Chapter IV

The Living Past in the Poetry of Kamala Das

Kamala Das, with the powerful conviction of her voice, the furious tone of her revolt and the maddening beauty of her sensuous imagery, is, perhaps a widely known Indian writer writing in English. While writing My Story and poems which blossomed from her agonized female psyche, she has thrown out her inhibitions to the winds. Her poetry has been considered as ‘a gimmick in sex,’ ‘a strip-tease in words,’ and ‘over-exposure of body or snippets of trivia.’ In her intensively confessional verse, she warrants a comparison with Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The role she played out as an unloved daughter, a frustrated wife, an unhappy woman, a mistress to young men, a carrying mother for children, relentless nymphomaniac, pining of lost joys of innocence at childhood bring before the readers the living past in the poetry of Kamala Das.

Kamala Das’s mind is a storehouse of innumerable experiences recollected and artistically articulated in the corpus of her poetry. In poem after poem, she makes an inward journey into the interior landscape of her mind and carries on a literary dialogue with the past and the present embedded in her memory. The literary creativity is recorded in the poet’s “bitter-sweet memories” of a vibrant past with which her poetic genius carries on tete-a-tete in her My Story. With no concealment, she confesses: “Like the phoenix, I rose from the ashes of my past (164).” Against the backdrop of the controversy surroundings Kamala Das, a proper assessment of her personality and poetic craft is taken up for study of her past. This chapter makes an analysis of the career graph of Kamala Das’s past life and studies the poems from different angles such as familial past, ancestral past, personal past and religious past and how far the experiences she encountered in the course of her career determined the woman she became and the poets she became in life.
In the analysis of the living past in the poetry of Kamala Das, firstly is taken up the poet’s familial past and its impact on her growth and development both as a woman and a poet. The familial past with its fond memories heals the wounds of the present that has to offer nothing but guilt and disillusionment. Indeed, past becomes a critique of the present and the transition is well brought out. Kamala Das’s closest companion was her grand-mother’s younger sister, Ammalu. As a poet Ammalu exercised positive influence on Kamala Das. She was a worshipper of Krishna, and wrote several poems in His praise. Though she was pretty, she remained a spinster until her death. She was averse to marriage but it is a shock for the poet to find that Ammalu’s poems betrayed *Krishna Prema* [Love for Krishna]. Ammalu was very faithful to Lord Krishna. Kamala Das’s great aunt, Ammalu, with her corpus of poetry centring on Krishna myth had its great impact upon Kamala Das. The poet’s turning towards a lover with a bodiless form was stimulated by the Krishna consciousness in the poetry of Ammalu.

To quote Kamala Das:

Most of the (Ammalu’s) poems were about KRISHNA. To Him, she had been faithful. My chastity is my only gift to you, oh Krishna, she wrote in her last poem. Her writings disturbed me. I felt that after thirty years she was trying once again to communicate with the world and with me (*My Story* 17).

Treading on the foot-steps of her great Aunt Ammalu was her aunt Ammini. Ammini was very allergic to marriage, but the irony was that in her moments of solitude, she, her aunt Ammini, recited the love songs of Kumaran Asaan, a popular poet of the time who was of the view that “love was a beautiful anguish and a *thapasya* (Penance)...” (*My Story* 14) when she listened to her aunt Ammini, a spinster reciting the love songs of Kumaran. Thus the severe orthodox life restricted the open demonstration of love and made her aunt and her grandmother’s younger mother speak of their unspoken love when alone or in the devotional
verse. The two ladies had influenced Kamala Das to such an extent that she felt the urge to break away from tradition and choose her own means of self expression.

