Christina Rossetti's poems published in 1927 were largely devotional, full of intense spirituality and a strong religious awareness. In this she was different from the other Pre-Raphaelite poets who used the religious element only as an ancillary element in their poetry. She was also different from them because of the simplicity of her language, manner and the lyrical intensity of her devotion. That is why her brother William Rossetti observed that "the deepest interest of the authoress's life was devotional, her Christian faith being of the most absolute and literal kind."¹ She considered religion supremely important and her poetry not merely a means to express her religious faith, but also a means through which the religious/sacred could be approached. She did

this in several ways: she wrote on Christian themes like Church Feast, Church Martyr, Saints, apostles, birth of the Lord and His passion and His agony on the cross. Besides, in many of her poems she celebrated her love of God in whom she sought her lover, her bridegroom; some one to whom she could devote herself wholly. She found in Him, "a finally satisfying object for the abounding love..." As a poet she did write on other subjects like Nature, but the theme of divine love dominates her poetry. Shove has rightly remarked that "her love for other subjects is only a sparkling tributary to that boundless still lover, so real, so personal." In her love poetry she celebrates the Soul's innermost dramas; its hopes, anguish, penitence, dryness and desolation and sufferings and sorrows.

Among the Victorian poets who treat of God or the sacred in their poems, Christina Rossetti stands unique in view of the intensity and over-mastery that dominates the quality of her devotion. The other notable woman poet of the 19th century


whom she resembles in several ways is Emily Dickinson, who too writes of the Divine. But unlike Rossetti, Dickinson does not write on sublime religious themes. As the corpus of her love poetry reveals, she celebrates the love of God with an emotional intensity that reminds one of human love in all its phases. Her religious/love poems pivot round the soul's innermost experiences of pain and joy, grief and expectancy connected with the separation of lovers and the assurance of their happy union in Heaven. It is quite how interesting to notice the two poets, Dickinson and Rossetti, despite belonging to two different cultures, write on similar themes and come close to each other in their religious outlook and their attitude to sacred love.

Rossetti was greatly influenced by the religious upbringing of her mother, and shared with her the assumption and belief that "the absolute and divine truth of everything is to be found in the Old and New Testament." She read the Bible with special fervour and regarded it alongside hagiographies, folk and fairy tales as one of the "greatest traditional store-houses of literature." One can discern its influence in several of her familiar phrases and the

titles of some of her poems. She had also read a book of religious poetry called *The Sacred Harp*, which provided her with models for writing religious verse. Like Rossetti, Dickinson had also been greatly influenced by the Bible. Though she avoided imitating Biblical phrases, the Bible, especially the *Book of Revelation*, provided her the raw material of her poems. She also learnt from it to juxtapose the concrete with the abstract to achieve vivid immediacy in her verse.

Both Rossetti's and Dickinson's conception of God was not an austere one in that they did not associate wrath or awe with Him. Dickinson conceives of God as the heavenly Father and in fact, addresses Him through all family relationships. The poems "I know that He exists," "They leave us with the Infinite," "Prayer is the little implement," "Of God we ask one favour" thus embody Dickinson's different ways of addressing God. Rossetti was no different in her approach to the Divine. In her poem

"The Master is Come, and Calleth for thee" which derives its title from the Gospel of St. John, she looks at Him in terms of familiar human relationships of "Father" and "Child," "Master" and "Disciple," "Monarch" and "subject," "God" and "Creature" and finally "Bridegroom" and "Bride." Both the poets familiarize and personalize God in order to give Him all the devotion and fidelity of their love. Dickinson's description of God in the following lines seems no different from Rossetti's:

God is a distant - Stately Lover -
Woos as He States US - by His Son. 7

Both thought God pursued man to love Him and sacrificed His son Jesus for the love of humanity. They believed that man was obliged to repay his debt of love to Him. This is unlike the belief of John Donne. 8 As their poetry reveals

6 William H. Rossetti ed. Poems of Christina Rossetti, p. 99. Subsequent references to Rossetti's poems are to the same edition. Page numbers are indicated at the end of every quote.


8 Donne believed that God the Creator demands devotion and gratitude from his created beings. He thought sin raised an insuperable barrier between God and man and the te of damnation made him dread God:
both Rossetti and Dickinson do not fear damnation, but look forward to "world's last night." They believe that Death delivers one from the encumbrance of mortal conditioning and brings about Soul's communion with the Divine. Both recognize the sovereignty of Future Kingdom, "an eternal state, something not of this world, an existence where they would enjoy spiritual citizenship" after death. Both the poets have celebrated their yearning for death in several poems. Rossetti's poem "The Lowest Place" should serve as an illustration:

Give me the lowest place; not that I dare
   Ask for that lowest place, but Thou hast died
   That I might live and share
      Thy glory by Thy side

Give me the lowest place! or if for me
   That lowest place too high, make one more low
   Where I may sit and see
      My God and love Thee so

   (R. 86)

I dare not move dimme eyes, any way
   Despair behind, and death before doth
   Cast such terour.


