Kamala Das, born at Punnayurkulum in South Malabar in 1934, is the daughter of V.M. Nair, and Balamani Amma, the Malayalam poetess. She was educated at the Convent School, Calcutta, but could not receive higher education because of her marriage at the age of fifteen. She has published four volumes of poetry in English viz. 'Summer In Calcutta', 'The Descendants', 'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' and 'Collected Poems', while Pritish Nandy's anthology of 'Indian Poetry In English' (1947-1972) contains eighteen of her uncollected poems and Gauri Deshpande's 'An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry' has seven of them. Apart from her occasional writings in English, her autobiography in Malayalam has been published in English as 'My Story'. Her works in Malayalam include more than fourteen books, a majority of them being collections of short stories. She has won the Poetry Award of The Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 for a collection of short stories in Malayalam.

In the contemporary Indian literary scenario, Kamala Das occupies a prominent position as a poetess of talent and artistry. She, as a major Indian poetess in English, has attracted international attention by virtue of her bold, uninhibited articulation of feminine urges along with other women poets like Gauri Deshpande, Mamata Kalia, Eunice De Souza and others. It is in the writings of Kamala Das that the Indian – English poetry
acquired for itself a real substantity that matches equally with the creative contributions of the Western Confessionalists like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton of America. Of all the women poets of the present in India, Das projects herself as a fervent feminist poetic voice always exacting for a dignified place of honour, a respect for the naturalistic freedoms and choices. Her poetry contributes for the strong reactions and justifications for the most needful awakening of woman as a living entity in being-in-the world.

The modern Indian–English poetry with all its aggressiveness and boldness begins and culminates in Kamala Das. No other feminist poet in India could achieve the absolute rebellious dimensions of Kamala Das in her poetry. In fact, Kamala Das makes a poetic revolt by way of introspectively pondering upon the unfortunate state of existence in which Indian women conduct themselves. Like a seasonal artist she penetrates her imaginative potential to sympathetically understand the possible average grievances of Indian woman as extremely exploited agent in the social, domestic circumstances.

‘An Introduction’ marks her entry into the realm of Indian–English poetry with an unequivocal declaration of her poetic revolt. ‘An Introduction’ first appeared in her first collection of poems, ‘Summer In Calcutta’. In ‘An Introduction’ the fission and fusion of different related themes within the framework of feminist cause, takes place with a cinematic effect. In fact, many of the thematic dimensions and variations of her poetry are sensitively and obliquely hinted in this poem. Therefore,
it can be conjectured that ‘An Introduction’ is the most representative of her poetic genre that is the exclusive feminist – rebellion.

Thematic concerns in Das’s poetry range from the sad plight of woman in society, and the harrowing situations of feminine experiences to a longing for the freedom of the inner self through experiencing consummate love in the interpersonal relationships. However, she culminates her poetic journey with the note of the pathetic nature of human situation. ‘An Introduction’ is an autobiographical initiation of her poetic verse wherein Kamala Das makes a categorical introspective exposition of an average woman-child in the process of her growth and development under oppressive and humiliating circumstances in our culture. The poem begins with the following statements:

“I don’t know politics, but I know the names of those in power, and can repeat them like days of weeks, or names of months.”

‘An Introduction’ best sums up Kamala Das’s predicament. It is wholly female, almost as wholly Indian, and part of the general Indo-English dilemma. There are fifty poems in ‘Summer In Calcutta’. Their Indian setting is obvious because they derive from experiences, which are entirely personal. Eunuchs dance frenziedly conjuring up the peculiar ethos that makes the average Indian look on them with a mixture of fear, pity and revulsion. Pigeon’s squat, silent, with dust on their “sun – peeled beaks”. The bougainvillea blooms, a “wild red” mingling with rotten fish. Cartloads of peasants come into the city, the men “proud, heavy -
turbaned”, the wives with “Tattooed cheeks, silver on their arms and fat/Babies dozing at their /Breasts”. 4

‘My Story ’ explains something of the circumstances in which these poems were written. Mrs. Das had lived in Calcutta as a child and later as an adolescent. It is while writing of the period of adult response that Mrs. Das makes the following frequently quoted remarks:

"Poets...cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet’s raw material is not ‘stone or clay; it is her personality.”5

It is all too apparent that the vivid images in ‘Summer In Calcutta’ are part of Mrs. Das’s life-she absorbs them with an appetite similar to her hunger for the men she loves. They do not, therefore, appear extraneous or tagged on but constitute the substance of her emotional panorama. Her persona is always present, playing its varied roles, which define her as woman, sexual partner, or lust-object. Childhood enters her poetic world making past and present one continuous experience. Her uncompromising honesty emerges as the most appealing force, especially when it is directed against herself:

I am a freak. It’s only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.6

Kamala Das’s outcries are on the central ground of the painful experience of being a woman. What has stirred her sensitive psyche is the
dehumanization of woman as a being. The spiraling self, as an insect pinned to a wall, rages within against this lack of social recognition for her lot. The articulation of this anger becomes impossible in any socially accepted language formulas. It has to be honest, and, therefore, it necessitates stretching of her:

- two-dimensional
- Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice.

