And Virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the
hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting,
melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You -----

- Kamala Das
The shift away from the exclusively male perspective is perhaps the most noticeable perception as one moves from Ezekiel to Kamala Das. Whereas the male persona in Ezekiel hankers for life-fulfilling relationship with the female, the quest for such fulfilment through love in Kamala Das centres round the travails of being a woman in a male-dominated society.

Kamala Das, one of the significant poets writing in English today, represents the gifted females of the Indian upper middle class who, despite their growing by the liberal western education, were denied any meaningful expression in the roles thrust upon them by the society. Her poetry acquires a special appeal to the reader primarily because of honesty and the candour with which she attempts to assert her right to exist as an individual with a distinctive identity, even if this assertion is at the cost of traditional propriety. The awareness that there is no opportunity available to her to assert her individuality and freedom even in the restricted field of man-woman relationship, makes this gifted woman dissatisfied and she starts on a bitter-sweet journey of self where the questions of defining herself become most significant for her.
Kamla Das has five books of works to her credit. *Summer in Calcutta* came in 1965, *The Descendants* was published in 1967. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* was published in 1973. In 1979 she published a book of poems in collaboration with Pritish Nandy under the title *Tonight, This Savage Rite*. *The Collected Poems* (Volume I) appeared in 1984. Besides this she has published her autobiography *My Story* in 1976 which helps the critic in making a better appraisal of her poetry.

Kamala Das belongs to the modern tradition of Indo-Anglian poetry by rejecting the too general and capturing the experience in a concrete manner. The concrete also fascinates her because it carries the aroma of her private life of the experiencing self which she seeks to define through her poetry. As a modern poet she attempts to project herself as an individual, distinct, separate entity and concentrates with her private voice on the "self" in her poetry. She appears as a rebel as she allows herself an opportunity in her poetry to scrutinise the age-old traditions which bind a woman to her man only as her stooge and minion, who can be used and trampled upon as per the whimsy of the man concerned.

Time and again, Kamala Das in her poetry exhibits a yearning to be an equal partner in love where "giving"
is as important as "receiving". To her dismay, all the society wants from a woman is to conform, to adjust to "fit in":

Be embroider, be cook
Be a quarreler with servants
Fit in, oh
Belong, cried the categorisers

Kamala Das refused to fit into any scheme devised by the categorisers and rebelled; this rebellion is duly projected in the frank and confessional quality of her poetry which thus seems to be a bitter attempt on her part to "retrieve her undermined dignity".

Kamala Das's autobiography contains many an open statement about the poet's efforts to define the constraints in which she has been trapped and also through this make an endeavour to redefine her position as an individual viz.a.viz. the world. One important feature of My Story and her body of poetry, is the critical analysis of the men-women relationships in their myriad forms and hues. My Story very often delves deep into the darkest abysses of Kamala Das's psyche and thus provides a rare insight into the compulsions and constraints under which Kamala Das had to experience and encounter life.

In fact, it is of benefit to read My Story along with the poems of Kamala Das because the autobiography
provides the reader with important pointers. With these pointers the reader can attempt to decipher the major themes in Das's poetry. The autobiography concerns itself with the constraints of Kamala Das's being a woman in the tradition-bound Indian society. It also deals with male lust and desire of a woman to gain love in the orbit of institutionalised arranged marriage. Her craving to be loved makes her seem, most of the time, preoccupied with the theme of love and sex, which, when denied in the sacramental marriage, she tries to achieve in extra-material relationships. The autobiography gives a clue into Kamala Das's craving for love by tracing its origin in a loveless childhood and her consciousness of the "burden of a swarthy skin and ordinary features."  

Her pre-occupation with the body is indicated in numerous incidents scattered in My Story where it serves as a pivot to her existence. She tries to escape from the world of harsh reality into a world of dreams; like Draupadi, she too would be presented flowers by her lover. She wants a son like Kunthi; after bath she bares her body to the Sun-God and prays: "Take all of me, take my swelling limbs, take my wavy tresses, take my round breasts with their dimunitive nipples, take all of me and give me a son".
The sense of loneliness in childhood finds its transference in her adult life as well. In marriage, she had dreamt, she would find love. But in a foretaste of what she was going to receive in marriage, she found herself being pushed into a dark corner by Mr Das, her fiance who kissed her "sloppily near my mouth." Instead of love, all she felt was "hurt and humiliated." Kamala Das recreates her first sexual encounter in marriage. "Then he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack." The ideals of romantic love get a good beating when she comes face to face with the harsh reality of sexual aspect in marriage. She had expected "love was flowers in the hair, it was yellow moon lighting up familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear," What she gets in marriage, instead, is sex in its utmost naked form.

The contradiction in her mind, however, becomes apparent when, inspite of the shattering of her ideas relating to romantic love, she confesses "I was at that time deeply in love with him and would have undergone every torture to please him." She apparently passed from the stage of infantile romanticism to the stage of stark cynicism where married life was nothing more than a prison with a soft double-bed, and like any other Indian
woman she too knew that there was no escape from the
drudgery of this strangle-hold. Her husband was
interested only in sex and co-operative movement while she
was interested in neither, still she "endured both knowing
that there was no escape from either. I even learnt to
pretend an interest that I never once really felt."10

The crux of the whole argument is that her ideas
about getting love from her male partner got a battering
and, gradually, she came to develop a contempt for sex
for husband in particular, and all male-kind in general.
She wanted to get love but what she always got as a woman was
lust. At this stage, she feels crumpled in the
constricting role of a traditional wife where the
institution of marriage puts woman in a subordinate
position. Her feminine self rebelled and went on
"emotional wandering attempting to explore an identity and
freedom."11 She entered the forbidden territory of
experimenting in sex beyond the laws of marriage, found no
answers forthcoming. The pulls of the body and the soul
and the pressures of the traditional society resulted in
her becoming a bundle of raw emotions. Thus she tried
repeatedly, and repeatedly she failed. Despite the feeling
of failure in finding love, she continued with her search
for a relationship which would give her love and emotional
security. For this she even moved towards Lord Krishna and tried to find an ideal lover for herself.

Kamala Das is a strange blending of contradictory emotions and attitudes. Her sensibility is truly feminine and it reflects in her deep-rooted longing for a loving heart and security, yet she is rebellious and does not want to be cast merely in the mould of traditional wife and thus reacts in a conflicting manner. "It is during this conflict, suggests Devinder Kohli, " that she concerns herself with the problem of finding freedom beyond the physical."¹² It is a struggle "conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented Universe."¹³

In this context the themes pertaining to death become important mediums for her to escape from the trap of sexuality and loneliness. By transcending the barriers of the physical body, thereby annihilating all bodily desire, she attempts to attain a mystic vision in the Radha-Krishna syndrome, though at times, it does not seem to be a viable proposition. She however, succeeds at a different front. She is able to affirm herself as a female poet struggling desperately to seek a definition for herself as a woman and as an artist. Her struggle to reconcile the world of flesh and spirit is the child of
her body and her soul where "her self as women ... and her self as poet and artist ... are tied together. The feminine sensibility can be described as her personal self: her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution from teenage bride to adultress and mother-figure."¹⁴

My Story has an added significance in the study of Kamala Das's poetry because her art and her life bear a close resemblance and she maintains the direct expressions of an autobiographical voice. In fact, the themes, imagery, tone, style, cultural content in her poetry is indistinguishable from the preoccupations and the fixtions of the soul of the poet. She, herself affirms this when she writes that "a poet's raw material is her personality."¹⁵ She also testifies that she writes to "empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience."¹⁶

In the ultimate analysis My Story emerges as a significant document projecting the conflicts between the poet's mind, her body and her soul which in the words of Devendra Kohli "proceed from her own duality ... The combination in her self, a need for domestic security and desire for an independence, an independence consistent with a non-domestic mode of living."¹⁷
In Kamala Das's poetry there is a strong touch of subjectivism and the confessional and the dividing-line between the poetic self and the individual self is not maintained at all. Dealing with her private agonies and her dreams, Kamala Das tries to redefine her identity in the context of her loveless marriage and the tradition-bound society by putting herself under the microscope of self-examination. Her poetry moves through the zig-zag of fulfilment and despair of love. *Summer In Calcutta* starts with 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' which sets the tone of the entire volume. 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' presents an external familiar situation through which sterile, unfulfilled desires of the woman within the poet are presented in an objective manner. The poem points to the crisis of identity that her feminine and her poetic self encounters, the crisis which is the product of a sense of persecution and maladjustment to her situation. Her craving for love, fulfilment is countered by the sterility of emotion in her relationship with her husband and leads to mere vacant ecstasy:

Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn...
Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy.
The vacant ecstasy of the eunuchs co-relates to the restless turmoil of the poet's mind itself. According to Vimla Rao "The bizarre dance of the body-conscious eunuchs is a concrete metaphor for the poet on body language packed into later poems. What saves the poem from grotesqueness is the underlying self-awareness and irony of the poet. This is as much as the body is worth of - to undergo the pathetic acrobatics involving the limbs without enjoying the mind." The grotesque dance of the eunuchs symbolises the painful, frenzied, and self-consuming life of an ill-adjusted sensitive individual in the rotting tradition-bound society.

