Chapter - IV

Violence and the Self

There is a way of understanding Kamala Das’s practical immediate poetic fight with her male counterpart as a symbolic gesture of an eternal metaphysical phenomenon, as an unerasable ground of operation between the self and the other, between mind and matter, between spirit and substance, between essence and figuration. This mind-matter tug of war is constant, continual, irresolvable, and unending. In the mutual transactions of the self and the other, the other permanently remains a mystery, and the self indefatigably tries its own strength of falling into a war (of words) with the other. In this war, since it is a matter of nature’s mystery itself, there are no victors or vanquished. In the true metaphysics of things in the world, mind and matter have to conduct their mutual transactions without any support from the third. The third does not exist at all in a rational sense. It is just like the relation of water and river where water is the self and the river the other. Kamala Das symbolizes this metaphysical fight that subsists in the woman-man relationship where woman is the self, and man is the other. The self is perennially, and fervently too, trying its own strength at exhausting the meaning of the other, but the other always eludes such a possibility of exhausting the essential mystery of being the other. Das is well aware of the fact that she would not gain any viable point of victory in the fight she conducts with man as the other. But then, the mystery of man as the other remaining perennially intact, what all she wants to assert for herself is the very strength of her freedom as a being in the world. As Jerry Aline Flieger confirms, this transaction between man and woman should be conducted with the help of language.
of the Unconscious itself. This point can be elaborated in Flieger's own words; says he, "The paradigm of desiring intersubjectivity is written in the very language of the Unconscious itself" (358). What exactly is this 'language of the Unconscious'? In the context of Kamala Das we arrive at two contradictory formulas: one is that same old Wordsworthian formula of 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' and the other refers to the fundamental manner of decoding the body language into a perceivable poetic entity. In spite of the fact that there is a tilt towards the British Romanticism, she prominently addresses her poetry to the twentieth century readers, where Naturalism and Realism are the essential ruling poetic forces. The body language which converts into poetic symbols and metaphors, instead of being a rationalized clarification of the women's needs, awfully turns out to be a fervent invitation for men to probe and find for themselves the essential content of the women's needs, where man and woman are mutually desiring intersubjective entities.

Elaine Showalter draws our attention to "The Mad Woman in the Attic" by Gilbert and Gubar, wherein they had pinpointed "a feminist revision of Harold Bloom's Oedipal model of literary history as a conflict between fathers and sons and accept the essential psychoanalytic definition of the woman artist as displaced, disinflicted, and excluded" (qtd. in Showalter 468). Needless to say, the 'psychoanalytic definition of the woman artist' as comprehended by Harold Bloom is biased and insufficient in the context of the generation of feminist writers. The possible alternative for the 'Oedipal model of Literary history as a conflict between fathers and sons.' should be available in the conceivable Electra model of literary history where the conflict is between mothers and daughters. But, however, this
Electra model is not to displace, disinherit, or exclude men as artists. On the other hand, Kamala Das starts a new poetic paradigm as suggested above. In this context it is relevant to resort to the words of Adrienne Rich; says Rich: “In order to live a fully human life, we require not only control of our bodies... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence” (qtd. in Showalter 463). The expression ‘control of our bodies’ simultaneously refers to man and woman equally. Such a ‘control’ must invariably address to ‘unity and resonance of our physicality.’ Here comes the major problem of clearly and transparently knowing and understanding the mutual intersubjectivity. It is a fact that nature conceived man and woman as genetic opposites, and their personalities are absolutely held in the relative mysteries of uniqueness and ambiguity. If the biological needs of man and woman are held as nature’s secret, in this unique ambiguity there is specific difference between the needs of nature in its evolution, and the intersubjective fulfilments of man and woman in being equal co-sharers of the living moments of experience.

The purpose of nature itself was prominently designated as evolution through natural selection as confirmed by Charles Darwin. If the ‘natural selection’ complexity of Charles Darwin is right, the mystery of intersubjectivity should permanently remain a mystery only. But unravelling this mystery, to the extent that it is a programme of Kamala Das, she just rails and rebels against the oppressions and repressions as resorted to by generations of men in their attitudes and disposition towards women. The immediate poetic programme of Kamala Das is just in evocatively denouncing the traditional contexts of oppressions and repressions.
Man's psyche, which had inherited the oppression and repression syndrome, must first be rationalized by duly removing this syndrome. Therefore, her poems are rebellious reverberations of the essential need of perceiving the 'unity of our physicality,' which is 'the corporeal ground of our intelligence.' In her poetry these reverberations manifest themselves through her self's expeditions along the precipices of life in its interactions with the 'other,' its passion for life, its futile jaunts through the labyrinths of love and lust, and the self's final comprehension of the sterile vacuum and darkness in which it has to grope, having no way out.

A. The Agony of Being-in-the-Here-and-Now

As a matter of fact, the feminist violence as articulated in Das's poetry displays the tug-of-war between her inner self and the external realities that are compounded in the immediate social and familial interpersonal situations. This violence springs from a perpetual struggle between the psychic aspirations and the social compulsions. The poetic self rebels against the imposition of a 'cultural unconscious' over the feminine 'natural unconscious' strategically contrived by the patriarchal autocratic civilization. In this context, Helen Cixous' clarification about the 'unconscious' is quite relevant. Says Cixous: "There is work to be done on female sexual pleasure and on the production of an unconscious that would no longer be the classic unconscious. The unconscious is always cultural and when it talks, it tells you your old stories" (488). It was Levi-Strauss who had pertinently drawn a distinction between nature and culture. According to Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, Strausse even goes to the extent of discussing "the great opposition between Nature and Culture" (Davis 430). Kamala Das insists upon the idea of
erasing the cultural ‘classic unconscious’ from the minds of men and re-introducing
the natural unconscious in its place. Precisely speaking, the basic cultural stands and
standards rigidly determining the place of women in culture must be modified in such
a manner that the natural unconscious goes to fill the gap. When this natural
unconscious takes the poetic form, there emerges clarity of understanding woman in
her naturalistic context. This kind of visualizing woman in the natural context
through poetry is always a matter of effecting open insights instead of closed endings
that are usually dictated by the cultural unconscious. The ‘cultural unconscious’
blinders the vision of men by way of conforming to certain set situational responses.
The ultimate purpose of Kamala Das in constantly and continuously speaking about
her natural unconscious is to present it as a formula to be re-discovered by man in one
form or the other. In turning against her own self, she re-discovers for herself the
feminine natural unconscious and poetically presents the same through innumerable
poetic images and symbols.

For the self of the poet, being-in-the here-and now itself, to the extent that it is
absolutely informed by the ‘cultural unconscious,’ turns out to be a trauma. The
signals that the perceiving mind communicates from the external world to the inner
self get rejected recurrently at the psychic level. Similarly, when the outer world
continually discards the gestures transmitted by the inner self, it becomes a persistent
shuttling of incompatible signals to the self and back like sea waves, which eventually
sparks off violence within resulting in rebellious poetic outrages. The poet attributes
her bitter personal experiences to the disorder of the so-called civilized world and its
prejudices. The malaise thus created within flows out in the form of poetic
confessions giving vent to the pent-up suffocative emotions which eventually brings about a relief in the poetic self. If so, her poetry is not a portrayal of the outer landscape; instead, what is revealed is the vast, complex inner panorama and the existential pressures it confronts in its interactions with the outer world. There is always a conflict between within and without. The self seems to have a predilection to withdraw into the shell of solitude fearing defeat, which finds expression in the following lines of “Anamalai Poems VII”.

If someone would only remove the sun
from my way I would not have to face
another sorrowful day but I would
lie then in kind night’s embrace, soothed by its
blinded compassion while its groping fingers
would anaesthetize my private terrors... (BK 156)

Such lines emerge clearly from a self, defeated and fatigued by the external world of the ‘other’. Whenever the poet touches upon the external world it is only to contrast it with her psychic demands emerging out of its yearnings in the early childhood. Hence, the frequent nostalgic reminiscences that appear in poem after poem are mere subterfuges to escape the present both in the spatial and temporal contexts. In the poem “My Grandmother’s House” she becomes reflective about her ancestral [grandmother’s] house.