Kamala Das is a self-conscious poet, and does not pretend ignorance about her unique position as a feminist mouthpiece. This uniqueness is asserted when she says that her poems are:

- the speech of mind
  That is here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
  Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
  of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or rain or the
  Incoherent mutterings of the blazing Funeral pyre.

The ‘mind that is here and not there’ is a confident pronouncement of the originality of her poetic revolt. This originality is asserted through suggesting the spatial variation of the mind, the mind that is not to be found elsewhere. It is a hint at her resolution to override the traditional limits prescribed for the exposition of feminine psyche. These lines have the effect of a sudden waking from a hallucinatory state of inexpressibility and suffocation, and bursting out. And at the background of this outburst is a rebellious spirit against centuries of oppression undergone by women.
Kamala Das is predominantly a poet of love. The all-pervasive spirit of the whole poetic world of hers is of love and its vigorous manifestations drawn from life—experiences, both exhilarating and agonizing. About the recurring love themes in Das's poetry A.N. Dwivedi observes:

"The frequency of love theme may evoke repudiation from nuns and spinsters and breed boredom in the minds of general readers, but like Sappho in Greek Literature, like Elizabeth Barret Browning in English letters, and like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath in modern American poetry, Mrs. Das offers us a feast of vivid images of love couched in felicitous language. No doubt, love is her 'forte' in poetry."

Kamala Das is almost exclusively concerned with the personal experience of love in her poetry. For her, ideal love is fulfillment on the levels of body and mind; it is the experience beyond sex through sex. Kamala Das’s love experience is a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving tensions of different kinds. Its complex nature may be properly apprehended by focusing in terms of her relationship with the 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 absolute honesty to experience gives a quality of uniqueness to her poetic exploration in which the validity of expression is resolved purely by the validity of experience being communicated. Even her autobiography is poetic experience expanded in prose.

The relationship with the husband forms the basis of Kamala Das’s love-experience and hence provides the most important dimension
for its exploration. The beloved’s psyche is strenuously burdened by the bitter realization of the husband’s inability to offer spiritual fulfillment in spite of fulfillment on the bodily level, as in:

Can’t this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers? ¹⁰

Thus, man’s indifference to woman’s pursuit of perfect being becomes a major pre-occupation in her poetry. This incompatibility is the source of frustration in the poet.

In ‘An Introduction’ the poet speaks about her first bitter experience of getting rejected in love, which was enough to shatter all her adolescent dreams:

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door
He did not beat me
But my sad woman body felt beaten
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me¹¹.

In her poem ‘The Old Playhouse’ she repeats about this failure on the part of the man to respond to her love:

It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow but every
Lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased
With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow

Convulsions.  

The theme of lust and sex preoccupies Kamala Das in ‘The Old Play
house and Other Poems’. The tension in man-woman relationship, the
inadequacy of love and intolerable sexual tyranny enable the poetess to
protest against sexual subjugation. She yearns for liberation. Love:

must seek at last

An end, a pure total freedom it must will the mirrors.

To shaker and the kind night to erase the water.  

She has lost her identity in the presence of the domineering male and
craves for liberty:

Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf.  

In ‘The Looking Glass’ Kamala Das describes frankly sheer lustfulness
devoid of love:

stand nude before the glass with him

so that he sees himself the stronger one

And believes it so, and you so much more

softer, younger, lovelier

and

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.\textsuperscript{15}

In ‘The Stone Age’ also she deplores the male aggressiveness and inadequacy of love:

As me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubio. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what is its price.\textsuperscript{16}

‘The Old Playhouse’ articulates vividly lustfulness in married life and the dull and weary role of wife who loses her individuality and identity. There is no love lost in married life. It is “Narcissus at the water’s edge”.