Kamala Das has no soft word for her father. Her father was no shaping force in the formation of her character. She was scared of her father, an autocrat and a dictator, in so many ways similar to Mr. Edward Dickinson, the father of Emily Dickinson. Her affection for her father was largely compounded with awe. The father and the daughter did not see eye to eye with each other. Whereas he scorned public demonstration of affection, she defended it (qtd. in Kalaithasan, Kamala Das: A Critical Study). A Gandhian that her father was, he went to the extent of commanding, in a brutally insensitive manner, a timid wife to strip herself of all the jewellery and wear white Khaddar:

After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all expect the ‘mangalsutra.’ To her it must have seemed like taking to widow’s weeds but, she did not protest. She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle... (My Story 4).

As long as her father was alive, there was no love lost between father and mother. The poet’s fear for him is revealed in the poem titled “Next to Indira Gandhi”. There is a veiled comparison between Indira Gandhi who let loose the Reign of Terror by the acts of atrocities perpetrated on the people.

The poet remembers her father’s obdurate attitude running roughshod over the feelings of his daughter. “You chose my clothes for me/ My tutors, my hobbies, my friends” (“Next to Indira Ghandi”, OSKHTS 148) She also complaints that he could not spare time due to his being awfully busy in his public responsibilities:
In a poignant mood the poet feels that she was an unwanted daughter:

Father, I ask you now without fear
Did you want me
Did you ever want a daughter
Did I disappoint you much
With my skin as dark as yours
And my brooding ways

(“Next to Indira Ghandi”, OSKHTS 148)

The poet expresses bitterness and displeasure on her being married at a very young age. Her father chose a husband non-chalantly “And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me husband.” (“Next to Indira Ghandi”, OSKHTS 148) She expresses the loss of romantic charm in her married life.

The poet felt freed at his death but she did not feel any relief. In a mood of remorse and repentance, she recalls her aggressive postures that brought family a bad name:

I know I let you down, father,
But you have punished me enough, haven’t you?
We are quite today. You are dead, nobody fears you now
And I, freed from fear at last,
Feel no relief at all. I feel dead. More dead than you...

(“Next to Indira Ghandi”, OSKHTS 149)

The poet had loved him all along even though she had no opportunity to reveal her love. All the differences between father and daughter evaporated during his prolonged illness when her father suffered from coma. The poet refers in “My Father’s Death” to how she and the members of the family kept watch for 12 long nights and days. In moving words, she describes her father lying in a death bed. Kamala Das was not very intimate with her father but she loved him very much: “A Requiem for My Father” marks her respect and affections towards her father: “I loved you father, I loved you all my life...” (“A Requiem for My Father”, OSKHTS 145).
The poem also reveals how she likes to be close to her father. It is a pity to see the dead body of her father on the floor.

... I feared
My father. Only in coma
Did he seem close to me, and I
Whispered into his ears that I
Loved him although I was bad, a bad Daughter, a writer of tales that
Hurt, but in the task of loving
The bad ones were the ablest, yes,
You should have hugged me, father, just
Once...

(“My Father’s Death,” OSKHTS 147)

The poet records the tension between the father and the daughter. Sarcastically, she remarks, “He was generous with money/ As generous I was with/ Love.” (“My Father’s Death,” OSKHTS 147) The hiatus difference between her father and her went on widening as years rolled by so that even literally they were not close to each other.

... There was a cloud of tension
Between him and me. I bought him
Shame, they say. He brought me on each
Short visit some banana chips
And harsh words of reproach.

(“My Father’s Death”, OSKHTS 147)

With no layer of secrecy, the poet talks about her father’s discriminatory attitude: “You gave my sons each a hundred/ Rupee note, you purchased their brief” (“My Father’s Death,” OSKHTS 147) In “A Requiem for My Father” the poet bitterly recalls the raw deal she had in her father who cared for his status and position but never cared for the daughter.

Kamala Das confesses the impossibility of achieving emotional patch-up with her father during his life time. In the poem, “Too Late for Making Up”, the poet lets loose her
bent up emotions at the sight of her father lying in death bed wrapped in khaddar. She could hear sarcastic comments made by some of the visitors:

She is the daughter that went astray
I heard someone whisper
The one who caused him the greatest pain
And look at her now, acting solemn.

