

Thus the poem focuses on this vital contrast for its strength.

A sense of gloominess is also felt in her poem, "The Fear of the Year". Meanwhile, "My Grandmother's House" has the depiction of another ecstasy of wild despair:

... you cannot believe, darling,
*Can you, that I live in such a house and*
was proud, and loved... I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger's door to
Receive love, at least in small change? [p. 15]

And in "The Wild Bongainvillea" we are to listen to the poet's
poignancy and how she groaned/And moaned, and constantly yearned for a
man from/Another town.....' In "The End of Spring", the poet, while
waiting for the poet's phone call, sinks into brooding over 'the fear of
change'. And "Too Early the Autumn Sights" also evokes a mood of
premature dryness within:

Too early the autumn sights
Have come, too soon my lips
Have lost their hunger, too soon
The singing birds have
Left.

[p. 26]

Even in this poem of so conventional a mood, Mrs. Das is able to
compress or squeeze out of common images a bit of visionary quality.

"Visitors to the City" is another blatant and passionate etching of a
scene composed of 'sights and sounds' offered by one morning on Strand
Road. "Punishment in Kindergarten" is warm and muffled, and recounts the
picnic of the poetess at Victoria Gardens to which she and her classmates
were taken, and the incident which followed it. She was all alone near the
hedge, while other girls were playing at a distance. The poem demonstrates the poet's potential to smell the flowers as well as the pain of being sighted. It also suggests us about the feminist sense of isolation and her desire to be free.

Mrs. Das presents a feminist movement through her poetry. She discovers the male-hegemony from the inner care of her feminine consciousness. Her search for identity is sex-oriented; and therefore, she delineates her feminist voice through sex-imagery. She is every woman suffering passive pathos in a male hegemonic set up. Her free mention of sex, her husband's pride of having had contacts with 'Sluts and Nymphomaniacs', a pair of beautiful breasts and a faint musk-rat smell in her perspiration: all these confessions deserve applause and appreciation but her statement, "adultery is common with women residing in cities" may not be positively agreed to because this view may hamper the general outlook of women in the society. De facto our societal structure ought to create enough rooms for those women who would like to preserve the sanctity of husband-wife relationship in sex.

Her poem, "The Siesta" is accompanied by sleepiness 'The sun-lit tank', which brings 'an anonymous peace' to her, or with dreams which 'glow pearl-white'. But what the mysterious siesta brings to her is neutralized by her supposed inability to meet this alien world which talks
of gods and casual sins. However, the poet is concerned more with the vulnerability of the ‘anonymous peace’ of the siesta, its inability to withstand the challenge of the wakeful world rather than with the siesta itself. The display of the potency of this challenge is the poet’s oblique commitment to it.

Mrs. Das projects a self-contained mood of sensuous luxury in her title-piece, "Summer in Calcutta". The image of the sun in April in the poem brings a sense of sensuous repletion to the poet. In it we find the warm intoxication which inspires as well as relaxes so that she comes to the statement, 'my worries doze' and

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\ldots \text{wee bubbles ring} \\
My \text{ glass, like a bride's} \\
Nervous \text{ smile, and meet} \\
My \text{ lips. Dear, forgive} \\
This \text{ moment's lull in} \\
Wanting you, the blur \\
In memory
\]

[p. 48]

The poet celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over 'the defeat of love'. It is an Indian poet's creative reaction to the torture of the Indian summer. What distinguishes Kamala Das' reaction is her unconscious intimacy with this torture.
"With Its Quiet Tongue" expresses the poet's agonized concern with the wretched coldness of heart. Another poem, "My Morning Tree" deals with the familiar theme of desperate longing for fulfilment. Its images are sharp; structure is carefully organized; and mood poignantly objectified. The poet looks forward to the moment of the blossoming of 'a sudden flower' in it, though the images like the 'ugly tree' and the 'fleshless limbs' of the tree give no hope of this blossoming. The poem is one of the dark desairs; and the sense of fulfilment which so strongly dominates poems like 'Winter', 'A Phone Call in the Morning', 'Love', Spoiling the Name', 'In Love', is here imagined and telescoped but not without involving the cost of an almost brutal irony, for the blossoming may not only come too late but may be the end itself. The 'passive' limbs of her desires and passion will flower into a 'red, red morning flower' of death.