The theme of love is directly related to the theme of self-knowledge, torture and agony and is to be observed in almost all her poems. Her poem 'An Introduction' again is concerned with the question of human identity. By using effectively the confessional rhetorical mode Kamla Das attempts at focussing pertinent questions relating to a woman's identity in the context of Indian society's reality. She speaks of her freedom to make a choice regarding the medium of her poetic expression and a confidence in her own creative talent. Kamala Das also comments upon the process of growing up in a hostile world, a world of lust without a trace of love, where the
union of hearts and souls is impossible. In this world the tender, receptive body-soul of a woman is not given fulfilment through love and mutual respect but given a beating:

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the Bed-room and closed the door. He did not beat me But my sad woman - body felt so beaten The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank pitifully.²⁰

The confessional tone is effectively used in balance with the rhetorical mode in order to focus the reader's attention to questions related to the persona's identity who happens to be no one other than the poet herself. The same theme is touched upon in My Story where Kamala Das writes about her first sexual experience in marriage: "Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed against our window and the singers sang of Damyanti's plight in the jungle.²¹

Kamala Das's feminine self finds itself lacerated and slowly it acquires a strong desire to be at par with the male world; she wants to compete with the male, her persecutor. Despite the family and social pressures to "fit in" in the system, she wants her self to evolve in
independence, hence "refuses" to choose a name, a role" for herself. What she seeks is love, what she gets, always is lust:

He is every one who wants a woman, just as I am every Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry hate of rivers, in me... the ocean's tireless Waiting. 22

Thus her feminine perception of love is apparent where she only wants to be the recipient of love; the hunger to be loved is to be seen in almost the whole body of her poetry. But it is to be noted that her passivity in accepting the role of a beloved is directly related to her stance of rebellion as she does not want to be a mere object of lust. That is why there is constant "conflict between the passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe" 23 and it becomes one of the more important pre-occupations of the modern women poets. But then, while Kamala Dass oscillates between her traditional woman's role on one hand, and her rebellion on the other, a poet like Sylvia Path, who though capable of tenderness of emotion like Kamala Das finds the idea of being a woman unbearable.

Kamala Das, on the other hand, quests for truth by diving deep into her unfathomed female self by raising
questions about love and lust. In Summer in Calcutta there is a fairly large number of poems dealing with love and sex. In this collection Kamala Das deals with many manifestations of love. Poems like 'My Grandmother's House', 'Love', 'Afterwards' belong to the category where love is presented in its pristine quality and we find her rejoicing in the experience of love or feeling nostalgic at the loss of such love. Then, there are poems where she speaks of her frustration or disillusion resulting from the loss of love. 'The Freaks,' 'A Relationship', Loud Posters', 'The Bangles' 'The Sea Shore' etc. belong to this class. In some other poems like 'In Love', 'Summer in Calcutta', and 'Forest Fire', Kamala Das deals with the theme of lust. The very first volume, in this way, bears testimony to the fact that Kamala Das, through her poems, wants to explore the whole ambit of the love experience.

In 'Love' she is blessed with a mood of perfect happiness. She is contented and does not have any feeling of incompleteness or frustration. Before this experience she indulged in numerous activities but nothing gave her satisfaction. But now when she has achieved love she expresses her feeling:
Now that I love you
curled like a mongrel
My life lies, content
In you...  

This is one of the few poems where one finds no complaint, no grudges; unfortunately such moods do not last long and the poet's self is again ambushed in the hungers of the body. Only poems like 'Winter', 'A Phone Call in the Morning' and 'Spoiling the name' seem to have a sense of fulfilment which is dominating the poetic self's mind at present. In Spoiling the Name, she questions the validity of names and feels that in the lover's embrace, a name is meaningless, what counts is the feeling of love only. The poem is an insight into the central themes of Kamala Das:

... 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.

The theme of love occurs again in 'An Apology to Gautama' where she constructs a dialectical opposition between Gautama, the ascetic, and her man, the sensual lover. Gautama gives her a smile and calm while her lover gives her nothing but pain and tears, yet it is her lover who owns her spiritually. The situation is ironical in the
sense that Gautama offers her only physical bliss, while she is attached to her lover spiritually. Her soul is enmeshed in her body and she refuses to betray the "body's wisdom", she is capable of offering her body only in physical, mechanical sense:

Another noise haunts my ear, another face
My dreams, but in your arms I must today
Lie, and find an oasis where memories
Sad winds do not so much blow, and I must
Hear you say, I love, I love, I love. 26

In the second category of poems, we find poems where she feels disillusioned in the matters of love. She moves from one pair of arms to another, from one nameless, faceless lover to another but it leads to nothing but fatigue and exhaustion at the emotional level. She becomes wild and desperate, tries lover after lover but the end result is always the same, in 'My Grandmother's House' she confesses:

I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger's doors
Receive love atleast in small change. 27

In another poem 'The Bats' also Kamala Das conveys the sense of sorrow and exhaustion in a striking manner:
From stranger to guest, from guest to lover, my
Beloved, when you take,
When you at least win, ignore the stain
Beneath dead eyes, the fatigue in my smile.  

The sense of nostalgia over the loss of love
sometimes overtakes her as in 'Too Early The Autumn Sights'
The poem clearly brings out her misery and sorrow:

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

There is no doubt that in all her poetry she gives
expression to her private experiences in matters of love
and sex. It operates from the level of the personal and
the particular rather than from that of the general and
universal. Her experience of love proves to be a mere
"skin-communicated thing" which does not percolate to the
heart and soul and in frustration she even envisages death
as a possible solution to her agonised self. It is to be
noted here that Kamala Das maintains her feminine identity
throughout her poetic journey and this female identity is
distinctly visible to her reactions and responses to a
particular situation. Another important aspect of Kamala
Das's poetry is its confessional quality in the given
social milieu, a woman poet being afraid of scandals, would
frankly admits "and, I loved his body without shame, on winter evenings as cold winds chuckled against the white window-panes." But for Kamala Das this feeling which is exhibited in another poem 'Forest Fire' where too she is seized with sex. The moments of physical union present merely a transitory bliss. In 'Forest Fire' she writes:

    Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
    To take in with greed, like a forest-fire that
    Consumes, with each killing gains a wilder,
    Brighter charm, all that comes my way.  

The "hunger" is intemperate and terrible in nature as its simile with the wild forest fire signifies. Kamala das confesses in My Story," The women of our house have all been frigid. Although I fought against this hereditary incompetence by moving into the hot orbits of conspicuously coarse earthly males the experiments wore me down and I admitted defeat."  

She confesses that she wanted to hunt a man whose harshness would turn out to be only skin-deep "for I would then unpeel his soul and taste the sweetness of his soul. How tragically I collapsed at the end of each revelation! Now I am a reformed and wise woman." The above excerpts sharply call the attention of the reader to the fact that Kamala Das is like an empty vessel and yearns to be filled with love, but simultaneously, she distrusts the very
medium of poetry and laments its artificiality to achieve the bliss of love. For Kamala Das her body and her poetry act as instruments of expressing herself which she may exploit.

To locate my mind
Beneath the skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone.

Sometimes Kamala Das lands on an oasis of love leading to a state of bliss as in poem 'Love' but sojourn does not last for long; her search begins all over again.

In a letter to Devinder Kohli (Dated 10.12.1968), Kamala Das admits "I began to write poetry with the ignoble aim of wooing a man to break down his resistance. There is, therefore, a lot of love in my poems." It is, however, to be noted that Kamala Das soon becomes aware of the harsh reality that there is nothing but "pathos in the life of a common woman playing a very passive role in the tradition-bound society of India." Under the circumstances it becomes difficult for her to go beyond the palpable reality of love to ponder over metaphysical questions. The self in this case seems to be destined to bear the cross of desire, despair and disorientation. It is also to be appreciated that Kamala Das's self is
determined to use her "experience" as raw material. In this sense her poetry is a sort of psychic striptease: I must let my mind striptease I must extrude Autobiography. 42

Here the confessional mode of poetry comes to her rescue in dealing with her private humiliations and sufferings. E.V. Ramakrishna makes the point clear here when he suggests, "Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the other world as it is." 43 In this sense the best confessional poems are the revelations about their creators personal vexations and predicaments. Besides this, confessional poetry has a therapeutic value as it helps the poet in achieving a victory over pain and defeat.