How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air.
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie

_Behind my bedroom door like a brooding_ Dog. (CP 120)

The expression ‘armful of darkness’ is in itself is an ironic suggestion. The initial enthusiasm of going back to the grandmother’s house ultimately turns into acquiring nothing (‘armful of darkness’). This is so because of the simple fact that the grandmother’s house itself is a symbol of ‘cultural unconscious,’ which in many ways compounds in her a sense of disgust and frustration. Yet here the awareness of the present malady is so intensely painful that the ‘blind eyes of windows’ or the ‘frozen air’ or even ‘an armful of / Darkness’ (all images of loneliness and isolation) can console the poet’s self and take her away from being in the insufferable here-and-now.

In fact, this kind of need for a regress into the childhood is a formal stylistic device in the Romanticists and their followers, the confessional poets. This relative escape through regress into the childhood is their potential manner of expressing the painful undecided nature of being-in-the here-and-now. Being-in-the here-and-now is a matter of inordinate crisis and indecisiveness. The imaginative stress on the need for escape from the arduous nature of being-in-the present into a childhood that might have been comparatively freer from constraints is a mere fib of poetic imagination.

**B. Love of Life and Love for Life**

At the grass root level the experiences, be it agonizing or exhilarating, are common in life. But only a passionate sensibility can concretise these experiences in
the form of a vibrant poetic formula. In order to do this, the artistic self has to undergo a traumatic process through which his artistic personality develops, and the predicament encountered by the poet invariably transcends the personal and assumes a generality. Thus, the poet's artistic personality develops into a collective poetic sensibility. Kamala Das has shaped her feminine poetic self on the anvil of her naturalistic experiences and visions, and her poems are the direct results of the psychic trial she underwent throughout her life on instances. Though in her poem “Forest Fire” Kamala Das gives a commitment “To take in with greed like a forest fire” (OP 39) all experiences to her creative dominion, yet her poetry gains both its charm and tension from her personal views on the most important aspect of life—love. But these personal views of Kamala Das, to the extent that they are equally important in the life of any woman and every woman, maintain in themselves a typical poetic flavour of trying to comprehend the very feminine niceties insofar as they are required to be urgently attended to. Though study of many of her major poems will reveal ample proofs of a wider and more matured vision in the outlook of her poetic self, yet as T.N. Dhar rightly observes, “It is true that Das has lived up to her promise, but all through she has shown partiality towards the lovers; most of her poems deal with the theme of love” (21). It is important to note here that for Kamala Das love has various connotations and manifestations. Beyond the physical and divine dimensions of love, for her it is the fundamental source of energy that gives life its vehemence and its contours. Love being the most vital of the primary instincts of man as a creature, naturally, the all-pervasive spirit of the whole poetic world of
hers cannot be anything else other than love and its vigorous manifestations drawn from life-experiences, both exhilarating and agonizing.

In spite of the fact that Das's treatment of love takes innumerable dimensions—the love of a wife towards her husband; the love of a beloved towards her lover; the love of a fond mother; the love of a daughter towards a dictatorial father; and the love of a grand daughter towards her grandmother—, the very fundamental nature of her treatment of love substantially concerns itself with man-woman relations as lovers. This theme of man-woman relations as lovers had been attended to poetically from the time's immemorial past; but love as treated in the traditional lore maintains in itself a kind of romantic evocativeness, where it all turns out to be a kind of imaginative fire-play. In Das also there is a slight romantic tinge wherewith she very often attributes a kind of imaginative height to love as the most needful concretising force of unifying humanity into a happy social blend. But she very often looks at the natural context of man-woman relations from a creaturely angle, and thereby she demonstrates that man-woman love has to be attended in its naturalistic ground realities instead of making out a pleasant winning story out of it as an instinctive fundament. As such, it needs the most needful libation, satiety, and satisfaction.

Love, in order to be real, must force itself as a typical naturalistic educative phenomenon, in the context of which man and woman have to learn something of their mutual personalities. In fact Das considers love as the fundamental manner of human-creaturely disposition of man and woman towards each other. She makes a clear-cut poetic analysis of the necessary expectations of the partners and equally
necessary manner in which they practically respond to each other. The phenomenal nature of love-play starts in high hopes and ends in deep depressions. The expected magnificence versus the achieved nothingness is the manner in which she builds a kind of irresolvable poetic tension. All her love-poems end up in this atmosphere of tension instead of acquiring for themselves the most needful happiness through liberation. Reading Kamala Das's love poetry is not at all a pleasant exercise. It does not give any pleasing conclusions.

On the other hand, she leaves most of her love poems with a big question mark. Insofar as they are structured within the stylistic devices of irony, paradox, antithesis, and ambiguity, they maintain in themselves a serious touch of modernity in its stylistic vibrancy. As a result, her love poems breed in themselves a kind of paradoxical tension between the love of life as we have it and the love for life as it is required to be. Many of her love poems, to the extent that they contain in themselves certain fantastic, even obscene episodes, can be interpreted as mere dreams and nightmares rather than the realities of life.

If so, the earnest creative urgency in Kamala Das is always with the expression of a stricken and frightened psyche deprived of the pleasure of love, helplessly raving for proper answers for her exclusive problems in being a woman. These problems are concerned with her search for an escape from the perpetual loneliness she undergoes in life. She is aware that such an escape can be attained only through engaging herself in an eternal search for true love. So with utmost honesty and without inhibition her poems express her felt loneliness and her self's wanderings in search of an ideal lover in addition to searching for her own satisfaction of the self. In her own words: "Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which sought for it a
receptacle" (MS 105). The same sentiment is expressed also in the poem "A Phantom Lotus" where again the giver is the female who is saturated with love:

The only truth that matters is
That all this love is mine to give,
It does not matter that I seek
For it a container, as alms
Seek a begging bowl, a human
Shape to envelope its wealth. (OSK 93)

The expression 'alms / Seek a begging bowl' aptly depicts the pathetic and fallen state of woman in being a seeker of the most needful thrill in life, which is fated to be unavailable for her. Her instinct for search of true love is so aggressive that the male entity is placed at the receiving end and the female is the desperate hunter for the male 'container' for putting in the 'alms' of love. This is the reason why all her poetic property is preoccupied with love in its various aspects. This preoccupation sometimes becomes an obsession, which only shows the self's desperate attempt to get hold of love and life at any cost, and the ensuing frustration. All this shows that the tone of her violence towards the very femininity, in all probability, is the sum and substance of herself as a lovelorn woman.

C. The Sea of Life: Love-Lust Tangle

1. Love as a Phenomenon

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 this simultaneous predominance of love in its higher and lower dimensions. As Kurup rightly says:

"The confessional self in her [Das] 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" (175).

This mingling of 'the most sublime and the most mundane' is an inexorable phenomenon in a poet who presents her experiences in all its genuine colours, smells, and sounds; a poet who attempts with all sincerity to portray life in its full blatancy.

An equally vigorous pull of the self towards opposite directions i.e., the higher and lower aspects of being, amounts to what critics call the 'split self' of the poet. She is conscious of the heinous and hateful nature of the creaturely survival, but then, any humanistic elevation of ideas and ideologies must necessarily state this creaturely survival as the primal springboard of secular, existential, and aesthetic heights in being-in-the-world. This is so because love, in the sense of passionate generic entanglement of the partners belonging to the opposite sexes, is only an honorific logo-centric coinage. As such, it is an extended Euphemism for the same creaturely activity of entanglement for procreative activity. It is just the *elan vital* ('life force') whose ultimate purpose for nature and cosmos is beyond the comprehension of human imagination.
Love in Kamala Das, then, connotes the visualization of man-woman relations through which the partners involved attain the ultimate goal of their being. For the poet, love is on the one hand an end in itself, and on the other a means to attain a greater meaning to life. In being a means, it aims at achieving a kind of ultimate freedom that puts aside all kinds of secondary concerns of life; and, in being an end in itself, it goes to reveal her philosophy of life: a life full of love, warmth, and care from her partner. When in reality such love is denied in the present modes and modalities of living, her poems become the story of her self's itinerary in search of love and life even outside her home. In fact in her case it is love as an end that tilts the balance. Since the genesis of love is our being-in-the-world, her concept of love does not reject the seat of it—the body. She favours expression of love in its fullest measure in the interpersonal relationships. As Sunanda P Chavan says, “She believes love to be a fulfilment of soul realized through body—an experience of sex, beyond sex” (Unity 143). This belief in the reciprocity of the physical and the metaphysical aspects of love is clearly expressed in the opening lines of the poem “The Suicide”:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare (D 1)