In ‘Substitute’ she tells us rather cynically what her experience of love turned out to be:

After that love becomes swivel-door
When one went out, another came in.\textsuperscript{17}

She voices vehemently her protest and resentment, which characterize modern Indian literature, against the social exploitation of the female by the male for his self-gratification, a mechanical and tyrannical yoking of the dumb-driven animal to his lust. She yearns for an escape from the prison house of sheer lust in ‘The Prisoner’:

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
of your body, dear love
For I must some day find
An escape from its snare.¹⁸

In fact, her writing is concerned almost entirely with herself: herself as a woman, 'the feminine sensibility' and herself as poet and artist. The search of love frustrated her. The fact that whenever she sought love she found lust caused in Kamala Das a distaste of sex. All that she does learn from this experimenting is the futility of love. As she sees it, one has to grow beyond searching for love:

Everything in me
is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting

...............nothing remains but
you............... ¹⁹

Alas! In her own life Kamala Das could not realize this ecstasy of love. She reveals in apt metaphors her craving for the freedom beyond the physical:

I shall some day leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love words flung from doorways and of course
Wings fly around, as often petals
Do, when free in air, and you dear one
Just the sad remnant of a root, must
Lie behind, sans pride, on double beds
And grieve.\textsuperscript{20}

The subject of her poetry is solely that of the struggle to find the self beyond the physical and thus find freedom to create. It is her frustration of love and subsequent feeling of melancholy and yearnings for a detached existence that propelled Kamala Das to compose poems.

The recent poems of Kamala Das show a development in her attitude to love. In ‘Summer In Calcutta’ and ‘The Descendants’, the overwhelming sense of defeat and frustration leads to the persistent desire for death. The sea seems to invite her towards itself, as in:

Come in,
Come in, what do you lose by dying, and
Besides, your losses are my gains.\textsuperscript{21}

But, in the later poems, the maturity of approach is revealed through the psyche’s willingness to learn the lessons of experience. The frustrated beloved at last realizes the need for adjustment. She reconciles herself with the role of a housewife, as in:

into the hospital
She opened wide her delirious eyes and
said:
Please let me go
I smell the Tuar Dal burning...\textsuperscript{22}

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

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.\(^{23}\)

The feminine psyche is awakened to the true significance of the painful
love affairs as being progressive steps towards the final realization of its
relationship with God, as in:

Any stone can make
An idol. 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 dreams.\(^{24}\)

The love-experience gains a fresh dimension in Kamala Das’s anxiety to
explore it with reference to the grandmother’s house. The life spent in the
grandmother’s house as a child symbolizes the state of innocence as
contrasted with the life as a married woman symbolizing the state of
experience. Her preoccupation with it echoes the subconscious anguish of
the frustrated psyche to return to the state of innocence now irrevocably
lost rather than a sense of “nostalgia” as interpreted by R.Parthasarathy.\(^{25}\)
The childhood stands for the period:
Before the skin
intent on survival,
learnt lessons of self-betrayal
Before the red house that had
stood for innocence
crumbled.²⁶

Another dimension that complicates the man-woman relationship in the case of Kamala Das refers to her identity as a woman involving the social compulsions to conform to the traditional feminine role. The urge for freedom from the conventional role of a woman asserts itself early in life, as in:

I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl.
Be wife, they said.²⁷

Her revolt as a woman against the traditional concept of womanhood is matched with her revolt as a poet against the conventional medium of mother tongue for poetry. She has instinctively chosen English as the poetic medium although she is at home with Malayalam in prose.

For Kamala Das love is not an end in itself; the culmination of it is the achievement of a meaning for life that is not to be found in the present modes and modalities of living. Since the genesis of love is our being in the world, her concept of love does not reject the seat of it that is the body. She favours expression of love in its fullest measure in the interpersonal relationships. This belief in the reciprocity of the physical
and the metaphysical aspects of love is clearly expressed in her poem ‘The Suicide’ wherein she says:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.²⁸

Love, for her, is an invitation between two personalities with an intention to measure the mutual depths of each other. Not that the depth is measurable; but then, the whole world is made of an intention. So Kamala Das makes her poetry a profound poetic expression of an intention only. What she violently pleads for is possible understanding between men and women as equanimously independent personalities in an atmosphere of what the Christian fathers call ‘agape’. But for the poet, her ideal lover is nowhere to be found.

Love is an authentic phenomenon both conceptual and perceptual simultaneously. In the conceptual context it is platonic and a chimera. In the perceptual context it dwindles into what can be called the creaturely evocative dimension. There is no possibility of reconciling both. They both are simultaneously felt experiences, hence, the love–hate tangle towards the very prospect of love in life. The essential dilemma in Kamala Das’s poetry emerges out of the simultaneous predominance of love in its highest and lowest dimensions that puts her on verbal excruciations flaring into abject ravings of a thoughtless creature wriggling under the ideological pressures of life. So her felt existential condition is like that of the cockroach of Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’.
Hence, life as given for Kamala Das is a Kafkaish unending agony through a trial.