Like "The Dance of the Eunuchs", "The Testing of the Sirens" has a befitting close. The poet wakes up from a night full of love and lust to a sense of physical loneliness, goes through a drive with another with 'a pock-marked face' and, while he is taking her photograph, arises with a keen desire for love which is doomed to remain unfulfilled. Her relationship with either of the lovers is a rootless and detached loyalty of the moment, to the first (of the night) that of the limbs and to the second (with the 'pock-marked face') that of 'a smile' which is 'such a detached
thing'. The poem immortalizes the poet's attachment to one of her family friends, a young man of eighteen years, who used to take her out to Victoria Memorial, photographing her against trees and against flowing water, and entertaining her with Hindi film songs.

We have a different category of poems like "The Flag", "Forest Fire", "The Wild Bougainvillea", "Someone Else's Song", and "An Introduction", in her work, Summer in Calcutta. In these poems, there is an attempt to rise above the 'private voice' and depict a larger panorama of experience. The technique is almost always one of assuming a vaster identity as in "Someone Else's Song":

I am a million, million people
Talking all at once, with voices
Raised in clamour, like maids
At village - wells.

[p. 31]

Or, in "The Stranger and I":

I've seen you in restaurant, all gay
And smoke-filled, on the seat behind
The pillar, drinking joylessly your
Sweetened tea, while your left hand
Softly trembling, crouches on the
Table clock like a wounded bird . . .

[p. 31]
The tone of Kamala Das' poems depicted in this volume focuses on betrayal and presents the poet as a prisoner of her own loneliness and isolation aggravated by complex moods. For instance, the poem, "The Wild Bougainvillea" shows the satisfaction of a peculiar personal need as a necessary distraction from her mood of sadness and loneliness. "It is good world, and packed with distractions". The poem, "An Introduction" is an open and witty piece of self-revelation, and is a beautiful statement of her poetic credo, her attitude to language and experience. The crux of her poem is to have the freedom to be herself. She takes a turning from normal paths to exhibit her true identity. 'Fit in', said they. 'Belong', cried the categorizers. But she doesn't listen to them. Indeed, she has transformed her alienation from 'critics, friends, visiting cousins', who say, 'Don't write in English', into a larger and more universal alienation based on the sexual, social and artistic perspective:

I met a man, loved him, call
Him not by any name, he is every man
who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love.

[p. 60]

It is, however, clear from the above that the poems of Mrs. Das especially in Summer in Calcutta, are charged with a sense of universality which is simply self imposed and not natural for her. The personal moods
and feelings in this volume are found to have outweighed the impersonal ones, for sustained universality is not within the poet's reach. She is found to be in her own world and her world is to denounce patriarchal hegemony.

*The Descendants (1967) : Poems of Sensuality*

The second poetic collection of Kamala Das entitled *The Descendants (1967)* is composed of twenty-three poems in all. All these poems are the manifestation of her favourite theme of sexual love. This treatment of sex brings about the bearings of carnal urge in a woman. The question of death is also foremost in this collection. It is, by and large, bitterly death-conscious, perhaps death-obsessed. Some of these poems like the "Invitation", "Composition", and "The Descendants" seem to be solemnised by compassion or humility under a false impression. The reality is that there seems to be a yearning for the pseudo-metaphysical poise and the inability to reckon with emotional defeat and frustration, with a sense of nothingness:

_To be frank,
I have failed.
I feel my age and my Uselessness._

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The poetess is actually rhapsodized by a sense of the smouldering "secret" and "isolation" that 'I am so alone', and that life is a colourless design of crumbling patterns, as we find in her poem, "A Request" which is shown in the following:

When I die
Do not throw the meat and bone away
But pile them up
And
Let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth
what love was worth
In the end.

[p. 11]

The above-passage delineates the insignificance and meaninglessness of the poetess' life. The situations she has been thrust upon and the sterility she experiences is being conveyed with a sense of sourness and bitterness. Her poems like "Shut Out That Moon" and "Neutral Tones" are examples of discontentment. The defiance of all positives in life reminds us of the poetical tone which Thomas Hardy employs.

The title poem, "The Descendants", frontiers on nihilism which moves the poet in a direction opposite to the faith in the essential continuity of life suggested by "Death Brings No Loss" (Summer in
Calcutta). This poem ends with a ring of finality: 'We are not going to be redeemed, or made new'.