(“Too Late for Making Up,” OSKHTS 49)

The poet lets her heart speak for itself when she reveals her boundless affection for her father.

Should I have loved you, father
More than I did
That wasn’t so easy to do
If I have loved others, father,
I swear I have loved you the most.

(“Too Late for Making Up,” OSKHTS 49)

All that she can do today is to perform rituals for the dead and poignantly feels the personal tragedy that has befallen her.

The outpouring of the poet in the poem titled “A Requiem for My Father” is indicative of the unconscious outburst of her affection for her father lying dead.

This time for Onam I shall not decorate my floor
With flowers, father, for I dressed your chest with jasmine
When you died a few weeks ago

We remembered your fear of the cold
And your aching spinal bone.
We were sick and cold within.
I would have gladly changed place with you, father.
I was never afraid to die,

Someone within had risen from a sleep
When you fell into yours, father
And that someone rejoiced to hear me cry
I loved you father, I loved you all my life...

(“A Requiem for My Father,” OSKHTS 144-145).
Inspite of her initial indifference to her father, she began mourning his death.

Kamala Das’s mother, Balamani Ammal was no model for emulation. A prolific Malayalam poet of rare distinction and a recipient of several awards, which included Kerala Sahitya Akademy Award, the National Sahitya Akademy Award, Padma Bushan for literature and the Fellowship of the National Sahitya Akademy in 1993, Balamani Ammal, a self-taught genius had, to her credit, more than seventeen volumes of poetry. The literary achievements of Balamani Ammal become more meaningful when one comes to know that she was not sent to school. On her own with the help of books and tutors, she could become not only a great poet but also an outstanding scholar.

The mother and the daughter did not meet emotionally. Little interest did the mother show either in the professional commitment of her husband or in the intellectual activities of her children. Vague and indifferent, she was always found lying on her bed, composing poems in Malayalam (qtd. in Kalaithasan, Kamala Das: A Critical Study 16).

The poet gives a true picture of her mother who was not a potent force in the formation of her character:

She was not the greatest influence in my life. I learned I should not be like her.... And although she writes so much about her children, I don’t think she could ever feel that love towards her own children, the way I love my children, passionately. They are so close to me. She always kept herself a little aloof, wore white khaddar (Hand-Spun and Hand Woven cloth) and wouldn’t touch her children (qtd. in Gopal 65).

As an extremely sensitive child, the poet felt herself alienated from her parents. This is clear from what she says:

Do you know what will make me really angry? He [father] would ask us, peering into our faces, if you ever harass your mothers that will make me really angry. So gradually turning wiser we moved away from mother towards
the maid servants who had enough time for us who indeed were dying time to tell us stories (**My Story** 112).

**My Story** talks of highly regimented atmosphere in which the poet grew up under excessive parental control. Kamala Das registers her protest against her parents’ attitude as a result of which she suffered from shattering deprivations of filial love and the non-registration of her individuality:

They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently like sturdy shoots of the banyan [sic] grew out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses. (**My Story** 71).

The past is not dead but lives in the present. What Kamala Das is today is shaped by the books she read in the past. The unconventional behaviour of Kamala Das can be attributed to the books she read. As confessed by her:

Ask the books I read why I changed. Ask the authors dead and alive who communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself. The books like a mother cow licked the calf of my thought into shape and left me to lie at the altar of the world as a sacrificial gift (**My Story** 147)

In a Wordsworthian manner, the poet recalls and records her emotional attachment to her grandmother and her grandmother’s house. One of the central characters in Kamala Das’s work is her grandmother who is linked with her memory of her parental home, now more than three hundred years old. Here she felt at home and got her diseases cured. To describe it is a paradise on earth for her.