This creaturely approach enables Kamala Das to observe the self more objectively. This is ‘the mind that sees and hears and/ Is aware’, which is rather a curse than a relief to her sensitive consciousness. In this context Devendra Kohli’s remarks about ‘An Introduction’ are worth quoting:

“It is a part of the strength of Kamala Das’s exploration of love –theme that it also follows her compulsions to articulate and understand the workings of the feminine consciousness. Her best known poem in this category, ‘An Introduction’ is concerned with the question of human identity” and “is perhaps at the heart of any attempt at self-exploration and self-integration”.  

Das’s quest for identity is directly the progeny of an old social set up, oriented towards the total annihilation of the feminine personality. Love and sex are, no doubt, the leitmotif of her poetry but the depth of her distress seems to have left a constant sting in her soul, and that does invest her identity with a certain tincture of pangs. As K.R.S.Iyengar points out the subject of her poetry: “Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself again and again.” M.K.Naik depicts the same figure: “The most obvious feature of Kamala Das’s poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex referring nonchalantly to ‘the musk of sweat between the breasts’, ‘the warm shock of menstrual blood’, and even ‘my pubis’. Through her poems Mrs. Das has projected a new
device to liberate the women from the bondage of slavery in man- 
dominated society. ”

There are essentially two sides to Mrs. Das’s poetry; one is 
that which is extraordinarily centered around her own self, probing the 
malaise and morbidity that seems to clamp on her poetic vision. Over the 
years, it is this side that has been turned to our view, and she has been 
dismissed and rated accordingly:

Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like? 

Things that come from her pen were something new, as no woman writer 
had ever before written with such power and honesty. The other side 
emerges from this, or seen from another angle, is a dimension of it. Her 
poetry constitutes not just a compelling expression of personal 
experiences and a forceful subjective voice, but more importantly, a 
phenomenon unlike any other in Indian English poetry. She is the first 
woman poet to crack the mould, and establish an attitude and viewpoint 
the Indian readers were quite unfamiliar with:

Kamala Das has written very few poems on social themes 
but they are notable for her capacity to respond to the areas of social 
experiences. Her latest collection, ‘Collected Poems’ marks a significant 
change in her themes and technique. She emerges out of the narcissistic 
world of the self and recognizes the reality of suffering in the outer world. 
Kamala Das’s poetic sensibility shows greater interest in the social
themes in the earlier stage of her poetic career as is seen by a number of poems from ‘Summer In Calcutta’. A significant part of her poems in ‘Collected Poems’ deals with the themes of social justice, human rights denials and the oppressed. A careful observation of her poems dealing with subalterns would also enable one to chart three significant stages in the widening of her social consciousness from the personal-sympathy with the marginalized “others” seen around her house in the village. (‘Evening at the Old Nalapat House’, ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’) to the political / social –deep compassion with the hired labourers in metropolitan cities like Bombay (‘The House Builders’) to the racially oppressed in Sri Lanka. It appears that love-lust frustration syndrome which predominated her other two volumes (Summer In Calcutta and Descendants) is given a temporary respite.

In ‘Evening at the Old Nalapat House’ the poet expresses her sympathy for the sufferings of:

...The field hands
  Returning home with baskets on their heads.
  ......their thin legs crushing
  The heads, the shrubs, their ankles
  bruised by
  Thorns, their inside bruised by memories....

‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’ also portrays the vagrant deprived people like “beggars with whining voices”, the Kuravan and Kurathis (Scheduled castes in Kerala who earn their livelihood by reading palms of people) and bangle sellers moving from house to house:
...all covered with the dust of roads
for all of them whose feet devouring rough
miles cracks on heels so that when they
clambered up our porch, the noise was grating

Kamala Das’s ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’ is also known for an atmosphere that is hostile and unpleasant. When others are annoyed by the heat, dust and noise, the poet longs for the hot noon in Malabar because it is associated with “wild men, wild thoughts, wild love”.

Yes, this is

A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love to
Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet
Stirring up the dust, the hot noon, at my
Home in Malabar, and I so far away....

A hot noon in Malabar is a time when strangers are welcome. They come from the sun to peer into the rooms, but the brightness of the sun temporarily dims their eyesight. The environment is hostile and the strangers look around with mistrust in their eyes:

.... This

Is a noon for strangers with mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent ones who rarely speak
At all....