We find weak passages and the lack of dramatic cohesion in another poem, "The Suicide". It is written as a conversation between the poet and the sea. The thematic content of this poem is found to be based on the poet's contemplated or suggested suicide, but the poem finally defies it through a rejuvenated sense of life. The body and the soul, according to her, are inseparable, she cannot choose between a physical death and a spiritual death. For her, the sea is the source of a constant distraction, a nagging threat, and invites her to negation:

The sea is garrulous today. Come in,
Come in. What do you lose by dying, and
Besides, your losses are my gains.  

This poem offers her dissolution with a tinge of seduction.

Another poem, "A Request" is pregnant with the sense of 'death' which also finds a parallelism through 'Dear night, be my tomb' of "Substitute" and merge into the unredeemed darkness of our own fate, of the wounds and the cross, of the fire and 'the hungry earth' of "The Descendants" which would devour us in the end.

1 Ibid., p. 20.
In "The Invitation", we witness the duality of death – while the sea offers one kind of death, a complete negation, her lover whom she can't disobey offers another, metaphorical death i.e. the feeling of 'lying on a funeral pyre or with a burning forehead'. The dictum she employs suggests a state of delirium and the feeling of torture that seems to accompany her more recent treatment of sexual love. In it, we find that she rejects the way of the sea and prefers to shrink or grow in her own way. Although the man has gone for good, the poet is still haunted by the memory of her past experience and is warmed in doing so. She cannot forget the self-contained intensity of the moment of sexual love:

\begin{quote}
*All through that summer's afternoons we lay
On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding
Into throbbing suns. The heat had
Blotted our thoughts. . . .*
\end{quote}

The above lines show an explicitly suffusing organic warmth and vivify the pervading heat of summer days.

The poem "Ferns" arrests sexual love in an image of self-mocking and self-devouring intensity which suggests that perhaps there is a sense in which her glorification of physical love carries with it an element of disenchantment.

\footnote{Ibid., p. 20.}
The poem, "Convicts" is an evidence of physical love in the
clemental terms of physical labour and heat, and a physical experience
shown below:

That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other's parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot
Sun. There was a burning in our
Veins and the cool mountain nights did
Nothing to lessen heat. When he
And I were one, we were neither
Male nor female.  

This is indeed, a sensuous poetic passage hurling amorous
implication to the readers.

"Substitute" is a poem which hovers amidst poignancy and
truculence. In it, we find the need to conform to the convention of a
hypocritical society and makes one's feeling of emptiness all the more
painful. The poem is full of pathos and is found to be ironical in its
meditative refrain:

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.

It will be all right, it will be all right
It will be all right between the world and me*.

This refrain experiences an abrupt intrusion of the image of crows over the market square waving violently but aimlessly in the sky 'with raucous cries' breaks the spell only to prepare the ground for the suggestion of the lack of 'mental contact' between the man and woman in "Our Bodies After Love-making". The tone of this poem is in the manner of Prufrock's 'Love Song'. The pursuit of love in it is merely mechanical without any meaning.

Another poem concentrating on sexual love is "The Looking Glass" which is shown below:

... 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*.

The tone of the above lines show close attachment and a ringing indulgence.

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The poem, "Captive" presents us the love of Kamala Das as 'an empty gift', 'a gilded empty container' and herself as the prisoner of the womb's blinded hunger, 'the muted whisper at the core'. Its tonic significance is found to be ambiguous and the theme of sexual love receives greater relevance from the charms of creation, and of childbirth. The same treatment of theme finds expression also in her "Jaisurya", which amalgamates the narrative and the meditative and which also details the whole gamut of feelings preceding and following the birth of a son. It brings together light and darkness, and fire and water, to weave a pattern of feeling which holds itself up with the joy of creation. It is noteworthy that meaningful things happen to the poetess at or around noon time under the virgin whiteness of the sun. There was a day of separation from the child which is substantiated by the line 'Separated from darkness that was mine'.

The newly born child is shown with a placement of 'war', 'bloodshed and despair' in "The White Flowers". The earnest prayer wishing her son a long life in the face of the outer threat of violence and death is strengthened by the contrast between the white flowers (symbolizing peace, long life) and the red (symbolizing for blood, mortality, anarchy) of the cherry wine, the rose. In it, we also witness the gesture of heroism as is shown below:
Today some of us will rise and sing of love.
In voices never as sweet before, for love like life
Is sweetest just before its end.