The needs of the body for the soul and the soul for the body are absolutely important. Here the word ‘soul’ has to be taken as a verbal substitute for self in its physical state of being. Self in its metaphysical dimensions may not be having anything to do with the body. But in the actual world of physical survival both the
body and the self are absolutely required to be malleable partners of the being. In fact, the poet is asking for something which is not practically viable. This nonviability aspect becomes clear when the self and the body in the above context are taken as mind and senses inherent in the being. Needless to say, the mind is always attended by the ego and the senses are attended by the most needed satisfactions. The mind that is the self with its egotism, and the body that is the senses with their passion for satiety quite naturally come into a conflict. As a result, mind cannot control the senses and the senses cannot satisfactorily depend upon the mind for the purpose of acquiring for oneself the most needed satisfaction. Soul and body in the above context, if taken as mind and matter, are absolutely left for themselves to contend with each other. Here the mind has no alternative except to go through the matter. And the matter (body) has no other source of animating itself with the life-principle. If only there is a possibility for a third principle that could unite mind (self) and matter (body) equally, there is a scope for harmonious understanding. The necessity of soul for the body and body for the soul has to be clarified by some third principle. That third cementing principle, for Kamala Das, is pleasure through love. When that pleasure through love is not available for a concrete experience, both the mind (self) and matter (body) appear to rend asunder. Frustration is the inevitable result of all this mind-body distancing. In this desire for a harmonious unification of soul and body (or mind and matter) Das is quite romantically apprehending a Platonic state of being-in-the-world. Very often in our practical life self ferociously reverts upon the body almost as an interior critic bent upon controlling the freedom of the body. What
she actually wants is a sort of hymnal cohabitation of self and body as interior paramour of each other

2. Creaturely Survival and Existential Heights

There are two antithetical dimensions of life: existential heights and creaturely survival (aspiring for superior states of existential heights and crying and cringing for creaturely properties of survival). While one is the outcome of civilization and progress, the other is born of the primal animalistic urges that are inevitable and unavoidable. Human survival is ultimately rooted in these two dimensions more or less equanimously. With the concept of sublime that man aspires to reach, it is also true that he has to practically remain tied up to his creaturely evocative dimensions. Totality in human life is reached only in a holistic and harmonious intermixture of both these dimensions. This contention goes in perfect agreement with the Hindu view of life, which advocates the gradual elevation to sublimation — Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Thus, Kama or sexual instinct remains one important aspect of human life, which not only concerns itself with self-preservation and preservation of the race, but also is a necessary ingredient in his progression towards attaining transcendence.

The art of success in life lies in properly co-ordinating the creaturely dimensions with the existential heights. Moreover, nature absolutely depends upon the creaturely avidities for the purpose of its evolution. So in the naturalistic context man cannot really distance himself from the creaturely survival modalities of life. From this angle the instinctive aberrations are not a matter of stigma. On the other hand, proper knowledgeable insight into their profundities adds for the human
interest, not as a matter of progress but as a significant matter of containing the
tffective activity with the needful completions of being-in-the-world. Nevertheless, the
need of conducting oneself towards existential heights compels one to look upon the
creatively survival dimensions as low, primitive, and worth renouncing. That they
cannot really be renounced practically is the hitch.

However, in the historical process of progress through constant civilization
and progress, there emerges a tendency to give excessive importance to the existential
heights by way of ideologically downplaying the necessity of creaturely dimensions.
It is in this tendency that the primal creative urges and faculties receive no proper
attention and importance. On the other hand, they attract utter negligence in the name
of civilities and decencies of life. Being-in-the-world, as such, is a matter of
surviving with a 'necessary courage to be' within the parameters of social, ethical,
moral, and cultural conventions and traditions.

Kamala Das prominently tackles the problem of love quite antithetically from
both the angles of creaturely survival and secular existential heights. In fact she
arrives at a poetic conclusion that capturing the existential heights is not at all
possible without an awareness and recognition of the inevitable creaturely dimensions
of being-in-the-world. Any act of aspiring for existential heights should necessarily
suggest this creaturely dimension. In a small poem called “Winter,” she suggests at
the significance of these creaturely dimensions of being-in-the-world:

It smelt of new rains and of tender
shoots of plants, and its warmth was the warmth
of earth, groping for roots—Even my soul,
I thought, must send its roots somewhere,

and, I loved his body without shame . . . (BK 92)

The analogy between the 'tender shoots of plants . . . groping for roots' and the 'soul' sending 'its roots somewhere' downward is expressive of the needful balance between the higher and lower aspects of life. The expressions 'its warmth was the warmth of earth' and 'I loved his body without shame' indicate the exclusivity of motherhood and the ecstasy of the creative process.

The creaturely dimensions in themselves are closely associated with the assertion of naturalistic freedom as against the social and cultural strictures. But in the name of social decencies as well as ethical and moral standards, the naturalistic freedoms of creaturely avidity are always invariably sabotaged and sacrificed by the so-called sophisticated conventions, moralities, and ethics. As a result, the very essence of naturalistic freedom of being-in-the-world gets crumpled and even annihilated very often. Kamala Das as a poet absolutely resents the manner in which the very life-giving institutions directly go to the extent of crushing and annihilating the innate naturalistic freedoms and choices through extraneous formalities and conventions. Das constantly and continuously puts a positive and exulting insight into the so-called forbidden aspects of instinctive aberrations, more or less with a missionary purpose of exhorting and evocating the readers for proper co-ordination of their senses and sensibilities in the most requisite manner of surviving with laudable self-emanating sanctions emerging out of the implorations of the conscience, and not the exterior morals and ethics.
3. The Love-Lust Labyrinth

All said and done, love-act between man and woman, rather than being confined to the creaturely dimensions, goes to involve both body and mind in equal proportion in attaining a greater satisfaction by the partners involved. The absence of such involvement of mind and body would pave way for frustration and agony in the partners. Kamala Das’s concerns in the man-woman interpersonal relationships, as have been expressed in her poetry, have to be understood in this perspective. She is equally concerned for the physical and metaphysical aspects of love in order to attain a meaning for life. According to her, unity is achieved only through involving both body and mind in love relationships. Denying either of these would result in a sense of frustration and waste in the partners involved. In fact, it is this sense of frustration and waste that gets reflected in most of her love poems, as she is conscious of the fact that man as love partner very often shows no serious concern for the needs of his beloved in love-play. Each of the protagonists of Das’s poems, thus, longs for a meaningful relationship with her lover, be it within or outside the marital life. But ironically, none of the male-lovers she comes across succeeds in giving her the kind of emotional support and satisfaction she longs for. In any transaction between man and woman, the independence and individuality of both the partners are absolutely required to be protected and safeguarded. The very manner in which she offers the facets of independence and individuality invariably becomes an arresting tale of the shattered and destroyed niceties of feminine aspirations. Therefore, it is an anxiety-ridden poetry in the uncontrollable and inexpressible contexts of personal agony at the deprivations of the naturalistic freedoms. At the same time, the verbal violence of her
poetry is only a potential poetic means of ventilating the feminine personal grievances.

Thus, the whole body of Kamala Das's poetry is the story of her self's search for true love. One may notice that the "tamed swallow" of "The Old Playhouse" (OP 1) could not remain 'tamed' for long, and flies away looking for wild freedoms and ecstasies "as often petals do when free in air" (OP 48). Very often life is infused into the "granite dove" of "The Stone Age," and it flies away from the husband's "webs of bewilderment" (OP 51) searching for new yistas for nesting. But ironically, every search and every flight eventually culminate in a denial of what has been aspired and the ensuing frustration. This sort of running away in search of true love, and the resultant frustration is the theme of her poem "The Sunshine Cat" (OSK 54). Like in "The Old Playhouse" and in "The Stone Age," here again, the husband is portrayed as a man "who neither loved nor Used her, but was a ruthless watcher" (OSK 54). The expression 'ruthless watcher' is important here. By using the term 'ruthless' she implies that male partners are heartlessly selfish and callous in dealing with their women. To escape the tyranny of the husband, the woman turns to a band

Of cynics... clinging to their chests where

New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her

Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget,

To forget, oh, to forget... (OSK 54)

Each of the 'cynics' she turns to, tells her, "I do not love. I cannot love. it is not / In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you..." (OSK 54) The statement 'I do not
love, I cannot love, it is not / In my nature to love’ is a strategic indictment of the
men-folk on their failure to love in the true sense of the term. One who shamelessly
confesses that ‘it is not / In my nature to love’ must either be a psychopath or one
lacking in virility. But in a superficial manner he says, ‘I can be kind to you.’ In a
system where people are divided into superior (men) and inferior (women), kindness
flowing from the benefactor towards the beneficiary is all the more humiliating and
painful to the beneficiary, for it is more a gesture of ego-fulfilment than a real and
carpent extension of love on an equal footing.