As indicated earlier also, Kamala Das, in her marriage and husband dreamt of love as the bond of the two bodies and the two souls. She understands and appreciates the significance of the body in the context of love but she wants to go beyond the mere situation of the bodily hungers. For her the respect for self, the recognition of her identity as an individual by her husband, in particular, and the world in general is very significant. Her female sensibility is hurt when she finds that her husband
exhibited no trace of love beyond the body. 'The Sunshine Cat' invokes a powerful image of a crisis of identity in her female self:

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.  

The cat - her feminine self- is made aware that she is but an object of humiliation and distrust at the hands of her own man. This injures her soul and turns her "cold and half dead, now of no use."

In order to save her identity she has to pose, pretend and act:

But
I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy women
Happy wife. 

Such conflict and torment, such crisis in her-self- in-conflict with the outside world representing closed door Hindu society brings in Kamala Das's self a desire to die which would obliterate all her private agonies and pain:

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love cannot be had
I want to be dead.
In another rather longish poem Kamala Das once again opens her heart to reaffirm her death-wish:

My only freedom being
The freedom to discompose. \(^{47}\)

There is one more option open to Kamala Das's self; she can escape into the fond memories of her childhood where her great grand mother stands as a polestar of love, trust and affection. The Nalapat House also stands out as a symbol of warm love, security and protection throughout the corpus of Kamala Das's poetry and is presented in stark contrast to the arid, loveless life of Kamala Das's self which she suffers after marriage: "I belonged to serenity of Nalapat. Nalapat belonged to me."\(^{48}\)

[Her nostalgic mood for the great grandmother and Nalapat House surfaces again and again during the moments of deep agony. The lustful husband cannot believe at all that she lived in such a house and was proud and loved. Her loveless existence in marriage makes her turn to other doors. From this point of view the poetry of Kamala Das is the epic of a female self caught in the peculiar constricted Hindu/Indian society where marriage never promises love, security and independence and acts merely as a mouse-trap to the individual's aspirations for an independent identity.]
Thus in Kamala Das's poetry there is a duality. On one hand she wants to stick to the feminine values of the traditional Indian woman, wants security in love, on the other hand, she attempts to rebel against the stereotyped role of a sex doll. Thus a conflict is born between her rebellious self and her traditional moorings. She tries to reconcile the two disparate elements by developing liaisons of the body outside the parameters of her marriage. Her self comments "I could not allow myself to be domesticated - I often walked with young men flaunting my unconventionality sometimes I removed my saree and waded into the sea while my friends watched me, laughing." 49 In a later poem 'Glass' she exhibits how she tried to

Enter others' Lifes, and
Make every trap of lust
A temporary home

The trappings' of love, however, create a sense of general dissatisfaction towards the male-partners and the loving hands turned into thieving hands:

All the hands
The great brown thieving hands groped beneath my Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist
Warmth was not their aim, they burnt my cities Down...
The experience of love passing through the ways of the body and the soul leads Kamala Das to an unlit tunnel the end of which does not seem to be in sight. All her relationships seem to her pointless and without significance. She finds herself empty from within.

'Summer In Calcutta" the title poem in her first collection also exhibits Kamala Das's preoccupation with the sizzling passion. The poem tries to blend the outside heat of summer in India with the heat within the self of the poet. Kamala Das speaks of the "blur in memory" caused by the drinking of April sun squeezed like a lemon in the glass. This experience gives the self of the poet a respite, a breathing moment - where she can forget her miseries related to failure of love and pains of marriage which made the victim to "run from one gossamer of love to another."

How
Brief the term of my
Devotion, how brief
Your reign when I with
Glass in hand, drink drink
And drink again this
Juice of April Sun. 52

As in the 'Summer in Calcutta" in 'Siesta' also the sun is associated with sleep and dreams but it seems that the
harsh reality of the world impinges on her drowsy consciousness. Still the contrast between the tranquil dream and the wakeful reality allows her to pin-point her loneliness and her vacant ecstasies. "Viewed in this light the poems like the 'Summer In Calcutta" and 'Siesta' can be considered only as her attempts-desperate attempts-to use poetry as a means to escape her self's oft-repeated horrors of her private anguish."^53

Creation for such a poet is like having an eye ball-to-eyeball confrontation with the realities of life and mind. "The central burden of her poetry is her typical feminine awareness of the chasm between expectation and reality and the failure of the feminine self to establish an emotional liasion between the two."^54 Under the circumstances it becomes imperative for any critic to examine Kamala Das's sexual eccentricities as depicted in her poetry on the basis of her attitude towards love, the ecstasies she feels on being fulfilled in love and the abyss of agony in which she lands herself when dejected or rejected. This leads her to her search for ideal love and an ideal lover which finds manifestation in her accepting a non-human, divine-lover like Lord Krishna. In this context it is also to be noted that the theme of "waiting" for the ideal lover who plays with her, in the absolute, sense becomes all encompassing.
Like Dora of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Kamala Das realises that she had been used like a doll by her husband and her lovers. The repeated illusions to her aversion to sexual love and the abundant use of irony in the depiction of her male counterparts clearly reveal the fact that she abhors the principle of male dominance and detests her own sexual exploitation:

These men who call me
Beautiful not seeing
Me with eyes but the hands
And, even... even... love. 59

The male body turns for her not a vehicle of fulfilment but an agent of corruption; the limbs of the lover turn into carnivorous plants:

Oh yes, his
Mouth and—his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me. 60

She reaches out to the male time and again to attain eternal peace through the gates of the body, and each time her soul gets a battering as the male is not at all interested in her soul, he is interested only in her body. While she yearns for love "the foretaste of paradise which is the pastime which involves the soul," 61 she gets bodily attention which embalms her poor lust with "bitter sweet juices". The lovers are projected in Kamala Das's poetry
as thieves, arsonists, cowards and hypocrites. "These cynics with monkey-like hair on their chests subjected her through all kinds of humiliation and torture - and were mostly driven to her for quenching their raging lusts. All of them assured her that they would be kind towards her, but they also pointed out to her that she was not meant for love."^2

The realisation of this malaise makes Kamala Das assert for her independence:

I shall some day take
Wings, fly around, as often petals
Do when free in air, and you dear me
Just the sad ramnant of a root, must
Lie behind, sans pride, on double-beds
And grieve.^^63

Even if it is an assertion of independence in a temporary mode, it, to some extent, helps Kamala Das's self overcome the sense of her plight.

Here Kamala Das with the help of her sincerity and courage tries to tide over the crisis of identity and moves from microcosm to macrocosm by the way of transcending from the personal and embracing the general humanity. For this she gets the courage "from the circumstances of her desperate love life and emotional wreckage."^64 The poems like 'Flag', 'Someone Else's Song',
'Forest Fire', 'An Introduction', 'The Wild Bougainvillea' indicate how she tries to put "my private voice away" and portray a large panorama of experience transcending her personal moods and feelings. A poem like 'An Introduction' proclaims:

I am the sinner
I am saint, I am the beloved and the Betrayed. 

According to Kurup here the personal alienation felt by the self of the poet merges "into a large and more universal alienation (sexual, social and artistic) that seems to characterise some of the best literature of our age and is perhaps at the heart of any attempt at self-exploration and self integration." 