But the glasses are found to be 'cold like a dead man's palm' added to the sense of horror and the ghastly wailing which tends to subdue the poet's prayer from harming the child.

Indeed, Kamala Das has produced a sizeable number of poems in Indo-Anglian literature. Almost all these poems share a common rendezvous. They all lie on the pedestal of love and sex. The treatment of the theme of love and sex is again interspersed by a sense of frustration that seems to have left a perpetual biting effect in her soul.

In my evaluation Kamala Das is found to have a high sense of modernism. She writes with rebellious attitudes denouncing old customs and traditional practices. Like every modernist who is a rebel, she also rebels against the custom ridden and orthodox society dominated by men. She would not keep her hair long but cut it short and wear trousers and which is enough a sign to defy the established order and to begin assessing of the characteristics of being a feminist. She found herself in a custom ridden and old fashioned society with patriarchal dominance. According to her, these men looked funny, repulsive and proud. They were also self-

centred men who tried to look different and acted differently from women folks. Women, on the other hand, are dolls in the hands of men. Kamala Das could not adjust herself to this situation and, therefore, she highlighted the sensitivity of her mind through her poems. She wishes that modern women need freedom, self respect and they are prepared to shoulder responsibility. Her poems crystallize the suppressed tensions in the minds of women, who are reluctant to speak, like Kamala Das. Kamala Das, therefore, has expressed her emotions freely through her poems, making herself controversial and at the same time world famous.

*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973) : A Challenge to Patriarchy*

"Suicide", "The Descendants", "Palam" and "Luminol". This new volume of poems thus, has only thirteens poems to be taken into account.

This volume delves deep into the self of the poet. It tells us that love is perhaps a foot-path in experiencing and learning about one's true self. It is an avenue for the realization of one's own personality, and that the pangs and agonies associated with love are entities that cannot be done away with in life. It is mainly addressed to 'you', to the husband, who wanted to hinder her from freedom of movement and action through his subtle manoeuvrings. It lodges a protest against the constraints of married life. It tries to thwart the restrictions canonized by patriarchal forces in the society. In it is felt the crystallization of the fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort and male domination.

Kamala Das looks for a kind of freedom; a freedom with a wider horizon; a freedom that may be treated as complete or absolute. A freedom that explores love to its zenith or to its nadir, and which is not fettered by the chains of patriarchy. However, she realizes that all these are impossible to be achieved in the human life.

'You' in the poem is possibly the husband, who wants to tame the swallow who is the woman and thus deprive her of her natural freedom. The 'monstrous ego' of this husband becomes under fire herein and the poet
has been reduced to a much insignificant level. As a result of his egotism, her mind becomes like 'an old playhouse with all lights put out' and she feels the emptiness of the natural mirth and thinking capacity.

The following lines from "The Old Playhouse" will show as to how she spells out from freedom to imprisonment:

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\ldots \text{you call} \\
\text{me wife,} \\
\text{I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and} \\
\text{To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering} \\
\text{Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and} \\
\text{Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your} \\
\text{Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.}^{11}
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Here the woman suggestively protests against the male ego and assertion.

The relationship of man and woman as portrayed by Kamala Das, though filled with discontentment and disharmony, is a relationship with a difference. This marriage alliance spells out exotica and the reader is made to listen with amazement. It carries us to a world of striptease and vestiges of surprises by her overpowering artistic techniques.

The frustration in married life and the emotional linkage between husband and wife are symbolically presented in it. The woman sufferer in

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this way realizes the fallacy in married relations. She displays the
tribulations of the woman who has lost anchorage in the turbulent sea of
human life. The persona is denied of love and comfort. The husband all the
times remains complacent, making her act according to his whims and
caprices. The disgust and the anguish of the woman in her heart is clearly
exhibited in a typically feminine way in one of her poems, "The Stone Age"
as follows:

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, you build around me a shabby drawing room,
And stroke my pitted face absent mindedly while
You read12.