The poet in such an atmosphere yearns for the spontaneity which was present in that early life as a child in Malabar. She is sick of the routine when everything is mechanical. She believes that the only way out of the
suffering is to travel down memory lane that is to her life as a child in Malabar.

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

Nani, the pregnant maid, hanged herself
In the privy one day. For three long hours
Until the police came, she was hanging there
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope; 37

The image of the clumsy puppet performing a comic dance is noted for its vividness and also for its suggestiveness. Nani, as is made evident by the poet, has been a puppet in the hands of fate and the real culprit who has subjected her to such humiliation is of course the society and also its moral codes. She hangs from a rope as a helpless victim to the designs of an “unknown citizen” and the effect produced to the eyes of children is comic:

.... it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
was doing, to delight us, a comic Dance. 38

In ‘Nani ’ the poet recollects the dark plump low caste women employed in the Nalapat House who hanged herself in their privy. A knowledge of
the life styles of the Nair tharavads of those in days in Kerala would reveal that many low caste young women were seduced sexually, exploited by their upper caste men and many such women were either killed in one way or other to protect their “honour”. The response of the grandmother – symbol for conventional feudal structure and values – to the child’s enquiry about the dead ‘Nani’ who used to bathe her reveals the “designed deafness” of the upper caste who could impose in viability on the “Other”. The poet writes:

...I asked my grandmother

One day, don’t you remember Nani, the dark
Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?
With this question ended Nano.39

The poem leaves open the question who is luckier, the child who asks the question and does not wait for an answer, or the one who is left behind to find the right answer, and who is the wiser, the questioner or answer?

Whereas the poems discussed already are inspired by compassion for the poor. “Honour” is a powerful expression of unmuzzled wrath and righteous indignation at the cruelties that have been heaped upon the depressed class people (Dalit panthers of the poem) by the feudal society of Nairs. The title like ‘The House Builders’ is ironic and sarcastic. The poignancy of the condemn nation is all the more genuine as she herself belong to the Upper Caste Nair Community of
Kerala. The suffering and dishonour to which the subalterns were subjected to is portrayed by the poet as follows:

Today, they [the subalterns] laugh at laws that punished rich, only the poor
Were ravished, strangled, drowned buried at mid-night behind snake shrines
Cheated of their land, their huts and hearts…

When the Dalit panther activist with head injuries and bandage around his arm visits the poet to seek her blessings unaware of the fact that she herself belongs to the oppressor caste which had indulged in atrocities against the lower castes, the poet is in a dilemma. Indian women’s identity is deeply embedded in the entire family, caste, class and community and to liberate her true self from this morass of intertwining network is no mean task. Hence the poet writes that “…. the only way I know to fool the world [is] my silence”

The feudal concept of honour which her own community entertained was distorted in the poem:

...Honour was a plant my ancestors watered
In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres at night their serfs
Let them take to bed little nieces…

Honour for Nayars included sexual exploitation of the serfs under them. They indulged in ‘brutal games’ but no laws punished them. When the poor were exploited, their sufferings only raised a derisive laughter on the feudal Nayars. The poem closes with a cryptic reference to the death
(murder) of the alluring Mopla Wench. Even the complicity of the police, their unholy nexus with the upper caste culprits is suggested by the poet.

In 'The House Builders' the poet sympathetically portrays the suffering of the poor hired labourers from Andhra Pradesh who have migrated to urban centers like Bombay for employment opportunities. The poet refers to these 'Builders in Bombay' in 'My Story' also. Like 'Honour' the title of the poem 'The House Builders' is also ironic. The poem offers a contrast between "mercy times" and the "miserable life" of ".... These/ Men who crawl up the cogged scaffolding I Building houses for the alien rich". The images like "cicadas in brambled foliage" words like "harsh", "burden" and "withered boughs" emphasize the sufferings of the hired labourers. The poet who hides her misery to forget her frustration and loneliness seems to identify herself with the dark souls singing in order to hide their misery.

The poem 'My Son's Teacher' also is noted for suffering though at a different level. It deals with the death of a teacher a minor tragedy enacted on the crowded pavement of the city:

His teacher swooned
On a grey pavement
Five miles from here and died.\footnote{43}

The mother keeps the tragedy from her son and goes on waiting for the usual doorbell. In fact it will be in great mental agony that the child will be engaged in the long wait which is never going to fructify:

Bathed, drank milk, wrote two lines of D's
and waited
But the dead rang no doorbell.\textsuperscript{44} In fact the child is too young to know the full significance of the tragedy. But the fact remains that suffering has been inflicted on the young mind by its own mother by not revealing to him the exact state of affairs:

He is only four.