The "lowest place" refers to the grave, and is a symbol of death. The beloved wishing to be in the divine lover's company would approach Him through the door of death. She thinks that there is life in Death because it would give her an opportunity to enjoy the company of the divine lover. On the contrary, Life without a lover is as good as death, as she writes in "L.E.L"

True best is last, true life is born of death,  
O thou, heart-broken for a little love.  
Then love shall fill thy girth  
And love make fat thy dearth,... (L.E.L, p. 221)

We come across a similar motif in Dickinson's poem "I see thee better in the Dark":

And in the Grave - I see thee best  
Its little panels be  
A glow - all ruddy-with the light  
I held so high, for thee -  
(J. 301)

In another poem "If I may have it, when it is Dead" Dickinson sees the grave as a place of union for the lovers:

Until they lock it in the Grave,  
'Tis Bliss I cannot weigh -  
For tho' they lock thee in the Grave,  
Myself- Can own the key-  

Think of it Lover! I and thee  
Permitted - face to face to be-  
After a life - a Death - we'll say  
For Death was That+  
and this - is Thee-  
(J. 282)
Both the poets thought that life was worth living only in the company of a lover, and such a company was envisioned as a certainty hereafter. So both celebrated death and joyfully visualised their own in some of their poems. Rossetti's poem "A Pause" is a good illustration:

They made the Chamber sweet with flowers and leaves,
And the bed sweet with flowers on which I lay;
While my Soul, love-bound, loitered on its way.
I did not hear the birds about the eaves,
Nor hear the reaper talk among the sheaves:
Only my soul kept watch from day to day,
My thirsty soul kept watch for one way:
Perhaps he loves, I thought, remembers, grieves
At length there came the step upon the stair,
Upon the lock the old familiar hand:
Then first my spirit seemed to scent the air
Of Paradise; then first the tardy sand
Of time ran golden; and I felt my hair
Put on a glory, and my soul expand.

(R. 235)

The first two lines dramatize the ritual of burial. The phrases "Chamber Sweet" and "bed sweet" suggest a fervent desire for death, seen as desirable, a thing longed for and not dreaded. The world is shown dying away from the perceiving consciousness of the dead:

I did not hear the birds about the eaves
Nor hear the reaper talk among the sheaves

The last lines describe the soul's flight towards eternity, finally a celestial communion. The ecstatic union is envisioned in "to feed the sense organs." The expressions "scent the air," "felt my hair" and "soul expand" indicate
that the union is conceived as analogous to sensory experience. "... I felt my hair/Put on a glory, and my soul expand" at the conclusion points to the spiritual transformation visualized by the poet as the soul's ultimate destiny in heaven. The expansion of soul could suggest its union with the divine, what the mystics seek to attain in the unitive stage. It could also mean that the soul rejoices over the divine presence. It is relevant to mention here that Christian mysticism sees the soul's communion with God not as complete fusion or identification, but as its experience of the constant presence of God. Further, the phrase "thirsty soul" is reminiscent of the long tradition of food imagery in mystical literature. This imagery is an appropriate means to render an introvert, spiritual experience into familiar terms - an experience ordinarily inexpressible.

Rossetti's poem is comparable to Dickinson's poem "I felt a Funeral in my Brain" in dramatizing the ritual of burial. However, the two poems differ in that no spiritual flight/illumination after burial is mentioned in Dickinson's poem, where the dramatized ceremony is restricted to the physical world. The persona in the poem drops down through the levels of consciousness to become at last completely unconscious.

And then a plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a world, at every Crash
And Got through knowing-then-

(J. 129)

In several other poems where too Dickinson deals
with the burial scene or death, the experience is confined
to the physical realm. The persona does not experience the
Soul's flight towards eternity; with the extinction of its
consciousness, she stops to know. For instance, her poem
"I heard a fly buzz - when I died" presents a death-bed
scene, with the members of the family and friends around.
The physical world is shown fading away from her eyes, with
no sight of the other world:

With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -
Between the light- and me-
And then the Windows failed- and then
I could not see to see -

(J. 224)

In the poems where Death is seen as analogous to a lover
who transports her in his carriage, Dickinson does not
chart the course of soul's flight into eternity:

Death is the Supple Suitor
That wins at last -
It is a stealthy wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach
But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected Coach
It bears away in triumph
To Truth unknown
And kinsmen as divulgeless
As clans of Down -

(J. 614)
Death through his stealthy wooing wins the beloved who knows that it will lead to a glorious new status for her. He bears her away "in triumph" with the sound of "brave bugles" to announce his royal marriage to her and her earthly "kinsmen" remain "divulgeless as clans of Down." In spite of her going with Him, she is unaware of her destiny; this is suggested by "To Truth unknown."

Dickinson seems "careful to define the absolute cleavage between the certainty of life on earth and man's dream about what lies beyond the grave." She does not either give the details of the ecstatic union of lovers in heaven.

Despite the differences pointed out, a common strand runs through the poems of Rossetti and Dickinson, we notice several common themes as recurrent in their poetry: separation of lovers, holding the prospect of union in heaven after death, the Soul's involvement in contrary experiences of pain and joy, grief and expectancy. Both often speak in the first person in their poems, lending support to the view that there is an autobiographical

strain in their poetry.

Rossetti’s poem “In Patience” is devoted to the theme of love in its austere aspect. The separated beloved tolerates the pain of separation in the belief that it will help her to win a place in Heaven, “where saints and Angels walk in white;” “White” is traditionally associated with purity, thus according well with “Saints”/“Angels” described in the Book of Revelation. The beloved in the poem compares her life to a “working day” and yearns for a “quiet night.”

My life is but a working day
Whose tasks are set aright;
A while to work, a while to pray,
And then a quiet night.

And then, please God, a quiet night
Where Saints and Angels Walk in white;
One dreamless sleep from work and sorrow
But re-awakening on the morrow.

(R. 88)

She believes that “Sad” days will lead her ultimately to “light” i.e. to her spiritual enlightenment:

Though Sad my day that lasts so long,
At evening I shall have a song;
Though dim my day until the night,
At evening - time there shall be light.