The revelation that love and matrimony are poles apart prompts
Kamala Das' persona to search for a lover. Though the love affair gives her
excitement in the beginning it is accompanied by disillusionment at the
later stage. "The Stone Age", like "The Old Playhouse", deals with the
reality of love being offered to the poetess by another man rather than by
her husband. This poem portrays the husband of the woman-persona as 'old
fat spider' weaving 'webs of bewilderment' around her and constructing the
dead, dull stony wall of domesticity and thus turning her into 'a bird of
stone, a granite dove'. The husband is the perpetual irritant, an unwelcome

intruder into the privacy of the wife's mind, which is haunted by other men. When the husband goes out, she drives along the sea and climbs 'the forty steps to knock at another's door'. We see the act of defiance taking place vividly, the deed done, freedom asserted, heightened with the assault of the dull domesticity enveloping around her. The poetess is further charged by the energizing questions:

... Ask me, every body, 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 hands sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, filled, he stumps against my breasts,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price.

[p. 51]

The freedom that we witness in these lines is the kind of freedom which Kamala Das has been longing for.

In most of her poems, Kamala Das tries to liberate the general lot of women folk by liberating herself. Her poems talk of women to be freed from the bondage of slavery in male-dominated society. She claims for perfect freedom in personal matters, chiefly in relation to love and sex. Her own personal life is a clear example of women's identity and liberty. She tries to combat against the age-old customs in the society. For this, she
even deserts her own religion to maintain her status independently. According to her, men are emotionally deficient and incapable of possessing a passionate regard for concrete reality. She, therefore, celebrates a free womanhood; she gives a free individuality to her woman persona. Das' poetic career is an incessant quest for self. She is laden with sensuality and compassionate urge for sex. M.K. Naik observes her such feeling in the following remark:

*The most obvious feature of Kamala Das' poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex referring nonchalantly to 'the musk of sweat between the breast', "the warm shock of menstrual blood", and even "my pubis".*

Hers is a different kind of protest for self-fulfilment. In the process, she releases her inner mindset with a contrast. In the poem, *"The Inheritance"*, her repudiation against the fanaticism of religion is seen. This poem is bitter, ironical but not cynical. It deals with the hatred and intolerance that goes in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism. What man has inherited is not love but hatred, not wisdom but babble: "This ancient virus that we nurtured in the soul...." depicts feminism of the past, an absorbing feminist saga or how women had been regarded in the past and is regarded at present.

"Blood" is the only new poem in the longer genre just like "Composition" and "The Suicide". Here the onrush of emotions is profusely restrained. It is purely in the manner of an autobiographical sketch, and the poet's nostalgia for the old house and for the great grandmother who lived in it is convincingly evoked. However, we are to see to it that she is not trying to idealize the house nor the people associated with it; she also does not attempt to reaching out into the history of the house of a long span of three hundred years beyond what she herself knows of it. Presently, we are given the picturesque scene of an old house with the walls 'cracked and torn and moistened by the rains', the whining windows, the fallen tiles and the rats scampering hither and thither. The grandmother, who is 'really simple', religious', and proud of her 'oldest blood', is portrayed with humour and detachment.

The old house with its walls cracked and torn may also symbolize the lost happiness and the declining dignity in a woman. While the fallen tiles represent the damaged hope and aspiration of Kamala Das.

The poem is concerned with the poet's sense of death apart from the pathos of the memory of her grandmother. There is a tone of solemnity and gravity of mood indicated by its short and crisp lines. Even where Kamala Das speaks of defeat and emptiness and the irresistible darkness which is
imminent, the assured clarity of outline, the serious control of nerve, and
the poise of movement confirm that the poet is in command of herself in a
moment of personal recollection. A pervasive and compelling sense of
death and decay is clearly obvious from the following lines:

I know the rats are running now
Across the darkened halls
They do not fear the dead
I know the white ants have reached my house
And have raised on walls
Strange totems of burial.
At night, in stillness,
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death
The noise of rafters cracking
And the windows whine.
I have let you down
Old house, I seek forgiveness.

Here she cherishes her placement of antiquity. She values her old
house to the extent of blending up of sweet memory with that of sadness.
Her leaving the house to its fate by not caring for it anymore also reveals
her longing for an escape for liberty and freedom. Kamala Das, here, likens
herself to Wordsworthian Skylark which does not forget the earth–her
home. Because it is as much a bird of earth as much as it is a bird of
heaven. Or Shelley's Skylark that wants to escape the world as the world is
full of cares; or Keatsian Nightingale of a dream world having little relationship with reality. However, a comparative study tells us that although Kamala Das may have a slight emotion or flavour associated with the above stereotypical birds, she is very much down to earth and there is an essence of truth to herself. The escapism she longs for is to isolate herself from male power. Her yearning is both humane and womanly falling within the ambit of feminist struggle.