For many years he will not be told that tragedy.\textsuperscript{45} The boy is unaware of the intrusion of death into his life and the poem ends with a moving image of tragedy where an old sad bird gently touches his shoulder with its wing. Perhaps after years he would know that the bird of death had flown over him that afternoon, tenderly touching him with its wing tip.

‘Middle Age’ is a poem which surveys the little, unnoticed pangs of mothers who are already on the “wrong side of the forties”. She begins the poem telling us when a person can be called middle aged:

Middle age is when your children are no longer
Friends but critics, stern of face and severe with their tongue.\textsuperscript{46}

The situation she describes here is one that is commonplace and found in every other household. When children grow up estrangement develops and the views of the old generation become totally unacceptable to the growing generation. The ultimate result is that the elderly people are made to suffer for no fault of theirs. The modern solution to this problem is nuclear families where the grey haired are mercilessly banished. Even when they get an entry to the households their role is limited to providing amenities to the other inmates of the house, that is, the role of a servant:
they no longer
Need you except for serving tea and for
pressing
clothes.  

Certainly it is a life of humiliation and suffering that the middle aged are made to experience. Like a pupa becoming a cocoon and then butterfly the silent obedient child has all on a sudden become an independent self-asserting personality and the casualty is his own mother. The poet’s attempt in this poem is to wake up the dreamy middle-aged mothers and to prepare them face the ultimate reality shedding the mental torture that has been in store for them:

You have lived
In a dream world all your life, its time to
Wake up, Mother,
You are no longer so young you know.

To the poet, the plight of the inmates in the lunatic asylum is equally pathetic. But the poem ‘Lunatic Asylum’ is advancement over the early ones in that the poet warns the readers not to pity these hapless souls:

…No
Do not pity them, they
Were brave enough to escape, to
Step out of the
Brute regiments of
Sane routine, ignoring the bugles, the wall of Wens.
The poet seems to find vicarious pleasure in the inmates who were brave enough to step out of the brute regimentation of the Asylum because it symbolizes the poet’s urge to break the fetters of feudal social order and its moral conventions.

In ‘The Sunshine Cat’ Kamala Das speaks of the injustice meted out to women where again the dominant motif is suffering. She believes that the society is hostile to women and that they are humiliated in all possible ways. A man is free to go in search of love and her own husband whom she loved, did not love in return:

They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, borrowing her Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget, To forget oh, to forget....

She seems to lose her sanity when she is forced on to the bed against her desire, as bed is no more a place that can offer her comfortable sleep:

They let her slide from pegs of sanity into A bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping For sleep had lost its use....

To escape from the suffering and humiliation all she can do is to build a wall:
.... I shall build walls with tears
She said, walls to shut me in....

But after her middle age she realizes that she has lost all her vitality. The poem is a strong representation of the feelings of Indian women who are very often mere puppets in the hands of the ever-dominating men. They are like “flies to wanton boys” to be thrown away after the “operation”. They continue to be ill treated and humiliated by men till they are sure that they are no more of use to them and are mere “half-dead” creatures.

The eunuchs are destined to lead a life of endless suffering and the poem ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’ is about the desperate eunuchs who have nothing to look forward to. It is a meaningless dance that they are engaged in even when they lead a barren life:

...Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing,
they danced, and
They danced oh, they danced till they bled
...there were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their
hair, some
Were dark and some were almost fair.

Kamala Das portrays the tragedy of the eunuchs with rare sympathy in ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’ in which:

Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres. Though they sing melancholic of dying lovers and unborn children, they fail to produce any sympathy as their voices are harsh and also because they indulge in their dance only with vacant ecstasy. According to the poet, the eunuchs are as good as half-burnt logs of woods taken from funeral pyres. Again the focus is on sterility of their body and they survive only to suffer, humiliated and ridiculed by a hostile world. They are sheer misfits in such a world and the poet successfully draws the attention of the society to their pathetic life.

Suffering and humiliation are undoubtedly the dominating themes in Kamala Das’s poetry. She airs her views with boldness unparalleled and she hopes that the society might change their attitude to those who suffer and are humiliated. She is essentially a poet of modern Indian woman’s ambivalence, giving expression to it more openly than any other Indian Woman poet. She is an Indian poet, writing in English when Indian poetry in English is breaking free from the rhetorical and romantic traditions when male counterparts like Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan are struggling hard to form a dense, pitty and ironic idiom in their poems and Jayanata Mahapatra is trying to relate his poetry to his immediate environment with pain and anger.