The Descendants (1967), the second volume of Kamala Das presents her self-despair to define herself with greater intensity. While Summer In Calcutta was an indication, a suggestion towards the ensuing existential struggle, The Descendants provides a rich evidence of her having taken a plunge into her self with the questions of life death and life-in-death, and earns from Devindar Kohli the remark that her poems are death-conscious and even death-possessed: "The Descendants shows a much greater concern with physical decay and the forces of disruption than Summer In Calcutta."
Devinder Kohli, however, points out that Kamala Das's poems in this volume are further variations of her favourite theme of sexual love. "In some of these in which she is also pre-occupied with the 'tug of time' and with the sense of futility, there are also moments of poise, compassion and humility. The final impression is not, however, one of the central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation." 68

In The Descendants we note further that the theme of sexual love continues to obsess her. Again, she has failed to achieve peace and poise in spite of all her struggles and wrestlings with herself and her environment. She also has become conscious of the decay of physical body which as a vehicle of sexual love seems to be deficient. It may, however, be observed that the consciousness of the physical decay and death may still act as a springboard for her self for the final leap into the heart of human reality. She has become aware of the paltriness and fakeness of the physical aspect of love and in order to reach the shore of her true self she has to go into an odyssey beyond the physical in love. This seems to be the only way to gain true freedom, freedom which comes with the shedding of the carnal desires. This is the freedom her true poetic self yearns for. According to P.K.J.Kurup, "Kamala Das presents the effort of her poetic
self to objectify the passions and to confer meaning to
her experience which tends to become universal.\textsuperscript{69}

In most of the poems included in The Descendants
the theme is predominantly love. Once again, the reader
finds Kamala Das waging her lonely battle in the
Kurukshetra of her soul for love and desire. These poems
present the graphic case-history of Kamala Das's tormented
self struggling to locate its true voice. The poems are
packed with emotion bitter and sour, they at once reflect
the self's desire to achieve ideal love, yet there is
always a salty taste of unfulfilment, of unrequited desire
for love.

In this volume Kamala Das consciously or
unconsciously tries to achieve the assimilation of a
highly subjective experience of love into poetry which now
seems to move from the particular to general.

Poetry for her has a cathartic, or to use a
better word, a redemptive role to play. Her personal
agony gets transmuted through the vehicle of her poetry
and gives expression to metaphysical nuances. The most of
the critics dealing with her scoff at the idea that her
poetry is metaphysical, a few like M.L.Sharma do notice
her similarity with Walt Whitman, Yeats and Emily
Dickinson. "Her poetry is a means towards
self-realisation"\textsuperscript{70}. But the word "metaphysical" can be
interpreted differently by different critics. It may not be directly concerned with philosophy but can be related to "an exploration of the meaning of existence through the tangled inpenetrable forest of everyday life."71

The opening poem of the collection 'The Suicide' brings about a conversation between the poet and the sea. The poet rocks between the body and the soul and cannot decide which one to prefer:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul will be bare.72

The poet contrasts her own lot where she is to play the role of a "happy woman", a "happy wife" with the lot of the sea which has to perform simple duties. Here her dissatisfaction with the duties of a domestic traditional wife becomes apparent and the reader is made to enter, at the imaginative level, the sea's vortex and the poet's childhood and adolescent days when she could swim freely:

I swam about and floated
I lay speckled green and gold
In all the hours of the sun.73

"Swimming" acquires an extra dimension of meaning because here in the poem it becomes synonymous with freedom.
Kamala Das lays bare her search for an answer to the most abstract questions about life and death. She attempts to find answers to cope with anxiety and depression, she struggles to know how she can endure life and embrace death sustained by memories of moments of vision.

The sea in the poem acts as an archetypal symbol of eternity and is exploited by Kamala Das to neutralise her sense of angst and ennui. She raises significant questions about the relevance of the body in the context of a vision of total freedom. Hence she raises the question whether the sea would have her body or her soul. The poem abounds in the images of swimming and drowning. While swimming symbolises freedom, death too is an agent of liberation from the fatiguing chores of human existence. The soul freed from the shackles of the body can enter the sea and attain for itself "freedom":

Only the soul knows how to sing
At the vortex of the sea. 74

Das in this poem presents the tension between the forces of life and death indicating clearly that unlike the skin-communicated "Warmth" of desire which in fact is chilling, the vortex of the sea is warm. The warnings of the grand mother, "You must stop this bathing now" stand for the archetypal traditional values which come as a
whiplash to the poet making her aware of the existence of the body in the context of a tradition-bound society.

There is a pointed reference to Carlo, her foreigner lover-friend whose company reminds her of the days of freedom when she swam naked oblivious of the constraints of the environment. The inherent conflict between the freedom to love and its insecurities on one hand and the loveless marriage and domestic life with the traditional securities on the other torment her:

Yet I never forget
The only man who hurts
The only man who seems to know
The only way to hurt. 75

But she finds difficult to hold her lover back to her even for half a day. Only with the help of drinks she could make him love her. Her intense craving for being loved acquires the confessional quality when she admits:

But when he did love,
Belive me
All I could do was sob like a fool. 76

The climax of the poem finds the poet making an appeal to the sea to accept her soul and leave her body out. But inherent in this appeal is the desire that her man should love her. In that case, she could postpone the idea of committing suicide. Still, since the lover's warm embrace seems to be a distant possibility only, the poet seeks her
liberation in the form of death. "The image of the sea, as a symbol found in the first volume *The Summer in Calcutta* is over-powered by the image of sea projecting most prominently her yearning for crossing the bars of one's own body and its lust in a bid to reduce the worth of living by merging the self in the great blue sea." 77

Thus we find that there is an evolution in attitude in Kamala Das as far as the second volume of her poems is concerned. In the first volume Kamala Das was involved with the issues related to love and lust, soul and body. She was feeling oppressed with the questions pertaining to her identity as a woman and as a human-being. In the second volume, however, her horizon seems bleaker but she seems now more desperate to find answers to her dilemma and conflicts.

'The Invitation' once again exhibits Kamala Das's tendency to escape from the world of the "funeral pyre" the body — to the world of "secret sands" — the death. Her loveless existence goads her to go to the arms of the sea but the tender memory of the moments shared with the lover stop her from taking the final plunge:

On the bed with him, the boundaries of Paradise had shrunk to a mere
Six by two. 78
But the present-day existence where there is only lust and no love exasperates her:

I have a man's fist in my head today
clenching and unclenching
I have got all the Sunday evening pains. 79

Under the circumstances she is tempted by the 'garrulous' sea to terminate her physical existence. And thereby putting an end to all her depressions:

Come in,
Come in, what do you lose by dying. 80

Despite the temptation the poet's self resists the invitation remembering the good days passed in the arms of the lover:

All through the summer's after-Noons we lay
On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding
Into throbbing sun. 81

She still wants to revel in the body's lust and is not ready to close the show as yet:

No I am still young
And I need that man for construction and Destruction. Leave me. 82

But ultimately, she gives in to the insistent demands of the sea and is ready to drown her body to salvage her soul.
The final yielding is beautifully presented when she addresses the sea as "darling" and is ready to take the long-awaited plunge. "Darling, forgive me, how long can one resist?" The eternal conflict between the body's lust and the demands of the soul has been beautifully projected in the poem. Dr A.N. Dwivedi comments: "The poem highlights the staggering situation of a middle class wife in the clutches of male dominion. It externalises the poet's hopeless condition of a loveless family. That her poetry is so empty and sterile without her lover, who is not likely to come back to her, becomes so clear in it."

It may, however, be noted that Kamala Das is not taking a romantic view of death; it is the tormented reaction of a tortured soul. Devindra Kohli agrees when he says, "Kamala Das is not romanticising death by comparing it to the ecstasy of love, but by approaching the language of delirium, suggests the feeling of torture that seems to accompany her more recent treatment of sexual love. This is, perhaps, unconscious."

The death-consciousness is created in her because her self is rendered lonely and empty because of the sterile experience of sexual love which does not have a trace of love in it. It is not merely the mechanical aspect where nothing but the carnal is important that
arouses in the self of the poet a death-wish, but the presence of personal dilemmas. Kamala Das herself gives abundant evidence of her inclination to die of self-drowning: "Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way, but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from the involvements." "The Invitation" and "The Suicide" externalise and concretise the dilemma faced by Kamala Das's self in her quest to achieve total integration and harmony. The harmony is illusive because of the "body's trappings", the ultimate vision she wants to achieve is blurred. The sad fact of Kamala Das's life is that though she professes to "shed carnal desire as a snake might shed its skin," she is not fully able to rise above from the ashes of the body and thus her experience which had the potential to bring about redemption of her soul becomes a medium only to highlight her grouse, anger and yearning for a better existence.

"A Request", called by Dr. A.N. Vivedi as "one of the most moving poems" is simple and straight-forward in the expression of Kamala Das's aimless and futile life. Life sans love is nothing more than foul-odoured bones and flesh:
When I die
Don't throw the meat and bones 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. 89

In another poem "The Substitute", Kamala Das bemoans the loneliness faced by the self. The husband does not understand the meaning of love, is limited only to the "physical thing". In desperation the poetic self wants to be free. The freedom, however, is unwelcome and gives no pride:

The freedom was our last joy
Like the hangman's robe, even while new
It could give no pride. 90

The futility of the "physical thing" without love is too apparent:

We kissed and loved, all in a fury
For another short hour or two
We were all warm and wild and lovely. 91

Yet the fury cannot go on, and turns into something mechanical with no bliss of the soul. The following lines
are most moving because therein lies the echoes of a tormented soul's cries:

After that love became a swivel-door
When one went out, another came
Then I lost count, for always in my aims
Was a substitute for a substitute. 92

Viewed in the light of this predicament the self's ultimate craving for escape from the cage of body's involvements is very natural. For the feminine self deeply concerned with the question of woman's Identity, the ironical statements like:

It will be all right, it will be all right
It will be all right between the world and me. 93

hint only at an impossible exercise.