Further lines of the poem are a poignant confession of how a woman’s
personality dwindles in the world of men. Her search for a true relationship both with
the husband and outside the domestic life bears no fruit. Moreover, “Her husband
shut her / In, every morning, locked her in a room of books / With a streak of
sunshine lying near the door” (OSK 54). These are the doings of a cold psychopath.
The husband locks her every morning ‘in a room of books’ where there is no light
(‘With a streak of sunshine lying near the door’ and not in the room). A dark room, if
properly understood, stands for the heart of the husband symbolically. In the context
of such an impenetrable dark scenario, the drama that follows is not a mere tragedy
but a melodrama of the sorts. On one evening when “He returned to take her out, she
was a cold and / Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men” (OSK 54). Because
of utter disuse of her natural faculties she turned into ‘a cold and / Half-dead woman’
indicating that she is ‘now of no use at all to men.’ That is to say that her very
feminine niceties and potentialities are crushed to the hilt. Vrinda Nabar’s comment
on this passage is worth quoting:
The eerie image of the husband metaphorically locking the poet in, prisoner among a roomful of books, while she slowly aged, is startling . . . We are not to take the lines literally, but they have a convincing authenticity because they hint at disturbing aspects of both the poet’s relationship with her husband and of her own sense of inner collapse.

(26)
The poem simply suggests at the fact that what all a woman needs is a living companionship. She can never withstand the loneliness thrust on her by the mindless men-folk. Love for woman is always a matter of transparent living companionship, in the absence of which she is as good as dead. Kamala Das here opens up a new area of woman’s heart and interiors. What woman needs is not at all a boorish animal virility in her man. She only wants a free, frank, and transparent companionship with her man.

Another poem called “Herons” expresses the heinous approach from the husband figure. Here he prefers to make love after sedating the wife so that:

My speech becomes a mistladen terrain

The words emerge tinctured with sleep

They rise from the still coves of dreams

In unhurried flight like herons... (CP 105)

And the husband, before making love, “Sing lullabies to his wife’s sleeping soul” in order to “thicken its swoon” so that “my ragdoll limbs adjust better / To his versatile lust” (CP 105). The modern day psychologists very often talk about masochistic abnormalities in the male partners in sexual congress. While psychological
abnormality itself takes its origin, growth, and development in the conditioned manner of social institutions. In some quaint and queer cases, masochism becomes a painful trait in males. In the abnormal psychology we have references to certain male-types who insist on their female partners remaining as silent and passive as dead bodies. This kind of insistence, psychologically speaking, is born of sexual diffidence and doubts in the male partner concerning his own strength and virility.

In all these poetically narrated instances, the orgasmic experiential dimensions of the female personae and that of the male partners are at great variance. While the sensibility of the female persona seeks ecstasy and exquisiteness in the oneness of the moment, the male persona refuses to comply because, as she says in the poem “The Old Playhouse,” “You were pleased / With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow / Convulsions” (OP 1). And the final result is, “I lost my will and reason, to all your / Questions I mumbled incoherent replies” (OP1). Here she is accusing her partner for throwing her into a state of incomprehensibility, in the context of which her response would be helpless mumblings. In a woman these ‘convulsions’ and ‘incoherent replies’ can mean more than mere sound productions. About such convulsive signs in woman, Beauvoir observes, “There are other than physiological reasons for her susceptibility to convulsive manifestations: a convulsion is an interiorization of energy which, when directed outward into the environment fails to act there on any object, it is an aimless discharge of all the negative forces set up by the situation” (340). In Das’s poem the woman’s mumbling of ‘incoherent replies’ are suggestive enough of what Beauvoir confirms in saying that “it is an aimless discharge of all the negative forces set up by the situation.” Whereas her partner
should have transparently and sublimely shared the occasion, he appears to be in an interrogative state of mind in the most intimate interactive moments, which is indicative of a pathological abnormality in him.

However, in Das's different poems, response to this abnormality has different manifestations. In the poem "The Stone Age," it changes into a revengeful attitude, where the female persona goes to "knock at another's door" (OP 51). In "The Sunshine Cat," again, the woman persona seeks love outside marriage but fails to have it; every lover she comes in contact with refuses to love her but only uses her to satisfy his 'young lusts,' and eventually:

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, I shall build walls with tears,
She said, walls to shut me in. . . . (OSK 54)

Here the 'shallow convulsions' of "The Old Playhouse" subside and transform into a passive but more pathetic state of schizophrenic frenzy. This is most pertinently the psychological negative response of a woman that flirts constantly and continuously in the hope of gaining for her self the most requisite sublimation and pleasure of companionship. Everywhere her experience comes to a drastic failure for the simple reason that all the male partners she came into contact are equally selfish and self-centred without any concern for the exact purpose of the woman. In stating that she 'shall build walls with tears,' she is creating such heavy poetic metaphors that go to aptly apprise her shattered state of mind, more particularly when a number of paramours also utterly failed in awarding her the needful pleasurable relief in the act
of love. The stylistic dramatization of the events of failure culminating into ‘walls’ of ‘tears’ is something quite exasperating and damaging for the female personality.

However, it is important to note that the protagonist in the poem “The Sunshine Cat” is referred as ‘she’ wherewith the poet implies a sort of third person evaluation of her own subjective experience. If so, it is a profound stylistic dramatic device aimed at confirming the vicissitudes of women that fail constantly and continuously in acquiring the rightful pleasures of companionship. At the same time, as Kurup points out, “it may be wrong to consider these attempts as betrayal or infidelity of her personal lust. In fact it is her disgust in failure of achieving the ideal lover that leads her to a frantic search” (136). It is also important to note that, according to Kamala Das, such an ideal lover is impossible to find in the world of our survival. In a way she is targeting the very social system that always denies the rightful opportunities and privileges to woman in general.

In the poem “Substitute,” one may notice that the poetic sensibility’s ‘disgust in the failure of achieving the ideal lover,’ turns from the pathetic to an apathetic state. In poems like “A Hot Noon in Malabar” (BK 18), “Composition” (D 29), “My Grandmother’s House” (CP 120), “No Noon at My Village Home” (CP 31), her self is seen trying to retreat into the past in order to flee the agony of being-in-the-present. But in “Substitute,” the self’s desperate attempt to escape both the past and the future is obvious. Here she wants to keep away from the memory that intrudes her peace of mind.

Memory

Great moody sea.
Do not thump so
Against my shore. (D 6)

The ‘sea’ metaphor and the ‘shore’ metaphor are significant. The ‘Great moody sea’ stands for the sea of life and ‘my shore’ suggests her suffering mind and conscience incapable of standing the dashing ‘thump(s)’ of the sea. The moodiness of the ‘sea’ is implicative of unpredictability and unassuredness of the world, which defeats and frustrates her mind and conscience that always cherish calm and quiet state of survival. But the ‘moody sea’ strikes at it whimsically and mercilessly. The ‘thump’ of the ‘sea’ is unbearable for her simple peace-loving mind. Her fond desire is for a peace of mind, even if it were to be for a short while. Therefore, she says:

Let me lie still
Without thought or will.
For a benign hour or two

Dear night, be my tomb. (D 6)

John Keats once acclaimed, ‘Oh for a life of sensation rather than of thought.’ Almost all the romantics fervently cherished for a life of sensations, even when the sensations and the sublimations that they improvise are purely temporal and momentary. Life of thought, on the other hand, is the phenomenal manner of introspectively brooding over the bygone and dead sensations. The very deadness of the lively moments lived and lost invariably lands the protagonist into a state of despondency and frustration. To quote John Keats again, in the poem “Happy Insensibility” he says:

In a drear night at December
Too happy happy tree
Thy branches ne'ver remember
Their green felicity. (L. 1-4)

In the above lines Keats is fervently pleading for a life of insensibility like the 'December tree' oblivious to the bygone vernal felicity of the month of May. This kind of fervent desire for a sublime life of senses in the immediate context should be a moment of permanence for both Keats and Das. To subsist in the exquisite excitations of senses and their pleasures is all that can be considered as happiness in life. Needless to say, this soul-filling involvement with the senses and their pleasurable moments is a matter of blissfully subsisting in the here-and-now. So the poet confirms for herself that a life 'without thought or will' provides for her the requisite abundance of being-in-the-world.