(R. 88)

As an orthodox Christian, Christina Rossetti anticipated spiritual regeneration hereafter - a higher state attained by the soul through its communion with the divine.

Dickinson too gave Christian meaning and significance
to Death. Though the end of life in the physical world, it meant to her an avenue to higher life in effect. She believed that "Death only nails the eyes,"11 but is followed by a higher life in heaven. Her poem "Death is potential to that Man" embodies this motif; it describes Death as a means to reach the Ultimate - God:

Death is potential to that Man  
Who dies - and to his friend -  
Beyond that - unconspícuous  
To Anyone but God -  

Of these two - God remembers  
The longest - for the friend -  
Is integral - and therefore  
Itself dissolved - of God -  

(J. 266-67)

The aspiration to reach the ultimate goal makes the beloved ask "Will there really be a Morning" in Dickinson's poem here:

Will there really be a "Morning"?  
Is there such a thing as "Day"?  
Could I see it from the mountains  
If I were as tall as they?  

Has it feet like Water lilies?  
Has it feathers like a Bird?  
Is it brought from famous countries  
Of which I have never heard?  

Oh some scholar! Oh some Sailor!  
Oh some Wise man from the skies!  
Please to tell a little Pilgrim  
Where the place called "Morning" lies!  

(J. 49-50)

In her state of separation from the divine lover, the

beloved compares herself to a little pilgrim, who is always at pains to reach her remote, ultimate goal, irrespective of the troubles she has to face in the course of her pilgrimage. "Morning," as the goal longed for, signals presence of the Divine; "night" signifies the physical state of alienation from God, reminding us of the "Dark night of soul"\textsuperscript{12} of the mystics.

In the second stanza, the beloved in her mood of happy expectancy envisions a state of "Morning" through the domestic images of water lilies and the bird. The future state is rendered in terms of something that is real and yet eludes apprehension because of its remoteness.

Is it brought from the famous countries
Of which I have never heard?

It has been a usual practice with the mystic poets to use the metaphor of spiritual assent and mention what they consider the various stages of the Mystic way. They talk of the ultimate goal as a "place" or "state" to be attained at the end of the spiritual quest.

\textsuperscript{12} In Christian mysticism, a mystic experiences an extreme state of anguish in which he is deprived of the "visionary gleam"; so he aspires for the bliss of "illumination" i.e. constant presence of God, the divine lover.
Dickinson too has written of her aspiration in a mystical vein in the poem discussed. The yearning for a spiritual dawn, her aspiration to go into a higher state, is particularly suggested by the word "tall" in its being associated with "the mountains":

Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they.

The poem approaches Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill," (in meaning), where Rossetti too expresses her spiritual yearning and affirms her conviction that there is a higher life beyond the physical, which one should try to attain.

'Does this road wind up-hill all the way?
'Yes to the very end.'
'Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.'

'But is there for the night a resting-place?
'A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.'
'May not the darkness hide it from my face?
'You cannot miss that inn!

'Shall I meet other way farers at night?
'Those who have gone before.'
'Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
'They will not keep you standing at that door

'Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum!
'Will there be beds for me and all who seek'?
'Yes, beds for all who come?

(R. 235-36)

Here also the symbolism of journey has been used. The separated beloved set on her pilgrimage towards the abode of her lover is anxious to reach it in spite of the
difficulties she will have to face in the course of her journey. She feels that her labours shall find her "the sum" and therefore she should not stop:

Shall I find comfort, travel sore and weak
Of labour you shall find the sum.

Rossetti believed firmly that by bearing the mortification of love the soul attains a higher realization like her, Dickinson too considered pain to be a purificatory experience. For both of them, its silent endurance was a "crucible" that would chasten the sufferer, making him "transparent spiritual and pure." Rossetti's poem "If Only" would serve as an illustration. Here the beloved, deprived of her lover's company, suffers the pangs of separation; she is numb even to the pleasant things of nature

And I forgot how summer glowed and shone  
(R. 92)

The barrenness and numbness accompanying spiritual anguish, as experienced by the beloved, are suggested by references to autumn and winter.

While autumn grips me and its finger wan,  
And frets me with its fitful windy sigh  
When autumn passes then must winter numb  
(R. 92)

The intensity of pain, which is not severe in the beginning, is shown reaching its extreme through the image of winter. But the beloved bears all the pains in the happy hope that they will be followed by the fulfilment of her long cherished aspiration to be realized in the arrival of Jesus:

And winter may pass a weary while
But when it passes spring shall flower again
And in that spring who weepeth now shall smile-
Yea they shall wax who are on the wane,
Yea, they shall sing for love when Christ shall come.

(R. 92)

The poems "A Better Resurrection," "The Heart knoweth Its Own Bitterness," "Weary in well-Doing," "Come Unto me" are all about the theme of acute spiritual anguish leading to final communion with the divine lover. The image of Christ as the heavenly bridegroom used in them is traceable to the Book of Revelation and the glosses to the Song of Solomon. Dickinson's poem "If you were coming in the Fall" has an analogous theme:

If you were coming in the Fall,
I'd brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As housewives do, a Fly.

If I could see you in a year,
I'd wind the months in balls -
And put them each in separate drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse -

If only centuries, delayed,
I'd count them on my hand,
Subtracting, till my fingers dropped
Into VanDieman's Land.
If certain, when this life was out-
That yours and mine, should be
I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity-

But, now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee-
That will not state- its sting. (J. 249-50)

The beloved waits patiently for her lover to come; but
to get over the agony of waiting she would wish to leap
over the time-gap dividing her from her lover. She is
ready to give up not only the pleasant things of life, but
life itself. Dickinson's use of 'Rind' is particularly
appropriate here. Rind means bark, skin around the pulp
of a fruit. The beloved wants to cast off the fleshy part
that envelopes her spirit and take "Eternity" for her
company. Relieved of the temporal part, she sees fulfilment
of her love in Eternity. The pain gone through during
separation is the sacrificial pain leading to an everlasting
union. The introvert experience of pain is conveyed
through the figure of "The Sting" of Goblin Bee.