The old house where she lived along with her grandmother and brother also refers to her Nair heritage. She often traces her blood to a royal lineage as her grandmother had once told her during her childhood:

That we had the oldest blood,
My brother and she and I,
The oldest blood in the world,
A blood thin and clear and fine
While in the veins of the always poor
And in the veins
Of the new-rich men.\textsuperscript{13}

There is a strong emotional bond between her and her great grandmother, and this is shown by the words of King Bruce:

\textit{an inner core of identity to which she refers her name and aristocratic blood, her mother’s family, life in the South and her youth in contrast to her marriage}.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} King Bruce, \textit{Modern Indian Poetry in English} (Delhi: O.U.P., 1987), p. 149.
Kamala Das is aware of the two classes – the poor and the rich – but she sounds ironical whenever such feelings come to her with intensity. The poem begins with the narration of her childhood days with her brother and grandmother who are deeply attached to the old house. As the poem proceeds, Kamala Das portrays the picture of her house as well as her relations of love. These reminiscences are a source of genuine human feelings.

She details the character of her grandmother in terms of her nature and behaviour and also the love she has for the decaying house. She is hurt on seeing the cracked and dilapidated house and the sight is as painful to her as the sight of the aged grandmother. Therefore, she promises to her,

\begin{quote}
When I grow old, I said,  
And very very rich  
I shall rebuild the fallen walls  
And make new this ancient house
\end{quote}

But later in the poem, we come across her honest confession and realization:

\begin{quote}
I had learnt by then  
Most lessons of defeat  
Had found out that to grow rich  
was a difficult feat\footnote{Kamala Das, "Blood" in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 16.}
\end{quote}

\footnote{Kamala Das, "Blood" in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 16.}
The speciality of this poem is that Kamala Das, while remembering her ancestral home and village, also feels the pulsation of the difference between her rural past and her urban present. The poet does not wish her blood to be blamed at all for not fulfilling the pledges given to her by her grandmother although her blood had inherited a stately flavour.

The blood that she possesses becomes an agency to recollect her glorious past and also carries irony of fate that the same agency cannot bring desired changes. It also hints at a feminine helplessness in the struggle against the male dominated society. The mention of the house occurs twice in the poem and describing it firstly from the grandmother's point of view and secondly from the poet's point of view. In the first description, we find that the house becomes a symbol of decay and at the same time arouses a powerful feeling of attachment and love for it. Whereas in the second phase, it causes a sense of death and becomes a symbol of inseparable past, she would never like to put a blame on her blood at any cost. There is an element of self-pity in the acceptance of her inability to retrieve and reclaim the past while upholding its glorious saga.

In the poem "Nani" we find that the poetessmingles gravity with irreverence. She is haunted by the suicide of the pregnant maid who hanged herself in the privy while the poet was yet a child. The pregnant maid, 'the
dark plump one, who bathed me near the well', said she and who hanged herself in the privy reflects her opinion in the following lines:

A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
was doing, to delight us, a comic
Dance... 19

To the children the hanging body turning gently on the rope was seemingly a dance of puppetry. They felt that Nani's body swaying as the wind blew and moved to and fro, was just entertaining them. After some years the poetess enquires of her grandmother about the dead maid. She pretends ignorance and the poetess remarks:

With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends thus with a query. It is this designed
Deafness that turns mortality into
Immortality, the definite into
The soft indefinite 20.

With the very passage of time the incident is forgotten by the grandmother, but not by the poet. We also see that the poem finally ends with a deep sense of serenity accompanied by the term 'clotted peace' of the dead, but the paradox is that the imagery evolving out of the peace of the

20 Ibid., p. 40.
dead does not belong to the world of the dead but to that of the living world.

A question that embarrasses a person cannot be answered by him directly as he cannot face the truth. In this regard what C.V. Venugopal remarks is worth quoting:

The poetry of Kamala Das is full of questions that are rarely answered. They are queries about truth. But, truth, in general, is unbearable. And Kamala Das, the seeker after truth feels betrayed. 21

Kamala Das is a poet with a high sense of curiosity. Her questioning nature in her makes her milieu well explored.