The mood of reconciliation, even if ironical, transcends into a mood of darkness in the very next poem where the poet's self is seen under a severe attack of depression. The life's games seem merely futile, generating a sombre mood:

We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
Exchanging some insubstantial love and
Often thought we were hurt, but no pain in Us could remain. 94
Grossly involved in the youthful pranks she - ironically declares, the lovers were nailed not to crosses but the soft beds:

We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not To crosses, but to soft beds, and against Softer forms, while the heaving, lurching, Tender hours passed in the half dust, half dawn and Half dream, half real trance.  

But all these games lead only to pain and generate a consciousness of death:

We shall give ourselves to fire or to The hungry earth to be slowly eaten, Devoured.

The final cry of her anguish is reflected when she declares:

None will step off his cross Or show his wounds to us, no god lost in Silence shall begin to speak, no lost love Claim us, no we are not going to be Ever redeemed or made new.

It can, therefore, be seen how frustrating the game of love, particularly the "gentle sinning" of physical love is for Kamala Das's feminine self. The physical love gives her no satisfaction, she is after an ennobling
experience which is illusive, almost unattainable. Almost the same idea is repeated in 'Luminol' which presents the feminine self of Kamala Das gulping barbiturates because she finds no solace in love. The noisy ruthless lover cannot enter the mute arena of the poet's self and she finds no alternative but to keep on gulping luminol in order to soothe her frayed nerves. The sense of emptiness felt by the poet is visible in another poem titled 'Captive' where love is pronounced as an empty gift, a gilded empty container:

My love is an empty gift, a gilded
Empty container, good for show, nothing
Else.  

It is to be noted, however, that with all the pangs of her soul regarding the futility of sexual experience in the attainment of a true sense of bliss, Kamala Das's fixation with the body does not go. 'The Looking Glass' placed strategically almost near the end of The Descendants beautifully underlines the ecstasy of her union with her lover. She emphasises here the role of the body in the scheme of love; only a woman has to be honest with her body and her bodily reactions in luring a man to love her. Here she does not mind if the beloved, in order to make her lover love her adopts a subordinate stance and
proclaims him to be the "stronger one" and "you much more softer, younger, lovelier". She advises:

Admit your
Admiration, notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, at the jerky way he
Urinates. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.99

The above lines, demonstrate Kamala Das's unabashed interest in the male body while she celebrates with all abandon the power of her naked physical self and speaks unequivocably of it:

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.100

'The Looking Glass' in its utter honesty is in stark contrast to all the noises made by kamala Das's feminine self regarding her subordinate position as an individual and her protests regarding sexual love as a barrier in the path of attaining an ideal stance in love.

Compare, for example, the complaint made in the 'Conflagration':
Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It is time again to come alive,
The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame. 101

The sex act interests her despite her loud
protestations regarding her disgust at the "glassy-eyed"
love. In 'Convicts' she rejoices:

When he
And I were one, we were neither male nor female. 102

In fact, a strange blending of interest in the sexual
aspect of love and disgust for it is seen. The two
parallel currents seem to gush forth in the psyche of the
poet making her react to situations in different manners in
different situations. But sometimes they seem to mix
together, like oil and water churned in a mixer. In the
same poem while Kamala Das celebrates the sexual union she
protests loudly also:

There was a time when our lusts were
Like multicoloured flags of no
Particular country. We lay
On bed, glassy-eyed, fatigued, just
The toys dead children leave behind
And we asked each other, what is
The use, what is the bloody use? 103

The celebration of the physical and the inherent
pathos and tragedy simultaneously go together in a poem
like the 'Convicts' where the tender act of love can turn into a song out of each sad night like an ache:

That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other's parts
Like convicts backing, breaking clods
At noon.104

Under the circumstances where Das's poetic self has come to realise the hollowness of her hopes in attaining harmony with her self the surest way to liberate her self seems to be pointing towards the soothing arms of death. The obsession with death envelops the whole second volume. The cramping feeling of insecurity, her private insecurity, is so intense that even a tender relationship between the mother and her son is fraught with it:

In mud walled houses far away,
Old mothers weep
Washed their sons' Khaki uniforms and pressed them
They weep even while they sleep.105

The themes of death and loneliness appear simultaneously and involuntarily in Kamala Das's poetry. Her self quivers and quakes for true companionship which is, generally speaking, not forthcoming. Love in the form of sex has been her fraility, though she, without doubt, realises the futility of the sexual game which, after a time, becomes monotonous and boring. In 'Composition' she stresses:
We are all alike
We women in our Wrappings of hairless skin. \(^{106}\)

She understands that she "must/most deliberately/whip up a froth of desire / a passion to suit the occasion." \(^{107}\) She cannot completely wipe out the body, though she realises that freedom can only come at the dawn of death:

I must linger on
Trapped in immortality
My only freedom being
The freedom to decompose. \(^{108}\)

The poems in *The Descendants* project a kind of helplessness where the poet's self wanders in the darkness groping to find some way. A conflict rages in her consciousness; there are pulls of the body and the pulls of the soul tearing the self of the poet into shreds. *The Descendants* ends with the 'Composition' where the poet reiterates the importance of the body and its pleasures, but indicates also that the body is subject to the rules of decay, and here the significance of the soul becomes all important for her. She seems to compromise her stance here when she declares:

Love I no longer need
With tenderness I am most content. \(^{109}\)

P.K.J. Kurup agrees with this when he comments: "The poems in *The Descendants* do not share the poetic self's
enthusiasm for vaster identities which had been predominant in 'Forest Fire'. The complex emotional restlessness caused by the new recognition that the body is important but equally important is the concept of body decaying with the passage of time dominates the horizon of The Descendants.

The Old Playhouse And Other Poems (1973) once again relates to the central theme of Kamala Das's poetry:

Love in its various shades and how it can help in the realisation of self. In this sense The Old Playhouse continues the themes dealt with in the preceding two volumes. Here too Kamala Das focusses her attention on the question of realisation of woman's identity revealed through love.

The Old Playhouse contains thirtythree poems in all. Out of these thirty three, fourteen poems first appeared in Summer in Calcutta. The theme of the decaying body treated in the 'Composition' in The Descendants is carried on in The Old Playhouse as well. Kamala Das's poetic self is now acutely conscious of the fact that the process of ageing and decaying is irreversible and with all her "manipulations" of the body she has not been able to achieve any concrete realisation leading to harmony and contentment of the self. The sense of futility and waste
haunts her. All her strategies - creativity and motherhood—have failed her. She has tried to transcend the body by trying to concoct an ideal lover in the shape of Krishna to mitigate her frustration and yearnings. Her attempts to transcend the limitations of her body by executing the Radha-Krishna myth where the body submerges in the spirituality of an ethereal relationship have failed. "The crisis of irresolution emerges from the peculiar predicament of the poet in which she is torn between the dual loyalties, of the self and the non-self. On one side, her pre-occupation with the loyalty to the body's wisdom pulls her towards sacrifices at the altar of male sex and ego and on the other hand such sacrifices bring in the shocking awareness of the self as a captive of the male ego."

The Old Playhouse not only symbolises the world as theatre, a theatre which has gone on despite crumbling walls and faded curtains, it also symbolises the human body which also acts as the theatre of various passions, emotions. The theme of ageing and decaying acquires greater significance in the sense that the poet is engrossed not only with her past but also exhibits a strong desire to resurrect her dreams.

The title poem laments the over-bearing husband's innate desire to make the poet - a swallow - captive of his monstrous male ego:

...
You planned to tame a swallow, 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 native urge to fly, and the endless Pathways of the sky.

Kamala Das protests against the possessive instinct of the husband who tries to capture and tame her as a hunter, Placing himself in the position of a master who has destroyed her identity as an individual inch by inch. She is domesticated, tamed, given specific duties to attend to, the household chores, to his whims sexual or otherwise. She resents all this and complains:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer Begins to fall.

Instead of the warm touch of love, she gets the cold touch of authority. She reverts to the same theme when in 'The stone Age', she protests in loud voice
calling the husband "old fat spider" and tells him "to be kind":

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 — — .