It goads me, like the Goblin Bee
That will not state- its Sting.

Yearning of the beloved for the ultimate consummation
of love, is another, recurrent theme in the poetry of both
Rossetti and Dickinson. The two poets often use similar
analogies to render the inward experiences of the soul
seeking fulfilment in union with the Divine. For instance, Dickinson makes an effective use of the analogy of River and sea in her poem "My River runs to Thee:"

My River runs to thee  
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?  
My River waits reply -  
Oh Sea-look graciously-  
I'll fetch thee brooks  
From Spotted nooks -  
Say- Sea-Take Me!  

(J. 76)

The images of "river" and "Sea" signify the separated lovers: the "river" stands for the beloved and the "sea" represents the Great Beyond, the ultimate goal of the aspiring soul. The poet employs the technique of indirection. By juxtaposing the "river" and "the Sea" she suggests indirectly the inevitability of the union of lovers. Rossetti's poem "Confluents" uses an identical analogy for the separated lovers, besides the other analogies of rose and sun, Dew and Sun. The Sun used as a symbol has a Biblical association: It stands for Christ, thus investing the poem with a Christian significance. The various analogies used emphasize the fact that the soul's painful sense of separation from the beloved points actually to a blissful union:

Its goal like river knows  
Dew drops find a way,  
Sunlight cheers the rose  
In her day:  
Shall I, lone sorrow past.
Find thee at the last?  
Sorrow past,  
Thee at last?  

(R. 231)

It is pertinent to mention here that the oceanic symbol has been used pervasively in mystical literature as signifying the ultimate communion. It is particularly recurrent in Hindu mystical literature. For instance, in Upanishad IV, the religious experience of communion is conveyed in the following lines:

As rivers flowing (downward) find their home  
In the Ocean leaving name and form behind  
So does the man who knows, from name and form released  
Drawn near to the divine person who is beyond the beyond. 14

In Dickinson's poem "The Drop, that wrestless in the Sea" we find a similar description:

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea -  
Forgets her own locality  
As - I toward Thee -

She knows herself an incense small -  
Yet small-she sighs-if All-is All-  
How larger-be?  

(J. 131)

In contemplating the bliss of union, both the poets

dwell on the theme of the Soul's struggle within the confining walls of the body. Here is Dickinson's poem on the theme:

My Cocoon tightens colors teaze
I'm feeling for the Air
A dim capacity for wings
Degrades the dress I wear -

A power of Butterfly must be -
The Aptitude to fly
Meadows of Majesty implies
And easy sweeps of Sky -

So I must baffle at the Hint
And cipher at the Sign
And make much blunder, if at last
I take the clue divine -

(J. 495)

The poem makes use of a conceit. Like a cocoon, the soul is locked in the body during mortal life. The word "Aptitude" best conveys the soul's struggle within the confining walls of the body, unable to fly to the "Meadows of Majesty." Similarly in Christina Rossetti's poem "I will lift my eyes unto the Hills" the beloved, separated from the lover on earth, awaiting union in Heaven, struggles within the temporal realm to reach "immortal things."

Oh my soul, she beats her wings
And pants to fly away
Upto immortal things
In the heavenly day;
Yet she flays and almost faints!
Can such be meant for me?

(R. 52)

In the poem "Who shall deliver me" Rossetti dwells
on a related theme. The beloved finding herself confined in the temporal realm wants to cast off her mortal dress to set her soul free:

Yet one there is can curb myself
Can roll the strangling load from me
break off the yoke and set me free

(R. 88)

She apprehends that the 'flesh part' might get attracted towards worldly splendours and thus distract her from the sacred troth that alone guarantees unalterable dedication to the loved one. Out of her dedication, she has given up everything material, except her own mortal part, which she considers an intruder into the world of her privacy where the lover is enshrined and worshipped for ever.

All others are outside myself
I lock my door and bar them out
The turmoil, tedium-gad-about

I lock my door upon myself
And bar them out, but who shall
Wall Self from myself, most loathed of all.

(R. 87)

Dickinson's poem "The Soul selects her own Society" has a similar theme:

The soul selects her own Society
Then Shuts the Door
To her divine Majority
Present no more -

Unmoved- She notes the Chariots-pausing
At her low gate -
Unmoved-an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat-
I've known her from an ample nation-
Choose one-
Then—close the valves of her attention
Like Stone

(J. 143)

The beloved is indifferent to future suitors because she has already chosen Him. She "Shuts the Door" to worldly splendours that might tempt and distract her from devotion to the chosen "One." The likeness of the soul to the stone conveys the soul's attitude towards other claimants for her love and also signifies her dedication to the "One" in terms of the unalterable finality of her choice. In both Christian and non-Christian mystical literature we notice a deliberate withdrawal on the part of the seeker from external things of life in order that his/her attention may be centered on the Divine to realise communion with Him. Both Rossetti and Dickinson stress and prize solitude as an indispensable condition for a steady devotion to the chosen one. Herein they only confirm what marks the disposition of many mystics: their strong inclination for 'solitude' and 'silence', conducive to the inward search for the Divine.