The poem "Gino" begins on a note of warning and fear. In it the kiss of a lover is compared to the bite of a krait who 'fills the bloodstream with its accursed essence'. Subsequently, she becomes love-conscious, and at the same time, conscious of the sense of death which is also the essence of living. There is a conflict between the desire to experience this poisonous love, possibly love outside the wedlock, and the difficulty to 'dislodge the inherited memory of a touch'. But if this difficulty is anyhow solved, thoughts of the triumphant love haunts the poet and she dreams of 'obscure

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hands', of 'wardboys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors/To the x-ray room's dark interior', 'of aeroplanes/Bursting red in the sky', 'of fat/half-caste children, lovelier than Gods', and of 'Drinking wine in verandahs'. And in a sudden fit of thought, she realizes that her dreams are unreal and that the burden of the body growing unattractive and gross is more real:

This body that I wear without joy, this body
Burdened with lenience, slander, toy, owned
By man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with
My darling's impersonal lust. Or, it shall grow gross
And reach large proportions before its end.²²

The poet is obviously conjuring up here her sense of disease, death and decay of everything beautiful.

The "Glass" meanwhile focuses the attention on the proneness of the disintegration of love-experience and also of the body. There is an indepth sense of pathos when the poet says:

I went to him for half an hour
As pure woman, pure misery
Fragile glass, breaking
Crumbling...²³

²² Kamala Das, "Gino" from The Old Playhouse and Other Poems.
²³ Ibid. p. 21.
In contrast to the above self-hurting remark and the disadvantages of femininity, the lover avers by saying:

... drew me to him
Rudely
With a lover's haste, an armful
Of splinters, designed to hurt, and,
Pregnant with pain.²⁴

In this poem, the anxiety of the poetess is voiced through a Freudian search for the misplaced father figure. She is seen moving from man to man in the search for her true home, however, there is again a sense of wasted effort purported in the prolonged search. The poem "Glass" thus becomes a clinical version as an attempt to look for him and the "misplaced" father now everywhere.

In "The Prisoner", the poetess has compared herself to the convict who studies his prison's geography with disbelief and hope. The situation is shown by the lines:

I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid. p. 21.
²⁵ Ibid. p. 29.
The term 'trappings' is very important, for it suggests "the trappings of lust from which she has to free herself to know true love" as well as "the soul's cry against its mortal dress". Usually the convict tries to escape from the prison only to return to his normal course of life. What Mrs. Das suggests here is the reality that there is no exact freedom from imprisonment of this world or of lust.

"After the Illness" was written after the poetess' recovery from a protracted illness. It gives us the theme of survival of herself as well as the lover's love for her. It was perhaps the deeply hidden soul that kept his love stable.

"The Millionaires at Marine Drive" is both serious and meditative in nature, its subject being the indispensable alienation of the woman. The kind of warmth which she received from the grandmother still haunts the poetess; the reason is that no man has been able to give her such an authentic love. The grandmother is shown here as an embodiment of tenderness and warmth and contrasted with her as in the following manner:

... all the hands
The great brown thieving hands groped beneath my
Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist's,
Warmth was not their arm, they burnt my cities
Down...

[p. 53]
The touch of her grandmother was soft and tender. Her patting and pampering had always made Kamala Das' ailing heart relieved. But the touch of her husband and other men as we have seen above, is, not at all consoling. Their touch has the similarity of the hands of 'theft' which is illegal, paltry and outlawed. Groping her clothes and burning her cities down would, therefore, show the destructive incendiary devices employed by men to suppress and mar feminine interests in the society.

It is thus clear that there was, in fact, not any mental contact between her person and her husband. What she wanted above all, was a lovable 'identity' with him, but her situations and circumstances brought her only the pain of growing old with a freedom she had never asked for. This poem vividly makes a shift in Kamala Das' approach to love theme; and from the grandeur of sexual love she now moves towards a general discontentment with the male character which urges to dwarf the kind of woman in her.

Kamala Das' poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self. This collection of poems entitled, "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems", therefore, presents Indian woman in a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. In it she envisages a new age for woman poets, an age seeking to forge new areas, a new medium and
newer modes of address constituting a total rejection of the conventional modes of poetic expression of the dominant culture. This third collection of her poems, in its entirety, hurls a scathing attack and a rebellious attitude against the male-oriented universe; and can rightfully be claimed as a challenge to patriarchy.