She projects her complete helplessness and does not want to be treated merely as an object of lust or an insensate stone, "a granite dove".

In 'Stone Age' too Kamala Das deals with a situation where love comes not from the husband but some other man. The husband, because of his lack of love and abundance of lust can treat her like his lap-dog, caressing and fondling her while he goes on with his book:

You built around me a shabby drawing room
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while You read.  

This indifferent love naturally frustrates the tradition-conscious, love-hungry feminine consciousness and in order to quench her thirst of love, the woman is constrained to rush to the arms of another man. The abhorrence of mere sexual activity is well-presented when Kamala Das writes:

... ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis.
The imagery of a hooded snake clearly indicates her fear of this kind of sexual contact without a trace of love. Kamala Das is unable to gauge whether she can find her true identity through such liaisons. She fails to understand whether these encounters give her pleasure or pain and if there is pleasure what its price could be:

Ask me why life is short and love is 
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price.116

More of less the same sentiment is conveyed in another poem when she says:

I no longer care
whom I
Hurt with love and often without
With a cheap toy's indifference
I enter others'
Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home.117

The joys of the body and, simultaneously, the urge to run away from them thus form the central enigma of Kamala Das's poetry:

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
of our body dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare.118
In this context Anisur Rehman's comments seem highly relevant: "They are the records of the poet's love-hate relationship with her lover. One which cannot either shake off or bear permanently, a true confession of the inescapable."\(^{119}\)

A.N. Dwivedi also points to the same fact when he says "The poet draws attention to her role-playing techniques and represents her mind as an old play-house."\(^{120}\)

In the prose-poem 'The Swamp' Kamala Das calls the husband "the richest, the strongest, the deadliest" and complains that her husband loves not her soul but the body. Influenced by Pritish Nandy and the American poet E.E. Cummings she goes without a full-stop or a comma into a torrent of words to give expression to her anguish:

My lover ageing without grace says why do you want my child I am your child yes yes yes then again and again this tragic sport that has made of us its addicts he undressing my soul effortlessly blindly reaching the locus of anguish but still I shake my head i leave unsatisfied for what does be bare for me on the bed in his study except his well tanned body.\(^{121}\)

The theme of frustration because of failure in love and because of her self being treated as an object of
lust unfolds in 'Gino' also which opens on a note of warning and apprehension. Kamala Das compares the kiss of a lover with the bite of a Kraite who "fills the blood-stream with its accursed essence". She is terrified with the contact:

You will perish from his kiss, he said, as one must surely die, when bitten by a Krait who fills the blood stream with its accursed essence, I was quiet.

For one, my tongue had failed in my mouth. 122

The Kraite-like kiss of the lover makes her think of the all-engulfing essence of love—experience but simultaneously, she is reminded of death, which, in a way, like the mysterious darkness and invigorating rain, is also the essence of life:

... July,
Full of rain and darkness
Trapped like smoke, in the hollows of the sky and
That lived, steamy smell of rot, rising out of earth. 123

The poet's self points a conflict between the desire to experience the venomous love, perhaps outside marriage, and the difficulty to dislodge the inherited
memory of a touch." The conflict goes on and if such a memory can be dislodged then she would!

... serve myself in
Bedroom mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter,
While he lies watching, fair conquerer of another's Country. I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes,
And in jealous moods, after bitter words and rage,
I shall wait in his nerves, as homeless cats wail
From the rubble of a storm.124

From this imagery of essential waste, exhaustion and discord, it is a but a logical step to move towards the obsessive concern with decay and death pervading everything:

Of obscene hands
Striding up my limbs and of morgues where the Night lights
Glow on faces shuttered by the soul's exist.125

But then she escapes into the world of love where she
Should be dreaming his Peerless dreams
... ... ...
... ... ...

he and I ageing
And at peace, all disguise gone from us.126

The poet's illusion, her day-dreaming very soon end, the sense of decay possesses her self once again:
This body that I wear without joy, owned
By man of substance, shall perhaps wither,
battling
With
My darling's impersonal lust. Or it shall grow grow
And reach large proposition before its end. 127

The cumulative burden of domesticity, routine, sickness and final conclusion of death are so sensitively portrayed that it evokes a sense of discomfiture and gloom:

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato
Must
Roll across the road
...
Perhaps some womb
In that
Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant marked by discontent. 128

The ending of 'Gino' recalls to our mind 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' whose lack of fulfilment is jaded into mere convulsions. Thus in the poem it can be noted that the lack of love and the uncalled for expectations of the social system result in the reduction of personality, and the withdrawl of the poet's self in the routine of dull domesticity.

Unfortunately, the readers and the critics have a rather snoopy opinion about Kamala Das. She has been
traditionally taken as a woman with a flamboyant lust which she unfurls at the drop of a hat. No doubt, Kamala Das has candidly confessed and written about her affairs beyond the orbit of marriage, yet it should be clear to the discerning reader that she is guided not by her lust but her craving for love which she lacks in her married life. Kamala Das presents a true picture of herself when she writes. "My articles on free love titillated many . . . it was obvious to me that I have painted of myself a wrong image, I was never a nymphomanic. Sex did not interest me accept as a gift I could grant to my husband to make him happy."129

This statement clearly outlines the fact that Kamala Das remained hungry for a touch of love from her husband; her friends and lovers also exploited this weakness - her craving for love. No doubt, she "studied all men" with a researcher's hunger, yet it was not lust but a strong desire to find and experience love as a soul-satisfying phenomenon and a sensibility to assert her self as an individual. This she fails to achieve in the animalistic world of the male and thus her conflicts within her body and soul yet sharpened, with her growing awareness of the decaying of the body and consequent death.
The poem 'Blood' exhibits the poetic self's nostalgia for the old house and the great grandmother who inhabited it and gave it an everlasting character. The poem acquires touchingly autobiographical tone. Kamala Das does not idealise the house, though she speaks of it endearingly. The history of the house is evoked in terms of the poetic self's childhood memory. The memory acquires ironic significance under the poetic self's immediate concerns:

The house was crouching
On its elbows then
It looked that night in the pallid moon
So grotesque and alive.\(^{130}\)

The poet continues:

I thought I heard the pillars groan
And the dark rooms heave a sigh.\(^ {131}\)

Kamala Das finds the forces of decay eating into the entrails of the house as they are seen working on her body as well. The themes of decay and death so envelop the image of the crumbling house she loves so much that the dominant themes of defeat and emptiness and the inevitable darkness engulf her. Even then, it seems that the poet does not have command over herself:
I set forth again
For other towns,
Left the house with the shrine
Another sands
And the flowering shrubs
And the wide rabid mouth of the Arābean sea.\textsuperscript{132}

She realises well:

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.\textsuperscript{133}

She continues:

At night, in stillness,
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death
The noise of rafters creaking
And the windows whine
I have let your down
Old house, I seek forgiveness.\textsuperscript{134}

The Old house is internalised as in the passage:

My body is like a mansion where once parties were given. Wine flowed, the dancers danced, the musicians sang . . . Then the house crumbled, and one day the slum-dwellers began to arrive with their shabby baggage...\textsuperscript{135}
Thus it is to be noted that Kamala Das is able to strike an analogue between the old Nalapat house and her own body through the medium of her preoccupation with decay and death.

The old playhouse and the body can also be interpreted as the two worlds the self moves within. P.K.J. Kurup accepts the view when he comments: "They are viewed as instruments of imprisonment which confine the body and the imagination to a certain structure." According to Anne Brewster: "The house is a symbol of the traditional Indian way of life that Kamala Das was brought up as a child, a tradition that has been modified as she grew older . . . like the ravages of time and natural forces as the rats and white ants - undermine the foundations and the shrines are over-grown with weeds." 

It is to be noted further that if the house represents the cultural or moral system, the body represents the organic medium that imprisons the consciousness of the poet. The man to whom she had turned for love and fulfilment has only endeavoured to domesticate and tame her. The only contact that has been sparked is the contact of the bodies and not the souls. That is why she has only learnt "to crumble and to dissolve". She has learnt to break saccharin in his
tea and to hold court for him. Her self cowers under his monstrous ego. Under these circumstances when her self fails to find such a freedom to define itself, Kamala Das turns to the memory of her great grand mother from whom she received warm, selfless love, she yearns for now.