In several of their poems Dickinson and Rossetti establish an intriguing parallel between profane and sacred love. In these poems almost indistinguishably the two kinds of love are fused. Dickinson's poem will serve as illustration.
I'm ceded- I've stopped being Their's-
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now
And they can put it with my Dolls.
My childhood, and the string of spools
I've finished threading-too-

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace-
Unto supremest name—
Called to my Full - the crescent dropped —
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With just one Diadem.

My second Rank - too small the first -
Crowned—Crowning-on my Father's breast—
A half unconscious Queen —
But this time - Adequate-Erect,
With will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Throne—

(J. 247)

Two ceremonies, baptism and celestial marriage, one earthly
and the other heavenly, are set against each other. Both
are name/status-giving ceremonies. The beloved thinks that
the status she is elevated to because of her marriage to
the divine lover is higher than that which baptism bestowed
on her. She chooses it consciously "Adequate-Erect" in
contrast to the first when she was "Crowing on her Father's
breast." The exalted status conferred by celestial marriage
is further suggested through the regal terms "Crown,"
"Queen," and "Throne." The signs of her first rank, "Dolls"
and "Spools" of childhood, are replaced by those of her new
rank, when she becomes a queen: Bride of the Lamb. According
to Anderson, the water imagery of the baptismal drops in the
"Country Church" with the surrounding aura of innocence, reappears in the later ceremony, with submerged sexual implication in "Existence's whole Arc, filled up." The crescent symbol of Virginity has been replaced by the full moon of a "Diadem." Through this marriage the sacred love is glorified. In yet another poem Dickinson expresses her special and exalted esteem for divine love:

Title divine- is mine!  
The Wife-without the sign!  
Acute Degree-conferred on me-  
Empress of Calvary!  
Royal-all but the crown  
Betrothed- without the swoon  
God sends us women

When you hold - Garnet to Garnet  
Gold - to Gold  
Bärn - Bridalled - shrouded  
In a Day  
"My Husband" - women say  
Stroking the melody  
Is this - The Way?  

(J. 487)

The beloved who is betrothed to a celestial lover is "Without the Sign", "Without the Swoon," and "Without the Crown." She is denied the rich sensuousness of physical union in which women hold "Garnet to Garnet," "Gold to Gold." All these are part of a worldly wedding while her wedding is a spiritual one, conferring on her the divine

title of "Empress of Calvary", suggesting the acute that leads to Grace. The Earthly bride's whole existence is in her wedding day, which brings death to the "Virgin" and birth to a "Wife." The heavenly bride is elevated to a new "Degree," which implies the birth of a higher spiritual life. This is denied to an earthly wife.

Rossetti's poem "Twice" likewise highlights the essential significance of sacred love, revealed in the beloved's preference for higher love. In the first three stanzas, the beloved addresses herself to an earthly lover who has betrayed her, leaving her sad and desolate.

But I have not often smiled
Since then, nor questioned since,
Nor cared for corn-flowers wild
Nor sung with the singing bird.

(R. 223)

Reminded of the ruinous experience of earthly love that deprives her of the mirth of life, the beloved turns towards her heavenly lover, who returns her love and at the same time chastens her spirit. Rossetti knew well enough that spiritual anguish was like a furnace from which the chastened spirit emerged with the grandeur of God. Hence the persona's surrender to His love, instead of lamenting over earthly love.

This heart take thou to Scan
Both within and without
Refine with fire its gold
Purge thru its dross away -
Yea hold it in Thy hold,
Whence none can pluck it out.

I take my heart in my hand
I shall not die, but live -
Before Thy face I stand;
All that I have I bring
All that I am I give
Smile Thou and I shall sing
But Shall not question much.

(R. 223-24)

Speaking in the first person in her poem "Love from the North," she tells us of the vaster glories she has attained through her preference for the heavenly lover. The poem describes the scene when the beloved is about to marry an earthly lover. But before the vows of marriage are exchanged by them, the heavenly lover appears almost suddenly and takes her away. In spite of her earlier attachment to the earthly lover she has neither the courage nor the wish to say no to the heavenly lover.

He took me in his strong white arms,
He bore me on his horse away
O'er crag, morass and hairbreadth pass,
But never asked me yea or nay.

He made me fast with book and bell
With links of love he makes me stay;
Till now I've neither heart nor power
Nor will nor wish to say him nay.

(R. 158)

In their poems conveying a strong aspiration for eternal union, both the poets often write about their own
insignificance: physical smallness suggesting the unworthiness of the beloved in contrast to the height and might of the lover. For instance, Dickinson's poem "My Worthiness is all my Doubt" refers to the fears of an earthly beloved, who thinks herself unfit for Heavenly lover.

My Worthiness is all my Doubt-
His merit-all my fear
Contrasting which-my quality
Do lowlier - appear

Lest I should insufficient prove
For His beloved Need-
The Chiefeast Apprehension
Upon my thronging Mind-

'Tis true-that Deity to Stoop
Inherently incline-
For nothing higher than Itself
Itself can rest upon -

So I - the undivine abode
Of His Elect Content -
Conform my Soul - as 'twere a Church
Unto Her sacrament -

(J. 368)

The very idea of insufficiency matched against the perfection of the ultimate makes her apprehensive about her election to the status of His beloved. Therefore, she is determined to conform her soul to "His Elect Content." Her fear is that if such heavenly bliss is bestowed on her, she might prove herself inadequate to it. Aware of her limited human potential, she feels that she would dishonour the potentialities of such love. However,
uplifting oneself from a lower position to an exalted one is not so easily achieved. She is fully conscious of the fact that she has to go through a painful process for a fuller realization of the mirths of heavenly love. A similar motif occurs in Rossetti's poem 'Of Him That was Ready to Perish':

Lord, I am waiting, weeping, watching for Thee:
My youth and hope lie by me buried and dead,
My wandering love hath not where to lay its head
Except Thou say "Come to Me."