Mainly with the Romantic poets, as with Das, the Western historicism based on the bifurcation of time into past, present, and future, duly studded with memories (referring to the past) and desires (referring to the future) automatically obviates the present, particularly in the contexts of past experiences and future hopes and desires colliding with each other. As a result, the complex of here-and-now, as a matter of confluence of the past and future, gives no sustainable availability of the present for a fullness of experience. The fundamental loss of this fullness of experience in life's living moments harrowingly contributes for a kind of melancholy and pathetic nostalgia. The loss of the very pleasurable nature of love through 'thought' and 'will' conforms to what T. S. Eliot classically initiated in his poem The Waste Land. Even on the point of repetition, Eliot's lines are worth quoting in this context: "April is the
cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire..

" (L.1-3). For Eliot 'April is the cruellest month' because of the simple fact that 'Memory' (referring to the past) and 'desire' (referring to the future), as for Das 'thought' (referring to the past) and 'will' (referring to the future), in their smothering togetherness contribute for a colossal loss of the present. Invoking the very 'night' to be her 'tomb' is plentifully expressive of the agony of her mind in the felt loss and death of the given moments of sense-excitations and exquisiteness. The poet is ready to cherish death, again like Keats, as a welcome alternative to a life of miserable thought and unfounded desires. She wants the 'night' to be a 'tomb' for her i.e., a state where all living sensibilities are colossally suspended. Put into a simple argumentation, the very loss of sublimation of senses and the pleasures is a matter of death for her. This implies that she poetically measures the worth of life in the felt moments of sense-sublimations. This may appear to be an excessive hedonistic craze on the face of it. But in its reality the poet wants to suggest that life's worth should invariably mean a compacted simulation of felt excitations without which life will turn out to be a formula of nothingness and void.

The world now demands a cosmeticized show of life, and not a life with due naturalistic vitality and life force. This socially and culturally imposed show of life on women vexes and frustrates her. The following lines of "Substitute" clarify the poet's point:

It will be all right when I learn
To paint my mouth like a clown's.
It will be all right if I put up my hair.
Stand near my husband to make a proud pair.

It will be all right if I join clubs

And flirt a little over telephone

It will be all right, it will be all right

I am the type that endures. (D 6)

In determining and deciding the man-woman roles, a kind of typicality was socially and culturally thrust on them, in the context of which the male 'type' always arrogated after having conceived and conformed the women-folk in the most passive and typical manner. This kind of socially inflicted typicality on women in the bygone centuries gradually contributed for a total negation of individuality and personality for women. Women are expected to conform themselves as mere pleasure-offering objects without any freedom and individuality of being-in-the-world. She, however, does not like to be a mere pleasure-offering entity to the men-folk, particularly when such freedoms of acquiring pleasures for herself are potentially smashed and denied by the society.

Further, in painfully stating 'I am the type that endures,' it is clear that the individuality worth her personality was required to be mercilessly sacrificed on the threshold of modern day life, which is a mere pantomime. There is something quite chagrined in her grievance here. These lines seem to imply that it is inevitable for her as a woman to join the social group and start adopting all the mean tricks in order to endure in the society. However, "Substitute" concludes on a note of a self-created indifference and coldness towards such pantomimic performance of life. Here onwards a sort of revengefulness takes over the woman.
We kissed and we loved, all in a fury,
For another short hour or two
We were all warm and wild and lovely.

After that love became a swivel-door,

When one went out, another came in.

Then I lost count, for always in my arms
Was a substitute for a substitute,

Oh, what is the use, explaining—

It was a nameless, faceless crowd. (D 7)

The very title, 'Substitute,' is important in the sense that human individual, instead of realizing his own natural worth of being-in-the-world, always falls into the idea of relative and comparative introspection according to which he starts evaluating his own worth by way of comparing and contrasting himself with others. In doing so, he obliviously forgets his own being and behaves himself as a metaphoric entity to somebody else, which he calls 'one like the other.' This 'one like the other' formula is a phenomenal insistence of any social and cultural system. But from the personal point of view of the being, he is none like the other. It is in this formula of none like the other lies all the worth of individuality and the height of personality. But a social system imposes on the individuals a kind of generality which becomes an average necessity to be a member in a group. According to the principle of sociability, everyone has to assess and access his worth to the generality and commonality. Therefore, in the intense moments of introspection, as Kamala Das warrants us in the above lines, everybody ultimately appears to himself, from the social and cultural
point of view, as his own ‘substitute.’ This is the result of social conformism and conventionality at which the poet revels. In the context of one being a substitute, his originality gets lost. When this originality of being a woman gets smashed through conformism, conventions, and traditions, the poet becomes inconsolably restless. She hates the idea of herself being relegated to be a substitute of herself. Herein we have the implication that God gives us one face and we in the social and cultural contexts make many out of it. This multiplication of one into many, and the resemblance of one with some or all is something that is thrust on the person in being-in-the-world. But in the ultimate sense of being-in-the-world, it is not this kind of evaluation that matters. On the other hand, it is the very sense of being as ‘none like the other’ that ultimately creates the height of being-in-the-world. Thus, Kamala Das confirms the fact that, in spite of the demands of the society and culture, one should strive to live like oneself and not like the other or the ‘substitute.’ Hence, she herself is insisting upon the exclusivity of the existential choice and freedom of being-in-the-world. The ‘nameless faceless crowd’ that she is talking about is the manifestation of her multiple existence according to the demands of the society and its conventions.

In the poem “The End of Spring” Das states more clearly this multiplication of one into many by saying, “I split each minute into strangers, a lot / of them, a sort of game to fill the void / In time” (BK 26). In “Substitute” such ‘split’ into a ‘faceless crowd’ becomes a compulsion with a kind of freedom that “was our last strange toy / Like the hangman’s robe, even while new / It could give no pride. Nor even joy” (D 7). This is the kind of agony that emerges out of existential fear where the purpose
of the very existence is unknown and unperceivable. The ideas of Kamala Das here are cognate with what Jean Paul Sartre evaluates in the context of *Being and Nothing*.

In fact, “Substitute” is a great attempt to reach out to the dark interiors of the female psyche, and dig out the deep-rooted agony of the frustrated self. The outward indifference is only a mask to camouflage the overflowing anguish, which only heightens it. Unlike in the poem “The Sunshine Cat” (OSK 54), in “Substitute,” the male entity and the society are targeted not directly but by use of ridicule, irony, and repetition. The line ‘It will be all right’ is repeated thirteen times in the poem. Linda Hess, however, does not agree with the readability of such repetitions in Das’s poems. As Hess puts it, “There are frequent repetitions of words and phrases, another quick solution to the problem of filling up a line, but one that has disastrous effects on intensity and precision” (40). But in “Substitute,” the repetitions, rather than becoming a tedious replication, or degenerating to the level of a poetic trick of ‘filling up a line,’ do function as an effective device to communicate the mounting crisis in the poetic self. As Iyengar rightly says, “In ‘Substitute,’ the reiteration of the words ‘it will be all right’ has a telling effect” (680). In this context, even a critic like Nabar, who otherwise is very critical of Das’s extreme unconventionality in poetic structures, comments, “The lines [‘It will be all right, it will be all right’] have a cantatory tone. This suggests a sort of self-hypnosis, as if the poet wills herself into believing that she can endure. There is also an element of irony, even mockery, in the mention of the roles it will be alright for her to play” (44). In the ultimate analysis, the poetic manner of repetitions of the line ‘It will be all right’ contributes for a rare poetic fulfilment.
The mocking indifference of “Substitute” again surfaces in the poem “Glass” where the woman is “pure misery / Fragile glass” which, under the rudeness of the “lover’s haste,” breaks into “an armful / of splinters, designed to hurt, and, / Pregnant with pain” (OP 21). The ‘faceless crowd’ of the “Substitute” is presented again with stern determination:

Why did not I tell him that
I no longer care
Whom I

Hurt with love and often without. (“Glass,” OP 21)

Here the woman persona assumes the role of a parasite who tries to use men rather than being used by men. This is a sort of attempt to console the self by presuming that she hurts rather than being hurt, that she exploits rather than being exploited. The expression ‘often without’ [love] simultaneously refers to the contingent hatred she breeds in her towards the unfeeling male counterpart. And the expression ‘with love’ quite ironically substantiates the passive unfeeling manner in which she entangled herself with her male counterpart. It is this passive unfeeling manner that ultimately contributes for ‘an armful / of splinters.’ The broken ‘glass’ image further compounds her infelt suffering and also a typical abnormal self-pity that she attributes for herself in her fallen and defeated state of being in the companionship. This self-pity quantum in Kamala Das is comparable to that of P. B. Shelley. In the poetic act of exhibiting her wounds, she comes very near to the British Romanticists. But then, the poetic manner of representing pain in Kamala Das is certainly not out of unfounded Romantic imagination, the hurt is real and it is this realistic dimension of
Kamala Das that ultimately distinguishes her as an anti-romantic and as a neo-realist.

The neo-realism of the sort that Das practices is a profound supplement for the early twentieth century realism.

In “Glass” her deep rooted frustration in the self’s interiors springs from the fact that her initial offerings of her body as a ‘bait’ to men and her expectation of love in return meet with failure. None of the lovers could in any way exorcise the loneliness of her life. Gradually this turns into a revengeful determination, and now.

With a cheap toy’s indifference
I enter others’
Lives, and
Make every trap of lust
A temporary home. (‘Glass,’ OP 21)

The expression ‘temporary home’ is important, poetically speaking. If ‘home is the place where you have somebody to receive’ with love and compassion, the temporary nature of man possessing woman ultimately produces in her a typical pain of the loss of the certainty of home.

The poem “Convicts” also falls in the category of poems that express the overpowering heat of lust as the only binding thread between the lovers. Love is delicate whereas lust is excessively forcible and exploiting. But in the poem the union is portrayed as a mere lustful physical labour that is tiring and fatiguing. After each encounter in love, the lovers lay on bed like “The toys dead children leave behind” (OP 25). With the expression ‘toys dead children leave behind,’ the intensity of pathos is quite harrowing. Introspectively speaking, it refers to her own
enthusiastic self that maintained in itself innumerable dreamy ecstasies before the love act. And the lovers are thrown back to a heart-rending question: "what is / The use, what is the bloody use?" (OP 25). Further lines strengthen this question:

There were no more

Words left, all words lay imprisoned

In the ageing arms of night. In

Darkness we grew as in silence

We sang, each note rising out of

Sea, out of wind, out of earth and

Out of each sad night like an ache... (OP 25)

Growing 'in darkness,' and singing 'in silence' are inward and self-centred activities without visible or audible consequences, and without a second agency being involved. While the bodies of the lovers are involved in the act of 'hacking at each other's parts,' their minds are meandering in the dark worlds of their own, singing songs 'in silence,' which are songs of not ecstasy but of incommunicable agony and tedium.

In the poem "The Millionaires at Marine Drive" which is intensely autobiographical like the poems "An Introduction" and "My Grandmother's House," the poet is aggrieved at the ultimate doom her life has come to, after having lived for many years looking for an intimate relationship. But in that search she had to live her life as the "early rising doves" (CP 97) at Marine Drive, which feeds on the grains scattered by the millionaires. After fifteen years of her grandmother's death, she recalls.

... no longer was
There someone to put an arm around my
Shoulders without a purpose, all the hands,
The great brown thieving hands, groped beneath my
Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist's,
Warmth was not their aim, they burnt my cities

Down. . . (CP 97)

It is only in warm companionship of her grandmother that Kamala Das probably experienced the absolute gratuitousness in the human relationship. All the other companions in the name of lovers approached her for snatching away something from her, which in itself is an obnoxious selfish act. Now she feels sorry for the pleasure-hunt she has had throughout her youth, and asks: “Oh, why did I mix my Pleasures like I mixed my drinks to pass out / So soon on the velvet couch of life?” (CP 97).

4. The Torn Mask of Apathy

“The Testing of the Sirens” is a poem where the poet finally betrays all her self’s agony. The poem depicts the events following two kinds of love-hate relationships. It is interesting to note that both the lovers are absolutely imaginary. While she is painfully aware of the last night’s lovemaking with a man “speaking words of love / In some tender language I do not know,” in the morning it was nother man with “a pock-marked face, / a friendly smile and / a rollerflex” (BK 58) amera, who took her for a drive. The “wail” of the “sirens” and his “mirthless laughter” (BK 58) weave together, which in fact become one with the ‘wail’ of the oman’s own self. The poet evokes two repellent images—one, “a pregnant girl red her dusky / breasts” and washed them sullenly,” and the other, “crows bickered
over a piece of 'lizard-meat' (BK 58)—, which suggest at the disgust and insensibility within the female persona's mind towards the whole love affair. The triviality of the whole situation is further revealed in lines such as:

I want your photo, lying down, he said,

against those rusty nineteen-thirty-four guns,

will you? Sure. Just arrange my limbs and tell me when to smile. (BK 58)

The camera ('rolleiflex') metaphor with which the second lover attends her is quite significant. The camera is a mechanical instrument that improvises a static replica of the object (here the beloved) duly implanted on a negative film in it. The negative dimensions of the lover himself in being a partner who wishes to have a static posture of the beloved confirms the fact that her personal freedoms are completely eroded. It is quite ironic that she suggests him to 'arrange' her 'limbs.' The imposed passivity on her is quite disgusting, but then, what the lover wants is a static mechanical replica of her body for his purpose. The irony becomes all the more painful when she implores him with the words 'tell me when to smile.' This poem, like the poem "Substitute," reflects at the harrowing personal experiences of woman in being a passively dead or mechanical partner. It is imperative here to suggest that in both the poems the male counterparts are imaginary characters subsuming in themselves the self-centred male-chauvinistic authoritarianism. As a matter of fact, Kamala Das is trying to make a poetic improvisation of the male-biased authoritarianism which is the widest spread phenomenal feature in the male-dominated society. The 'rusty nineteen-thirty-four guns' metaphor implies the meaning that the male-chauvinism
and authoritarianism in being the dictators of the social systems are absolutely old, useless, and outmoded features, particularly in the context of women's exacting for their freedoms and choices during the feminist revolution of the modern times.

Though the female personae positively responds to the lover with the same inertia, yet towards the end, the poem is laden with the feeling of all love's labour lost, and of sheer frustration. In the concluding lines the mask of apathy is torn; and, behind all this veil of numbness and indifference, she betrays a feeling of unbearable agony of insatiate passion after such lustful encounters with the lovers day and night:

\[
\text{Shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was no more light, no more love, or peace, only the white, white sun burning, burning, burning...} \\
\text{Ah, why does love come to me like pain again and again and again? (BK 58)}
\]

She becomes awfully pained at the contingent manner in which she shut her eyes in the close company of her man out of helpless shudder and not out of experiencing the ecstasy of love. The ecstasy-less mechanical experience of hers is further qualifying in the expression 'only the white.' With the closed 'eye-lids' all her visions of freedoms and choices are turned into a blind spot, where the black in her eyes, i.e. the lens mechanism of her eyes is totally eroded and the ghastly white abnormal shattering of sun obliterating any vision.