The theme of old age and decay as taken up in The Descendants is reaffirmed in The Old Playhouse as well. In The Descendants she confesses:

To be frank
I have failed
I feel my age and my uselessness.139

Thus themes discerned in Summer in Calcutta and The Descendants find their echo in The Old Playhouse but in a more vociferous mode. In Summer in Calcutta the poet protests against her subordinate position of being a woman, she resents being treated as a toy of lust, in The Descendants the themes are channelled into the broodings over futility, ageing and death. In The Old Playhouse we find the poetic self pondering, dissecting, evaluating her position as a woman who wants love but detests sex, thus bringing to fore conflicting and confusing statements on love and life.

In Tonight, This Savage Pite, (1979) which Kamala Das published in collaboration with Pritish Nandy, the
same conflict between love and lust goes on. This book too has some poems published in the previous collections.

In 'A Looig Battle', Kamala Das's feminine sensibility reacts once again and her frustrations are demonstrated:

Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood. 140

In 'My November' her preoccupation with death and disease come back to the fore and with it the repulsion towards the only physical:

Like a sickle embedded
in flesh or crescent of the moon
Is this pain beneath my left breast
Which ruthless lover clasps its opulence
In this brutal, so brutal way. 141

The lover's lust is compared to the locust storm, something ignoble and all-devouring:

At the doorway-his maleness
Looms like a locust storm, a locust
Hunger. Like a Japanese dwarf tree
We shall stunt our love, he says, his lips
Forever my strangers, his dark hands
Always, always in his pockets. 142
The lover is always presented as a lion, always aggressive, always hunting. The game of coming together and parting is always a puzzle, a painful puzzle for her:

Whose ears heard our first mating cry?
Who planned tender happiness
Whose brutal brain contrived
The parting of our ways.
Whose toys were we, my lion, you and I
So incomplete apart and yearning?143

In spite of all this yearning for true love from her husband, she is very sure that her husband's love can only be "a high tide"144 which will wane with the passage of time particularly when she herself is disgusted with all disguise to:

Whip up a froth of desire
to suit to the occasion.145

and excavate "deep deep pain."

The traditional wife in Kamala Das demands love from the husband and when she does not get it, she gives utterance to her despair. The husband rebutes all this:

He said then, his
Dark brow wrinkling, oh, please, don't become emotional

Emotion is the true enemy of joy.146
Kamala Das's truly feminine sensibility is well reflected in a poem where she wants to hurt her lover, yet when all is over she cannot get over the feeling that she was nasty and, in spite of everything she still loved him:

I chose my words well that day
And used them like knives to hurt him
But love's battles are often strange
It the thrusts where mine, the wounds were also mine

He said good bye. I thought it ended there
But all through the night
I saw him in my dreams. I saw him smile
O I saw him greet me with a smile. 147

The crux of all foregoing discussion is that Kamala Das wrestles with the body on the one hand, and on the other, tries to define her spiritual needs. She cannot reject the body even when she understands that her desire for love is futile and cannot provide lasting joy. She continues her struggle with the body and tries to find her soul through the multi-relationships she develops one after the other.

In spite of all this, it is to be noted that Kamala Das does try to go beyond the shackles of the body and quests for true, lasting love. For this she creates a mythical framework identified with Radha-Krishna syndrome and occasionally, Mira - Bai -Krishna relationship.
However, it cannot be concluded for sure whether she succeeds in resolving her tension between spiritual and physical aspects of love. Yet it is equally true that her disgust and failures in love led her to a frantic search for the mythic Krishna, the ideal lover with whom she has established her ideal bond.

In *My Story* she makes a telling comment about her love for Krishna: "Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beauteous smile of my Krishna. Always, always, I shall love you I told him, not speaking aloud but willing Him to hear me, only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine ..."\(^{148}\)

In some of the poems Kamala Das tries to rise above the sexual mud clinging to her image. The Radha-Krishna syndrome is continually associated with the progress of the poet and is witnessed in all her poetic collections. Even her prose writings bear ample evidence of her spiritual love-bondage for Lord Krishna.

Radha, Sita, Mira and Saraswati of her novel *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* can easily be identified with Kamala Das herself. Ironically enough, these innocent girls named after the goddesses of the Hindu religion traffic in flesh. Tensely they await the arrival of Krishna who will eradicate their sufferings. Kamala Das writes at another place:
"I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child, used to regard him as my only friend. When I became adult I thought of him as my lover."

The Poem "Radha" is an expression of her total surrender to Krishna:

"The Long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but You ...

But It is also to be realised that her total surrender towards Krishna also implies a union at the physical plane. Kamala Das transcends the body to embrace the ideal lover but the use of sexual images like "I am melting, melting" etc clearly indicates that she understands that body is as important as the soul and its role cannot be underestimated. But this also shows the endless waiting for the ideal, a dream come true. The repetition heightens the sense of suffering. This endless waiting for the invisible God and her nostalgic attitude towards him account for the metamorphosis of her "self".
Apparently, Kamala Das is pricked by an inner urge to rise above the mere earthly and gives vent to her mystical longings for purity and nobility. She has, undoubtedly, a soul within her body and she cannot ignore its calls completely. On getting fed up with the physical and the carnal, the post takes resort to the Radha-Krishna type of love. The poem "Radha-Krishna" conveys this idea:

This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old Kadamba
Tree. Ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return some day
To hang like bats from its pure physicality...

The poem refers to a serene moment of composition. The "river" and that much-celebrated "Old Kadamba tree" concretise the experience enacted by Radha and Krishna. This, in contrast to the body's tedium, represents the other side of tranquillity and freedom.

The soul is "homeless" and is compared to a "bat". As a "bat" cannot see in the day-light, the poet's vision, similarly, fails her in the broad light of consciousness and she may reach the goal only in the darkness, a situation where she obliterates her self into Ghanashyam's.

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"Ghanashyam" by Kamala Das is infused with the feeling of love, ardour and self-surrender:
Ghanshyam
You have like a Koel built a nest in the arbour of my heart,
My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music
You pulled me along a route I have never known before
But at each turn when I meet you like a spectral flame you vanish ...
... O Shyam, my Ghanashyam with words, I weave a raiment for you. 152

The 'Koel' building a 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.

She again writes in the same poem:

Shyam O Ghanshyam
You have like a fisher man cast your net in the narrows of my mind
And towards you my thoughts to day Must race like enchanted fish ... 153

Here, the first line is an intimate address to her "Krishna", of which the following ones are the sequels. "The maggots" emphasises the futility of sexual union even if the consorts be Radha and Krishna:
At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...
That night in her husband's arms Radha felt
So dead that he asked, what is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, Love? and she said
No, not at all but thought what is
It to be corpse if the maggots nip?154

The poet identifies herself with Radha, and like
Radha she feels a sense of boredom and loss with another
man. She is reduced to the condition of a "corpse". The
male nibbler of the body is compared to a "maggot" which
nips at the cold, dead body of Radha. Kamala Das is aware
that though physical union is a compulsion of sorts, it
pollutes the transparent quality of love between spirits.

M.L. Sharma opines that in 'Ghanshyam' the poet
achieves "The highest peak that love experience can arrive
as according to Vedantic tradition. This is the acure of
advaitic realisation."155

The quest for an abstract supra-physical ideal in
love is reflected in numerous prose passages also throwing
light on her love for Lord Krishna. In My Story, her most
popular work, she writes, "I was looking for an ideal
lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and
forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the
cruelty that lies in the depth of a man's heart.
Otherwise why did I not get my peace in the arms of my
husband.156
Kamala Das, like the mythic Radha, seeks to realise her dream and her union with Krishna. Says She, "I was entirely without lust. I hoped that someday as I lay with a man, somewhere beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, a contact would be made, and that afterwards each movement of my life became meaningful. I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna. 157

Kamala Das has complete faith in Krishna and considers Him, her real husband. Again "The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to His desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. Then for me there shall be no return journey. 158

Poetry to Kamala Das is expressly redemptive. Her search for the beauteous Krishna and her act of remembering the past are basically united in her overall poetic process. The Krishna myth has clung to her consciousness. Her main thrust is towards a valuable and lasting acquisition - the desire to be possessed by love. Craving for that rare gift, she is torn from within. When
she looks around and discovers a vast gap between the real world and the world of her dreams, she becomes pessimistic in her outlook upon life and applies the Krishna myth as a symbol of her salvation. She writes, 'In the Old Play house of my mind, in its aching hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Thereafter, he dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat crosslegged before a lamp reciting mantras in his praise. It confirms her unflinching devotion to Lord Krishna, whom she often remembered and praised in hours of her duress.

Her devotion to "Shyam" has eventually made her happy and contented. It has saved her from a life of utter dejection and suffering. Not being satisfied with her husband and her male friends, she tries to find an escape into the world of Krishna, she herself becomes his Radha, so her spiritual poetry can be seen as an escape into the world of fantasy, where Krishna appears as an Ideal but true. It will be a truly satisfying affair for her.