My noon is ended, abolished from life and light
My noon is ended, ended and done away,
My sun went down in the hours that still were day,
And my lingering day is night.

(R. 118)

The beloved undergoes deep spiritual anguish to attain a place in the paradise above. She is aware of her unworthiness:

Beside Thy Cross I hang on my Cross in shame,
My wounds, weakness, extremity cry to Thee:
Bid me also to Paradise, also me,
For the glory of Thy Name.

(R. 119)

The central tenent of mysticism is the "Union of Soul with God."\(^\text{16}\) Separated from the Divine Soul the

mystic has a gnawing sense of alienation from God. That is why he seeks to re-establish communion with God to counteract the feeling of alienation, realized through the wedlock of the soul with God as her bridegroom. The mystic envisions his wedlock with God as the goal of mystical quest. Before attaining the unitive experience, the mystic has to pass through the following five phrases, as outlined by Evelyn Underhill. 17

(a) The phase of the awakening of the Self to consciousness of divine Reality.

(b) Purgation - a State of pain and effort

(c) Illumination - a State which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation.

(d) Purification or Dark night of the Soul; a State of extreme spiritual anguish.

(e) Union-merger of the individual soul with the Divine.

The examination of the poems of Christina Rossetti and Dickinson attempted in this chapter has shown that they are conscious of divine Reality, yearn for communion with the Ultimate, and undergo a state of pain too, but

hardly in any poem of theirs is the phase of illumination or union in evidence. In all mystical literature it is stressed that "a mystic strips his soul naked in order to join it to God," but both Dickinson and Rossetti are rather interested in the "separation of soul from its surroundings." Nevertheless they do show an intense sensitivity to experiences coming within the domain of the mystics, but these are restricted to the purgative stage of the Mystic way characterised by pain and penance. Georginia Battiscombe rightly observes that, "In spite of the passionate nature of her love of God Christina was no mystic ... if the word mystical signifies a direct apprehension of God by the human mind...." The estimate equally applies to Emily Dickinson.

In her treatment of sacred love, Kamala Das bears affinities with both Rossetti and Dickinson in a restricted


19 Ibid.

sense. Quite a number of her poems are about love, particularly about sexual love described in nakedness. In them (as we saw in the previous chapter) she does not glorify sexuality, but highlights its inadequacy: it cannot lead to fulfilment. Disgusted with profane love which she does not approve of but rather rejects, she celebrates sacred love directed towards Krishna. She writes about the themes of separation, longing/yearning, and self-surrender, which have often been treated in the Indian sacred love poetry.

The central theme of the Indian sacred poetry as of Christian mysticism is the "union of Soul with God." Consistent with the Indian tradition, the man of wisdom according to the Bhagavad-Gita "has no love (Sneha) for anything. Unattached devotion to God leads to liberation." Sacred love is bhakti: total devotion to the Bhagavat, the Lord. With the growth of theistic bhakti cults in India the "merger of Soul with God" was equated with the union of the lover with his beloved; so sensual human longing got related to sacred love. Bhakti was not just devotion but fervent passionate love. The Bhakti poets like Vidyapati, Chandidas, Nanak, Kabir, Surdas and Mirabai

sang about the love of God with the passions of a flaming lover. They sang about the pain of separation, the longings of separated lovers, and the joy of union. Some of the Christian mystics too have given poetic utterance to these themes.

The experience of Virah (separation) is a recurrent theme in the sacred love poems of Kamala Das. Herein she is comparable to the Indian Bhakti poets in general and several Christian mystical poets. With the longings of a spiritual aspirant, she craves for union with Krishna, the divine lover. She writes in the orthodox tradition of the Vaiṣṇavites, who too saw the eternal lover in Lord Krishna. Kamala Das once wrote:

I was entirely without lust. I hoped that some day as I lay with a man, somewhere beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, a contact would be made, and that afterwards each movement of my life became meaningful. I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna. 22

In her autobiography she expresses in most intimate and compelling tone how she sought to realize her dream of union with Krishna:

Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love
Which only sought for a receptacle. At the hour of worship even a stone becomes an idol. I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed
Like a blue lotus in the water of my dreams. It was to get close to that body less one that I approached other forms and lost my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination. 23

This aspiration finds expression in Kamala Das's poem, "Lines Addressed to a Devdasi":

Ultimately there comes a time
When all faces look alike
All voices sound similar
And trees and lakes and mountains
Appear to bear a common signature
It is then you walk past your friends
And not recognise
And hear their questions but pick
No meaning out of words
It is then your desires cease
And a home sickness begins
And you sit down on the temple steps
A silent Devdasi, a lovelorn
And aware of her destiny 24

Written in free verse the poem describes how a beloved


separated from her divine lover starts feeling homesick in the material world and waits silently on the temple steps. She is sure that her waiting will lead to her embrace with the lover. During the time she is waiting, she remains unmoved by the external material world. In fact, because of her singleness of purpose everything in the external world reminds her only of her lover.

All voices sound similar
And trees and lakes and mountains
Appear to bear a common signature

The figure of "Devdasi" is tradition-bound, suggestive of the devotee's conscious withdrawal from the material world to pursue higher love. The poem is similar to Rossetti's "Who shall deliver me?" and Dickinson's "The Soul selects her own Society." In the two poems mentioned, the beloved consciously renounces the world so that her attention is not distracted from the divine lover.