The poems reflecting the dehumanizing effect of social injustice and inequality makes her feel the differences in social status between Upper Caste and Lower Caste people. In ‘Blood’ she ironically refers to the differences in blood (cultures) between herself and others which her conventional upbringing had forced her to believe. She writes:
My mother 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 ones
Flowed a blood thick as gruel
And muddy as a ditch.56

Despite her determination to challenge systems of domination—patriarchy—she fails to openly expose the unscientificality of the superiority, and inferiority based on caste/race and wills herself to be defeated by such uncomfortable questions, because she had beamed by then “Most lessons of defeat”.

The ‘Colombo Poems’ mark the widening of the poet’s concern from caste oppression specific to Indian society to racial oppression outside India. The poems inspired by the poet’s Sri Lankan experience are an indication that she is capable of breaking the self made cocoon of brooding over male inequity and female vulnerability. These poems present the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and the situation of pain, distress and suffering prevailing in the island which she visited in 1984. These poems are a testimony to her involvement in the fate of a people with whom she is racially related. With these poems the poet covers all forms of oppression (Men Vs. Women, State Vs. Individual, Dominant Cultures Vs. Marginal/Sub- Cultures, Rich Vs. Poor and the White / Aryans Vs. Black / Dravidians). The central strain in the
‘Colombo Poems’ is the human beings that suffer on account of racial prejudice and cultural / linguistic chauvinism.

The poem ‘The Sea at Galle Face Green’ portrays the devastating effects of the race war in Sri Lanka. After an attack, the once splendid city is like “a half burnt corpse (with) it’s maimed limbs turned towards/ The smoke stained sky”. 57 The poet wonders why the Sri Lankan government troops (Gunmen) are “ordered to hate” the Tamils in Sri Lanka; “What secret chemistry let them down?” and “How did they track down the little one / who know not their ethnic / inferiority”. Though she portrays the suffering and curling grief that follows the destruction of human lives and environment, the poet could not free herself from the indifferent position and hence like the sea at Galle Face Green, she witness the tragedy “without / A sign of fear; without / A sign of shock/ or pain”. But she writes in ‘Smoke in Colombo’ that the smoke along the silenced streets, the rubble and the ruins lingered on her minds long after she left the place.

‘After the July’ presents the picture of how the Tamils in Sri Lanka are denied of their human rights; to move freely around. A people who are commonly proud of their Dravidian culture are deprived of their freedom to exhibit the sign and symbols of that culture openly. “no arangetrams/ were held in the halls, no flower-seller/ came again to the door with strings / of Jasmine to perfume the lady’s hair ”. 58 In a racially charged atmosphere, even the poet’s attempt to camouflage her ethnic (Dravidian) identity is spoiled by the Sinhalese sales girls at the Comells. Thus though the poet’s indignation against oppression of any
kind becomes more vehement in the poems already discussed, they do not rise to the level of “Conscience raising” restored to by other Third World women poets.

Instead, the poet seems to accept the unscientific racist premise of the inferiority of Non- Aryan race/ caste. She writes:

It was a defect
In our blood that made us the land’s inferiors
Certain muddiness in the usual red,
Revealing our non-Aryan descent.39

‘Wood Ash’ expresses the poet’s indignation against the wild fire of the Aryan invasion which destroyed the pre- Aryan civilizations and admiration for the heroic resistance of the Dravidian Kings though finally defeated. Like the ancestors whose “blood...lay cooling” Kamala Das keeps her safe position by writing on the edge.

As Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, point out, “Ideologies are not experienced or contested in the same way from different subject positions”. 60 What may appear just and rational from an upper caste woman’s point of view may seem exploitative and contradictory form a low caste woman’s point of view. This is more pertinent in the discussion of an upper caste woman’s portrayal of the Bothered castes. Though the First World women’s movement and Third World women’s movement exist in a shared space in regard to their anti – colonial and humanist positions, the Indian woman’s movement has, by and large, been perceived by Dalit women as Upper Caste Women’s movement. To these Upper Caste /Class women who have not been part of a culture colonized
by low caste/ class cultural group, colonialism has only single referent, the male. Whereas, the Native / Dalit women who have been subject to the racist/ casteist / upper caste colonial rule, colonialism has two layers of signification: The upper caste and the male. The colonized Dalit women have been the doubly colonized subject to patriarchy and upper caste rule. One should keep these differences in mind while analyzing Kamala Das’s poetry in relation to the portrayal of the oppressed “Other”.

The observation of the editors of ‘Woman’s Literature in India’ “Middle class women, white women, upper-caste Hindu women might find that their claims to “equality” or to the “full authority” of liberal individualism are at the expense of the working classes, the non white races, dalits or Muslims.” is also relevant here. Given the specific practices and discourses through which individuals took historical shape in India, these groups had to be defined as “Other” in order that the self might gain identity. Thus the subalterns we find in Kamala Das’s poetry are the “Others”.