M.L. Sharma also emphasises this spiritual bent in Kamala Das's poetry. According to him, "Kamala Das is a poet both of body and the soul and she is not merely a poet of the squalor, shame and freakishness of love or
lust; she also celebrates the splendour, glory and self-sufficiency of these emotions."\(^{160}\)

Kamala Das "likens God to a tree which has as its parts the leaves, the bark, the fruits and the flowers each unlike the other in appearance and in texture but in each lying dissolved the essence of the tree, the whiteness of it."\(^{161}\)

In this content, the comments of M.L.Sharma carry weight. He says, "we find that she celebrates the body as the vehicle of the most intense experiences which buildup the soul."\(^{162}\)

Infact, throughout her multi-flagged relationships she seems to be in quest of her spiritual paramour. In 'A Man is a Season', she realises that all the lovers are merely shadows of the real lover:

A man is a season
You are eternity\(^{163}\)

She Complains:

You let me sing in empty shrines. You let your wife Seek ecstasy in other's arms
But I saw each Shadow cast your blessed image in my glass, Somehow The words and gestures seemed similar.\(^{164}\)
She laments:

Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps,
I went astray, How would a blind wife trace her lost
Husband, how would a deaf wife hear her husband's
Call?165

In spite of her getting astray, she knows there stands her
eternal lover guiding her feet towards the final reunion;
The same sentiment is reflected in another poem:

Loving this one, I
Seek but another way to know
Him who has no more a body
To offer and whose blue face is
A phantom - lotus on the waters of my dream.166

Repeatedly Kamala Das turns towards Krishna for love and
solace; her quest, in spite of a chequered history of
loves and lusts, has been single-minded. Only Krishna has
been her goal, 'Free from that last of human bondage, I
turned to Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the
auditorium was empty. Then he came, not wearing a crown,
not wearing make-up, but making a quiet entry. What is
the role you are going to play, I asked Him, your face
seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself,
He said.167
This love for Krishna is reflected in Kamala Das's prose writings and poems repeatedly and exhibits a strong yearning in the poet's mind for the ideal lover. M.L.Sharma affirms "through all the vicissitudes of her loves with different persons in different places, it is the lure of the Blue God which is constant and the unconscious urges of her heart are providentially directed towards her ultimate destination, the union with the Divine Mate."\textsuperscript{168}

Thus, it can be concluded that all the pathways of this world apparently lead one to Brindavan. But it seems, sometimes, that in spite of M.L.Sharma's hypothesis, things are not as smooth as they seem to be. M.L.Sharma seems to be stretching the point too much when he opines that for Kamala Das all pathways lead her to Vrindravan where she ultimately will merge her identity with the Blue-bodied lover. According to A.N. Dwivedi, "Sharma grows a little zealous in his attempt to vindicate the position of the poetess. One must remember that she has invited adverse opinions and to some extent reasonably so, from several critics with regard to her frequent reversion to the subject of physical love. Interpretations may vary but the hard core reality will not change . . . Though there are references in My Story to substantiate what Sharma says, one shall not accept them as altruisms."\textsuperscript{169}
If her progress from *Summer In Calcutta* to *Tonight*, this savage Rite is to be summed, it can be said that this poet of love and sex journeys through the realm of "blazing light and heat" towards a sense of darkness and nothingness. The words like "dead", "tomb", "longer sleep", "funeral pyre", "crucifixion", "buried", "embers" "corpse" etc. are to be noted for their greater frequency of appearance. Though she makes sporadic forays into the world of the Blue Lover during her occasional mystical flights, the predominant feature of her poetic stance that strikes a critic is her feminine sensibility yearning for a fulfilment in love. She endeavours to carve a relationship between man and woman which can be truly spiritual, yet failing which, she at last, tries to achieve a near-ideal. Failing even in this, she tries to find answers to existential issues such as human bondage and freedom from it. She also, like the existential philosophers, tries to find answers to the problem of absurdity of human existence.

In the process of finding answers to these questions she grapples with the essential questions of death and existence. Critics like Anisur Rehman opine that "Kamala Das's concern with life in its various facets give her access to reality. She seems to move from a dark end to a region of twilight-glimmer and as the poems
unfold her progress, she appears to have struggled and
failed, sought emotional refuge in the past and waited for
Krishna, and finally realising the futility of all, has
taken the stance of philosophical detachment.\textsuperscript{170}

Love is important for her, yet it brings a sense
of disgust when it is not fulfilling in the emotional and
spiritual sense. To quote P.K.J. Kurup:

"The confessional sense in her is presented
through her shifting moods where apparently
contradictory images of the most sublime and the
most mundane mingle with one another; the images
of deep involvement in the physical act of love
mingle with those of physical rotting and
disgust."\textsuperscript{171}

On the whole, the body of Kamala Das's poetry
presents before the reader the portrait of her feminine
self as a tortured young woman. Her poetry concerns the
exploration of the self where Kamala Das wants to
interpret the world beginning with the self. In the words
of Anisur Rehman: "The poetry of Kamala Das is a sort of
psychic strip tease. She explores her psychic geography
with an exceptional female energy and the capability to
express her inimitable vision through sincerity. The guest
for an emotional liaison and failure to establish one is
the central burden of her poetry...\textsuperscript{172} Infact, the corpus
of Kamala Das's poetry, thus constitutes, veritably the raga
of self through her exploration of the diverse facets of love.

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\textsuperscript{171}
\textsuperscript{172}
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4 Kamala Das, My Story, p.5.
5 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
6 Ibid., p.82.
7 Ibid.,p.89.
8 Ibid., p.90.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p.127.
13 Ibid.
15 Kamala Das, My Story, p.165.
16 Kamala Das, Preface to My Story.


25 Kamala Das, "Spoiling the Name," *Summer in Calcutta*, p.45.


30 Devindra Kohli, *Kamala Das* (New Delhi: Arnold
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
44 Kamala Das, "Sunshine Cat," *Summer in Calcutta*, p.49.
46 Ibid.
47 Kamala Das, "Composition," *The Descendants*, p.35.
pulsating, throbbing act of sex. Devindra Kohli in this context remarks, "Acceptance of one's body, its nakedness, its individuality is also one of the themes running through Nissim Ezekiel's work. Indeed, he is another 'poet of the body' whose reflections on the awkwardness and the glory of the body are related, as they are in Kamala Das, too, to the depths of the inner sea-scape. Both in Kamala Das and in Nissim Ezekiel one comes upon the need to accept whole-heartedly the demands of the body.28"

One might set the following passage by Nissim Ezekiel against the one by kamala Das to show the underlying similarity of concerns:

I remember
nothing
except that she
uttered my name
over and over again
and I,
hers.29

In 'Winter' Kamala writes:

And, I loved his body without shame,
On winter evenings as cold winds
Chucked against the white window panes.30

Pritish nandy's poetry also does not exclude body and its pulsating passions. Throughout the body of his


54 Ibid.


63 Kamala Das, "I shall Someday," *Summer in Calcutta*, p. 52.
67 Devindra Kohli, Kamala Das, p. 87.
68 Ibid.
69 P.K.J. Kurup, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p. 145.
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77 P.K.J. Kurup, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p. 148.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.

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91 Ibid.

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110 P.K.J. Kurup, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p.155.

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113 Ibid.


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116 Ibid.

117 Kamala Das, "Glass," The Old Playhouse, p.21.


119 Anisur Rahman, Expressive Form In the Poetry of Kamala Das, p.120.


141 Kamala Das, "My November," *Tonight, This Savage Rite*, p. 17.

142 Ibid.

143 Kamala Das, "The Lion," *Tonight, This Savage Rite*, p. 17.

144 Kamala Das, "The High Tide," *Tonight, This Savage Rite*, p. 21.


146 Kamala Das, "The Latest Toy," *Tonight, This Savage Rite*, p. 25.

147 Kamala Das, "The Winner," *Tonight, This Savage Rite*, p. 32.


152 Kamala Das, "Ghanshyam," *Tonight, This Savage Rite*, p. 18.

153 Ibid., p. 19.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid., p.197.
159 Ibid., p.195.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid., p.100.
163 Kamala Das, "A Man is a Season," The Old Playhouse, p.20.
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
167 Kamala Das, My Story, pp.184-185.
170 Anisur Rahman, *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das*, op.cit., p.82.

171 P.K.J. Kurup, *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*, op.cit., p.175.

172 *Quote on the flap of Anisur Rahman's *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das*, op.cit.*