The image of 'the white, white sun burning, burning, burning' is something very powerful and all pervasive in Kamala Das's poetry. Therefore, Devindra Kohli
rightly finds a thematic identity between her poems “The Dance of the Eunuchs” and “The Testing of the Sirens,” which happen to be the first poem and the last one respectively, of her first volume of poems (The Summer in Calcutta). In Kohli’s words, “The ‘virgin whiteness’ of the sun is the outward blaze of the irony of the ‘virgin whiteness’ of the heart which keeps on sulking, smouldering in the privacy of the poet’s accursed loneliness, of the ‘vacant ecstasy’ of the dancing eunuchs” (“Virgin”14)

In fact, Das’s poetry is a wild and violent cry of invitation for victimization. Self-pity and the contingent call for victimization (exaggerated scene making) is inherent in all Romantic poetry. Psychologically it is linked with self-pity born of inferiority complex. As Bruce King rightly comments:

Her poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in feelings of love; they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self-dramatization and feelings of shame and depression (151)

In expression (poetry) these ‘feelings of shame and depression’ become a phenomenon of exhibiting superiority, which sometimes becomes a psychological abnormality. In Shelley, we have this coupling of self-pity with cry of invitation for victimization in his “Ode to the West Wind” in lines such as, “Lift me like a leaf, a wave, a cloud, / I fall upon the thorns of life I bleed” (L. 53-54) While Shelley displays this self-pity with a tinge of romantic idealism, in Kamala Das, it manifests
itself as the fallout of the overall sterility and sham that her self experiences in its interaction with the outer world.

Many of Kamala Das’s poems display an almost similar sentiment of her involvement with the body, ‘the cheapest bait’ and the subsequent dejections. In “Captive” the poetic persona narrates the painful story of her plunging herself into the world of lust, seeking love and warmth in return. But with each and every lover she was invariably falling into a mere snare of physical lust:

What have
we had, after all, between us but the
womb’s blinded hunger, the muted whisper
at the core . . . for years I have run from one
gossamer lane to another, I am
now my own captive. (D 17)

The very phenomenon of love-act with abundant enthusiasm and desire for exquisiteness of experience ultimately comes to a slovenly disgusting end. Towards the end, the love-act turns out to be a mere physical out-loading of body’s aggressions. For an introspective analysis, love-act is always enthusiastic to start with, and a disgust in the end. But the disgust of Kamala Das in the above context is altogether different. She rebelliously indict her partner as the essential cause of imposing a disgusting experience on her, instead of giving an equal opportunity to feel the exquisiteness of the interpersonal experience. The expression ‘womb’s blinded hunger’ and ‘the muted whisper at the core’ are poetically expressive of her inexorable grievance. Self-pity in the above lines becomes quite harrowing when she
declares that she ran hither and thither ("from one / gossamer lane to another") fondly pursuing the instinctive pleasures and excitements of life. In an ultimate analysis all the desired pleasures eluded her, and what all that remains for her is a mere disgusting regret. At least in this poem Das is vibrantly clear that the feminine instinctive aspirations are invariably fated to defeat and failure simply because of the excessiveness of the aspirations and the contingent depression that befalls as an alternate reality. Therefore, she is a "captive" because of her own personal exceeding dreams. The poem maintains in itself a typical melancholic nostalgia and such nostalgia is quite unbearable for her. The poem harrowingly complements the unbridgeable gulf between hopes and desires on the one hand, and the reality of personal experience on the other. Here the hope is for a permanent love relationship that she seeks in life, and the reality is the ever-elusiveness of such a relationship. But for the poet this permanent lover that she seeks could be her own creation out of frustration. The impending ultimate agony of knowing that the eternal lover would never be met is what she dreadfully longs to escape.

D. Being-in-the-World and the Cognitive Self

The poetic self of Kamala Das journeys through many worlds of despair and unfulfilment, and violently expresses its feeling of loneliness, anxiety, and the futility of being-in-the-world itself. This state further leads to dejection, depression and violence. The sense of nothingness and sterility sometimes are so extreme that it cannot be expressed in any usual logo-centric terminologies. There are many poems in which the poet has successfully tried to objectify her psychic distress through repellent images like "funeral pyre," "womb's" darkness, "menstrual blood," "low paid
street girl,' 'maggots nipping the corpse,' 'crows bickering over a lizard-meat,' and the like. But it is in the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs" that the objective world of the eunuchs most powerfully symbolizes her psychic struggle in terms of the barrenness of love-life experiences.

1. Self's Convulsive Manifestations

Like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the world of eunuchs revives in the mind of the poet her own internal world of barrenness, frustration, and agony. "*The Waste Land*," says Manju Jain, "in fact, is haunted by memories of a failed erotic relationship, and by feelings of guilt and remorse which remain unresolved, as in the episode of the hyacinth garden" (*A Critical Reading* 136). To support her argument, Jain recalls Eliot's own observations about the thematic complexities of *The Waste Land*. In Eliot's words:

> Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling." (qtd. in Jain, *A Critical Reading* 145)

Likewise, Kamala Das's "The Dance of the Eunuchs" outwardly depicts a particular Indian scene, but the poem definitely objectifies the poet's subjective wriggle through the sterility and sham of the eunuchs' dance. Here the poet feels that in the practical world of experiences she has the same vapid world of love-life as eunuchs have. In *The Waste Land* Eliot significantly celebrated quite deploringly some man-woman intimate relationship in the process of their utter failure. In the 'hyacinth girl' episode
and the 'lady typist-carbuncular' affair, we have the disgusting poetic example where he reflectively apprised the interpersonal associations fated to inevitable failure. Kamala Das as a modern feminine counterpart prominently understands the intensity of agony created by the male-partner. As an extreme example of the expressions of her frustration, helplessness, and hopelessness in the love-life, she visualizes the whole world in a synthetic metaphor of the eunuchs' dance:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling. Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They danced, oh, they danced till they bled . . . (CP 106)

At the outset, to call the convulsive movements of the eunuchs a dance is in itself ironic and absurd. In the Indian traditional context, we have sacrosanct notions of Sakti and Sakta performing the dance in the form of Siva and Parvati. Quite ironically, Kamala Das celebrates the anti-life or negative life proponents of our times in the eunuchs' performing a restless revel, which she calls a dance. The whole atmosphere is suggestive of the horrible barrenness in the life of the eunuchs. 'It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came / To dance.' The 'fiery gulmohur' with its red flowers intensifies the heat of the atmosphere. There is a tragic irony in the lines: 'They danced, they danced, oh, they danced till they bled' because it is not menstrual blood that the eunuchs bleed. In women menstrual bleeding is an exclusive phenomenon and the sign of the onset of fertility, but in the case of the eunuchs, it is a
forced bleeding bereft of the exhilaration and ecstasy associated with the onset of motherhood. In answer to a questionnaire by S.C. Saha, Das says about the above lines, "I was probably thinking of the menstrual flow when I wrote of 'blood.' . I was hoping that these eunuchs would become real women by dancing till they bled" (qtd. in Saha 15). But it is a hope against hope, and the lines are movingly remindful of the contrast between hope and reality. Further, outwardly the eunuchs had all the embellishments of women:

There were green

Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some

Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices

Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of

Lovers dying and of children left unborn... (CP 106)

Women usually make themselves up with jasmines for attracting their lovers. The eunuchs outwardly look like women with their make up, but their voices are 'harsh' and 'their songs melancholy; they sang of / Lovers dying and of children left unborn.' This is a poignant suggestion at the incapacity of the eunuchs to become real beloveds or real mothers. Further lines, "Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry breasts / And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy" (CP 106), are suggestive of the convulsive nature of their movements which the poet ironically calls dance. The expression 'vacant ecstasy' very successfully functions as the objectification of the inexpressible frustration in the poet's own self, through the barrenness of the eunuchs' situation.
Even the tiniest creature on earth has the capacity to procreate and multiply, but the eunuchs, in spite of the fact that they are human beings, feel themselves lower than any other creature because nature has denied them the prime creative activity. That might be the reason why “Even the crows were / Silent on the trees” (CP 106) feeling themselves greater in stature than the creatures dancing below. The concluding lines of the poem harrowingly intimate the sterility aspect:

The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning

And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in

Attics and the urine of lizards and mice...” (CP 106)

The first rain on dry earth usually produces a pleasant smell, but here the rain is not the usual rain that makes the earth fertile and tender. Its smell is repellent like that of dust in / Attics and the urine of lizards and mice...’