Though her poetry deals with the every day practices of subordination and expropriation of the oppressed, its implications for the politics of class, caste colonialism, ethnicity and a whole range of other structures of domination that determines the lives of subalterns remains silent. Her defiance is not, in the final analysis sufficient to break through the constraints imposed by the social and sexual traditions of a conventional society. She writes:

I am a trained circus dog.
It is this training which made her a captive to her class/ caste values. She says:

I am now my own captive

This experience of luminality of being positioned on the border between two cultures (the high and low) creates a tension in the poet and accounts for the ambivalence reflected in her poetry. She felt:

I must keep the right distance
between me and the low
And I must keep the right distance,
between me and the high.

Thus Kamala Das' sympathy with the subalterns especially with the Dravidian Tamils and Dalit women could be viewed as an instance of the benign paternalism of the upper caste Hindu women and their conformity with status quo. Though feminist position in 1980s committed itself to a self–reflexive process of examining its own racism and ethnocentricism, like the Western feminist movement, Indian Upper caste women movement also failed to consider what the "Othered" said about their particular concerns because genuine and thorough comprehension of "Otherness" is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his/her culture. The task of negating her own being is virtually impossible for Kamala Das, precisely because her culture is what formed that being. And naturally her poetry reflects the difficulties and contradictions involved in constructing a speaking position for the subaltern.
Kamala Das writes her autobiography into every one of her poems. Some doubt her sincerity, while others call her a hypocrite in a lamb’s wooly skin, to present herself as honest, but none denies the freshness and novelty in her poems which like a stone fresh from a wild stream, go blindly to hit and wound her conscience, knowingly or unknowingly. Put together, her poetry is a dissertation, and that too a well documented one of her lived experiences. And the experiences she has in life as we often come across in her poems are of an unkind variety. She feels ‘raped ’in life by all- husband, lover, society, and also the ‘humorous heaven’:

I am wronged, I am wronged

I am so wronged.65

Therefore, whatever experiences she records in her poems are all intimations of isolation and turbulence and not of tranquility, which many readers may love to hear from her. Her poetry, on this score, has achieved a certain degree of distinction.

The communication of experience for its own sake gives a special dimension of honesty and concentration to the poetry of Kamala Das. It is notable that the poetic psyche does not attempt at any stage, to derive consolation from the assumption that her particular experience of frustration is a part of the typical lot of a woman in the man-oriented society. There is no evidence to justify Keki Daruwalla’s comment that she continues “with her obsession regarding women being play-things in the unfeeling hands of the male.”66 On the other hand, her poems reveal the psyche’s anxiety to come to terms with the specific ordeal or frustration purely on the individual level. It is particularly notable in the
context of the writings on various occasions as a feminist rebel against the conventional marriage. For instance, she writes in the article on 'The Sham of Marriage' (Blitz): “I am thoroughly disappointed with my marriage and everybody else’s marriage.... The ideal marriage, continued according to the desire of our society, is a bond in which both become mental cripples and cling on to each other until death.”67

What Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Judith Wright, Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, Phyllis Webb, Margaret Avison, Rosemary Sullivan and Susan Griffins are doing in British, American, Canadian and Australian poetry was begun by Kamala Das in Indian English poetry. These woman poet’s gesture of defiance and self-assertion snowballed into a movement first and later in a genre. She was joined after a few hesitations by Mamata Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Margaret Chatterjee, Suniti Namjoshi, Gauri Deshpande and a whole generation of younger poetesses to establish an image of woman totally unencumbered by the conventional falsifying colors. This was not a personal matter but a whole generation’s pangs of birth, not an individualistic attitudinizing but a painful transformation coming over feminine consciousness.

Kamala Das’s poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self. Her poetry presents Indian woman in a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. She inaugurates a new age for woman poets by doing so, an age seeking to forge new idiom, a new medium and newer modes of address, constituting a total rejection of the conventional modes of poetic
expression of the dominant culture. Her importance as an inaugurator of new poetic awareness for Indian woman poets is an established fact. Her poetry is the acknowledgement and celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman.

The poetry of Kamala Das calls for special consideration because of its unique place not only among the Moderns but also even in Indian poetry in English by women as a whole. Kamala Das embodies the most significant stage of the development of Indian feminine poetic sensibility not yet reached by her younger contemporaries. Her poetry voices to the full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian woman’s journey from tradition to modernity, but even the Indian woman poet’s sense of commitment to reality.
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