Convinced that the agony of waiting leads to the bliss of union, Kamala Das writes about the ultimate union of lovers in "Radha."

The long waiting
Had made their bond as chaste, and all the doubting

And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And Virgin crying
Everything in me
is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains, but
You ......  26

Believing that long waiting will lead to the unitive experience, the beloved feels that the love of God has now taken complete possession of her, and she envisions her ultimate wedlock. The eternal marriage is suggested in the image of "embrace" that marks the end of her virginity. Though sexual in suggestion, in effect the word points to the state of mystical union between the soul and God. The analogies of physical union for the spiritual have a literary precedent in the mystical experiences of St. Teresa. According to Zaehner too "the sexual image is, moreover, particularly apt since the man both envelops and penetrates the woman, is both within and without her, just as God who dwells at the deepest point of the soul also envelops it and covers it with his Infinite love." 26 The sexual analogy relating to the union of the soul and God accords well with the image of ultimate communion in the poem embodies:


Everything in me
is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remain, but
You.....

The effect is reinforced through the repetition of the
word "melting." Here Rossetti's poem "A Pause" comes to
one's mind, in which she writes "My Soul expand," and
hints at the ultimate unity. It is appropriate to mention
here that unlike the Christian mystics, the Hindu mystics
see the soul's communion with God as complete fusion/
identification. In dwelling on the complete merger of
the soul with Krishna, Kamala Das has marked affinities
with the Hindu Mystics than the Christian mystics.

Like Rossetti and Dickinson, Kamala Das believes
that union with the ultimate lover has to be reserved
until death. She once wrote, "in death I might come face
to face with him (Krishna): Then the Shehnai can begin,
the birds can sing, the river can start its lullaby, for
another of his brides would have come home.... 28 In her
poem "Radha Krishna" she sees death as a means to reach
the goal of love.

28
Kamala Das, "Sex: Mindless Surrender Or Humming
This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old Kadamba
Tree, Ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return somebody
To hang like bats from its pure
Phycality ...

The "River" and "Kadamba tree" are symbolic, suggestive of the experience enacted by Radha and Krishna in their love-leela. The soul is compared to a "bat." The analogy vividly brings out the underlying theme. The bat cannot see things in the daylight, but only in the darkness of the night. Similarly, the beloved's vision fails her in the broad light of consciousness and she thinks that her goal will be achieved in the darkness of death, the mystic's "Dark Night of the Soul." Kamala Das, like Rossetti and Dickinson, believes in the citizenship of the future kingdom, that is why she terms the soul "homeless" in this physical world.

In "the Prisoner" Kamala Das writes about "the Soul's cry against its mortal dress."  

I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love


For I must some day find
An escape from its snare. 31

The word "trappings" is very significant; it suggests the encumbrance of flesh and the material world from which the soul must free itself to know true love, i.e. love of God. This is similar to Rossetti's poem "I lift mine Eyes unto the Hills," and Dickinson's poem "My Cocoon tightens Colors Teaze" discussed earlier. Both the poems dwell on the related themes of the beloved's confinement in the temporal realm and her struggle to cast off the mortal dress to reach the ultimate.

Kamala Das wrote once, "... from birth onwards, I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child I used to regard him as my only friend. When I became an adult I thought of him as my lover. It was only my imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure. Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all women, for did she not have his incomparably beautiful body in her arms... We do not have him physically to love us; we have to worship a bodyless one. How are we to get close to him without the secret entrances of the body which may have helped us

in establishing a true contact?"  It is in fact to establish the contact with Him, the bodiless one, that one has to give up the body to reach Him, since "Death is the hot Sauna leading to Coal-Rest rooms."

Like Rossetti and Dickinson, Kamala Das too glorifies sacred love. She celebrates the feeling of love, ardour, and self-surrender of the beloved towards the divine lover. In "Ghanshyam" she expresses her disapproval physical love, because it is only an act of lust between her and her lover:

We played once a husk-game, my lover and I
His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me
In panic I asked don't you want me any longer, don't you want me. 33

Disappointed by the imperfections of earthly love and of the earthly lover, she is attracted towards the love of Ghanshyam, the eternal lover, whom she describes in these terms.

The Cell of the eternal Sun


The blood of the eternal fire
The hue of the Summer air. 34

She gives up earthly love and establishes her relation with
the Divine, the abode of eternal peace:

You come in strange forms
And your names are many,
Is it then a fact that I love the disguise
And the name more than I love you?
Can I consciously weaken bonds?
The Child's umbilical cord shrivels and falls
But new connections begin, new traps arise. 35

The irresistible charms of the divine lover and her surrender
are concretized through the tradition-bound images of the
"Koel" building a nest in the arbour of heart and a fisherman
casting a net.

Ghanashyam,
You have like a Koel built your nest in
the arbour of my heart.
My life, until now a sleeping jungle is
at last stir with music.

.................

Shyam O Ghanashyam
You have like a fisherman cast your net
in the narrows
of my mind
And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like enchanted fish .... 36

34 Kamala Das, "Ghanshyam", Collected Poems Vol. I

35 Ibid., p. 94-

36 Ibid., p. 98
The aspiring beloved has been compared here to an enchanted fish who cannot restrain herself from surrendering to the fisherman. Here one is reminded of Mira Bai's poem "The Beloved" in which a similar mood of total surrender to the Divine finds expression:

I surrender myself body and soul and wealth to Thee

Mountain holder
Mira clasps his lotus feet. 37

The mood of Self-surrender is also present in Rossetti's poem "Twice" where she writes:

All that I have I bring
All that I am I give

Kamala Das's image of the "Koel" building a nest in the arbour of the heart is similar to Rossetti's image of a "dove making a nest" in her poem "After Communion."