The far-reaching influence of T.S. Eliot is obvious in the imagery of the poem. While the loss of naturalistic regeneration is the theme of *The Waste Land*, procreative capacity denied to humans are the central theme of “The Dance of the Eunuchs,” at the outset. Again, like *The Waste Land*, all this is ‘just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.’ The ‘rhythmical grumbling’ in Kamala Das, however, reaches far more disgusting heights than that does in *The Waste Land*. Whether or not *The Waste Land* is a ‘criticism of the contemporary world,’ “The Dance of the Eunuchs” visualizes a total world of impoverishment, as the eunuchs are supposed to be incapable of containing in themselves the usual physical instinctive sources of experiencing the sublime moments of life.
As a matter of fact, the poem is completely studded with Websterian melodramatic imagery. John Webster had a very great influence on T. S. Eliot, particularly in improvising melodramatic imagery. That way we do not find any direct parallelism to this poem in Eliot unless we resort to poetically comprehending with a sense of nausea the imagery in *The Waste Land*. The human agony concerning the potential infirmity created by the modern culture finds its echoes in *The Waste Land* and in “The Dance of the Eunuchs.” The rhythmic manner of enhanced existential ‘fear’ or ‘dread’ is equally present in both the poems. While the ‘fear’ or ‘dread’ in *The Waste Land* concerns itself with the preternatural apprehensions, the same in the eunuch’s dance is compounded by the naturalistic impoverishment. However, in both the poems it is the impoverished nature of human survival that becomes the centre. In a horrifying manner, Das quite intriguingly comprehends the whole modern world scenario in the impoverished and exasperating ‘dance’ of the ‘eunuchs,’ whose urgency of purpose is involved in a proper naturalistic procreative felicity. The eunuchs are by nature denied the life force, just like the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* are compositely turned to sterility. This sterility point of *The Waste Land* and the impotent nature of the ‘eunuchs’ are more or less the same. Ultimately both Das and Eliot find their source of influence in Webster’s imagery. Expressions like “Pressing lidless eyes” (L.138) and “chuckle spread from ear to ear” (L.186) in *The Waste Land*, and the expressions such as “Lovers dying and of children left unborn,” “wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy,” “half-burnt logs from / Funeral pyres,” and “urine of lizards and mice” in Das’s “The Dance of the Eunuchs” (CP
Towards the end of the poem, the poet calls the dance ‘convulsions,’ i.e. involuntary restless movements of limbs due to some sickness. The sickness of the eunuchs is understandable, and Das invents a vibrant poetical reflective prospect of presenting her concerned reactions to the eunuchs’ dancing in a chorus. Even in the dance, whose movements are expected to be exulting and exalting, the total atmosphere of the poem is quite suffocating and unbearable. The imagery makes the necessary poetic trick. The overall effect of the poem is in the nature of black comedy or black humour (a sick joke) traditions of our time.

However, Vrinda Nabar gives a negative comment on the poem. For her,

... the poem ["The Dance of the Eunuchs"] is an example of how sensitivity to the world of sights and sounds, while providing its own vitality and authenticity, does not necessarily produce a good poem. The unusualness of the theme, the special response of superstitious fear and a degree of revulsion which the eunuchs evoke in the average Indian mind, the aggressive, socially accepted roles they play in the Indian context, all these appear to make the poem larger than it actually is” (21-22).

By a ‘good poem,’ Nabar hopes to have an aesthetically agreeable poetic improvisation of imagery. But in the classical Indian Rasa theory ("theory of aesthetic emotions"), Beebhatsa rasa, ("the repulsive emotion"), has an equal place of dignity and honour along with all other emotions. Das is quite pertinently invoking
the ultimate tenets of *Beebhatsa rasa* in the wild 'dance' of the 'eunuchs.' If we take the 'eunuchs' as a general symbolic expressive metaphor for the obnoxious and hateful manner of modern life, the ultimate meaning intended by the poet becomes more vibrant. Nabar's demands for 'a good poem' are difficult to understand. It is true that "The Dance of the Eunuchs" arouses disgust. But this arousal of disgust is a poetically intended phenomenon in the structural dimensions of the poem. In arriving at the conclusion that the poem is not 'a good poem,' Nabar is not at all convincing. In fact Nabar errs in viewing the whole situation as a mere outward poetic portrayal of the eunuchs' revelry. The poem is to be viewed as an objective correlative for the absolute barrenness of love-life the poet herself experiences. The poet comes to see the whole world as a wasteful phenomenon. Every act, every happening, for her, is devoid of its prime purpose. The vast inner landscape of the poet's self with all its heat and sterility finds objectification through the portrayal of the vapid, pathetic world of the eunuchs. In this context what S.C. Saha writes is worth quoting. As he puts it, "The pathos, the helplessness, and the meanness of the situation are evoked and fused together into the superb lines that embody Kamala Das's exquisite identification with the barren spectacle of the spasm-shaken eunuchs" (24).

2. The Inescapable Snare of Body

The tragic dimension of Kamala Das’s poetry emerges from the irredeemable contexts into which the human instincts thrust the entire body and soul into a sort of covetous exactions for achieving sublime pleasures. The tragedy in her poetry emerges out of the situational anomaly, in the context of which such sublimations are self-denied or forcibly denied by the others in a given social system. This ultimately
refers to the naturalistic need of the creaturely survival. At times her self is passionately involved with the "body's wisdom" (OP 41), and at others it is in a desperate need for an escape from there. But whatever situation the self is in, it remains an inescapable condition. If it is the psychological vacuum that she objectively presents through the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs," it is the hopelessness of life and the coldness of death that she reveals in the poem "The Descendants." The poet's self cruises along many a turbulent sea of love-lust-frustration with the hope of ultimately finding an answer to its exclusive predicaments. But every trial eventually leads to the agony of unfulfilment, and no relief has ever been in sight. In the poem "The Descendants" she expresses this irredeemable nature of her preoccupation with love and lust. Here the lovers are involved in blind and inconsequential love without genuineness of emotions. The Biblical echo in the lines: "We have lain in every weather, no, not / To crosses, but to soft beds and against / Softer forms" (D 8), and the ironic comparison of 'beds' with 'crosses,' are suggestive of sin and the consequent punishment. The lovers surrender themselves to every trap of lust:

We were the yielders

Yielding ourselves to everything. It is

Not for us to scrape the walls of wombs for

Memories, not for us even to

Question death. . . (D 8)

In a metaphysical manner, the poet comprehends the human inescapability from the two naturalistic conditions thrust on human existence: one is the life instinct, and the
other is the death instinct. In an agonising manner she proposes that these two properties do not yield any feasible answers for human questionings to the extent that the beings are encompassed between birth and death, whose purposes are not known. The unforgettable nature of ‘the walls of wombs’ and the unquestionable state of ‘death’ itself as a certain inevitability are the two bedevilling features that destroy the human balances of thought and action. The Biblical echo is clear in the following lines which indicate a tormenting state of hopelessness:

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. (D 8)

The unavailability of Jesus ‘step(ping) off his cross’ compounds the female persona’s spiritual agony, or explicates her physical thirst for redeeming water, i.e. the spiritual ablation. Her self’s attempt to elevate the love-relationships to a sublime level by transcending the ‘body’s wisdom’ ultimately draws a blank. The self is interminably entangled in the vacuum between the tormenting but inexorable state of being-in-the-world and the elusive heights of transcendence.

Thus, all through her poetic journey Kamala Das talks chiefly about her search for an ideal relationship that she eventually fails to find, and the ensuing psychic violence. But she never comes in contact with this ideal lover because the right man has not yet been evolved in nature. Here the following observation of Sunanda P. Chavan is right in the practical context.
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. (Fair Voice 64)

But then, the incessant creative urge in the consciousness invariably stimulates the poetic sensibility to an eternal search for the immortal ideal. As Camus points out on the authority of Nietzsche, "No artist tolerates reality..." and further adds, "Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is. Rebellion can be observed here in its pure state and in its original complexities" (222). It is this intolerance for reality and the ensuing urgency of the mind to create an ideal world with all that is lacking in this world, and lacking all that is superfluous in this world that we see in the poet's search for the ideal. When the creative self rejects all that is unreasonable, it inevitably goes to replace in imagination the unreasonable with the reasonable. If so, Kamala Das's search for an ideal lover with his ideal love in an ideal world is the psychological necessity of her own creative self.

All this automatically leads and points at the essential philosophical counters of the phenomenon of love and the human survival. In the following chapter it is proposed to make a critical study of the broad philosophical counters, particularly in the context of the emergence of violence in the poetry of Kamala Das.