For thou hast lit Thy flame in me a clod,
Made me a nest for dwelling of Thy Dove.

(R. 95)

The image of a nest in both the poets serves to show the helplessness of the beloved for whom the act of dedication towards her heavenly lover becomes involuntary, the image is also suggestive of a small private world wherein the lover is guarded for ever.

In "A Man is a Season" Das returns to the theme of aspiring beloved, who is at pains to reach her goal.

A man is a Season
You are eternity
To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in other arms. But I saw each Shadow cast your blurred image in my glass, some how
The words and gestures seemed familiar. Yes, I Sang Solo, my songs were lonely, but they did
Echo beyond the world's unlighted edge. There was
Then no sleep left undisturbed, the ancient hungers were all awake. Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps I went astray. How would a blind wife trace her lost Husband, how would a deaf wife hear her husband call? 38

The beloved at first thinks that her divine lover has betrayed her only to "teach" her about the futility and imperfections of earthly love. Hoping that some day her contact with the Divine would be made, she remains devoted to Him alone and even seeks him in the earthly lover." I saw each shadow cast your blurred image." Then she feels that perhaps she had gone astray; that is why she could

not reach Him. She compares herself to a "blind wife" and "dead wife" who cannot hear or see her husband. The painful note running through the last lines shows the helplessness of the beloved, her keenness to break through the barriers and attain what is enshrined in her heart. The poem "Phantom Lotus" expresses the earthly beloved's anxiety to realise her dream of union with her divine lover.

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. Heed
My faith alone, all the rest is
Perishable, and as such, but
Delusions. 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. 39

The phrase "blue face" is a suggestive reference to Lord Krishna who is bodiless; in order to give a human receptacle to her overflowing love, the beloved seeks him in other human forms that are perishable. To realise the love of a high kind, she surrenders to the human form Divine, as is suggested in the lines:

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.

She soon realizes that earthly love is not ultimately
significant or valuable in itself. It cannot pre-figure
divine love, since lust has corrupted it.

Although the corpus of Kamala Das's sacred love poems
is very limited, her achievement in this area is no less
than that of Dickinson and Rossetti. It is in view of
this that Sharma remarks "Throughout the chequered career
of her loves and lusts, it is Lord Krishna who has been
her true paramour and her quest is always single-minded,
directed towards Him...." This links her to the tradition
of the Indian sacred love poetry.

The foregoing analysis of the poems of Emily Dickinson,
Christina Rossetti and Kamala Das has shown that despite
belonging to three different cultures, they bear affinities
in handling love themes connected with the sacred as well
as in the underlying attitudes toward sacred love reflected
in these poems. Dickinson saw her divine lover in Jesus

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40 M.L. Sharma, "The Road to Brindavan: The Theme of Love
in Kamala Das's Poetry," A.N. Dwivedi ed., Contemporary
Christ and expressed a constant craving for celestial delights and for union with the Divine. She makes use of the spousal analogy to convey the delights and pangs experienced by the soul in its pursuit of the Divine. She thought that the pain which the beloved has to undergo during her separation from the lover is actually a sacrificial pain; it makes the bond with the divine all the more strong, thus giving Christian significance to pain and suffering. For her physical and spiritual anguish are purgative in nature, that exalt man to a higher state, making him fit for eternal union with the ultimate. For her death is a means through which one can achieve communion with the Divine, as it is a means to reach the other world. It relieved her of mortal conditioning and made the eternal embrace possible. For her, temporal life is as good as death and she often conveys her longing for the eternal day, reminding us of the mystic's "Dark night of the Soul." These themes have often concerned mystics all over the world, but we do not find the ultimate communion hinted at in any poem of Dickinson.

Like Dickinson, Rossetti's concept of God is not an austere one; she too sees in Him her bridegroom. She celebrates all the grief and expectancy experienced by the soul in pursuit of the Divine, often using the nuptial
analogy. For her death and pain have a Christian significance. She at times stresses renunciation of worldly things out of her utter dedication to the divine lover. Some of her poems are devotional in tone. In this respect she is different from Dickinson because this tone is lacking in her poems. Rossetti's poetry too, like Dickinson's does provide evidence of many intense moments, that can be called mystical. There is, however, one poem, "A Pause" in the whole range of her sacred love poems wherein the divine communion is described. The poems deal largely with the experiences of pain and penance.

Like Rossetti and Dickinson, Kamala Das too sees her divine lover in God. True to the Hindu tradition, her divine lover assumes the form of Lord Krishna. She too expresses her yearning for the ultimate lover in her poems. Like both Rossetti and Dickinson she sees Death as an avenue to higher life, since it enables one to leap the temporal barriers and reach the ultimate. She seeks the Divine in different human forms only to realise eventually that an encounter with Him is possible through transcendence. Thus not finding Him in mortal forms she seeks him in the sphere of Death where she too would be bodiless. Kamala Das strongly believed in the dichotomy of body and soul, which is not so pointedly conveyed in the poems of Rossetti
and Dickinson, although in several poems they write about the soul's struggle within the walls of mortal dress.

The themes that Das has frequently treated in her sacred love poems link her to the tradition of the Indian Bhakti poets on the one hand, and Rossetti and Dickinson on the other. No doubt the difference in her cultural upbringing is quite evident in her poems especially in the use of her images such as the Devdasi, Koel, Kadamba tree, Ghanashyam, lotus, blue face. All these images are traceable to her Indian background and upbringing as distinguished from her Western education they are also a part of the Indian tradition of love poetry in general and of the sacred poetry in particular.