The grandmother’s house represented in her work is a repository of fond memories. In an upsurge of empathetic nostalgia, the grandmother, the poet, and the old house became one.
Kamala Das’s gives a poignant portrayal of her grandmother. There are moments when the poet longs for her affectionate grandmother and her ancestral home. Her grandmother showed incomparable affection upon her:

Neither her busy father nor her indifferent mother was worried about the duskiness of Kamala Das’s skin, save her grandmother who used to rub turmeric all over her body before an oil-bath. So orthodox was she and so rigid was her moral code that she never approved of Kamala Das’s association with any moral delinquent (qtd. in Kalaithasan, Kamala Das: A Critical Study 18-19).

It was to this affectionate grandmother that Kamala Das turned from the man who did not even learn to love her.

The poem “My Grandmother’s House” registers the poet’s loving memory of her grandmother who really loved the poet, who, in turn, reciprocated love:

There is a house now far away where once
I received love. That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books. I was then too young
To read, and, my blood turned cold like the moon.
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 if here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog. You cannot believe, darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved...I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger’s doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?

(“My Grandmother’s House”, SC 15)

The opening lines are tinged with the double reminiscence. First, the poet is reminded of filial love she received there. Second, the poet lovingly thinks of the dear old woman who is dead. The poem records the glaring absence of the selfless love she received in the hands of
her grandmother in the post marital phase of her life. A sense of natural temporal distance is
created by the reference to the grandmother as “that woman”. The demonstrative adjective
“that”, as contrasted with the personal, possessive pronoun “my”, also suggests emotional
distancing to which the dead woman is subjected in the passage of time (Irahad Gulam
Ahamed 39-40).

The “air” that used to be warm with human fellowship is now “frozen” with its
absence. However, embedded in the “frozen” air are warm reminiscences, the fond echoes of
the past to which she craves to listen (Irahad Gulam Ahamed 41).

In the present context, the predicament the poet finds herself in after the death of her
grandmother is reflected in the “wild despair” felt by the poet. She is lying like “a brooding/
dog” waiting for love – a love that cannot be compared to what her grandmother gave, “A
House far away” indicates her inability to return to the state of innocence she had been once
in.

There is a poignant juxtaposition of a “was” and an “is” in the projection of the poet
in two worlds- the world that was hers when she was a proud recipient of her grandmother’s
love and the world now that she finds herself in making an unabashed search for love. “I who
have lost/ my way and beg now at stranger doors to / Receive love, at least in small change?”
The gap between her loving past and her loveless present is rendered incredible from the
point of view of the male addressee.

The Nalapats House and the grandmother are so intertwined that it is well-nigh
impossible to think of the one without the other. The old Nalapat House becomes an
externalization of her personality. Away from it she experiences a gnawing sense of
incompleteness:
Returning again and again to Kerala, to my old house which must be ancient, 450,460 years- the feeling that the house and I have become one; for instance, if the gate is rusty I feel it’s the gate to my heart- it sounds so stupid when it comes out in prose; as though I identify myself with it (qtd. in Irahad Gulam Ahamed 43).

The poem “Evening at the Old Nalapat House” (OSKHTS 183) represents the yearning of the poet for the grandmother and the Nalapat house. With the passing away of the grandmother, the house is emptied of human presence. Its legitimate inhabitants are “The Civets,” “The Bats,” “insane rats”, and the spirit of the grandmother walking around climbing the stairs and peering through the “loose-hinged windows”. The poet heaves a long sigh to see the dilapidated house presenting a deserted look with the weeds, the shrubs and the thorns grown around it.

Even today the “The field hands/Returning home with baskets on their heads” do not linger about the place, but only speed hearing her grandmother’s footsteps and sighs in the monsoon wind.

The total identification of the poet with the house cannot be missed in the following lines:

Ultimately the house and I became one. My Heart’s door
Swinging ajar with each vagrant breeze was the wrought iron gate,
Its hinges rusted form disuse, creaking to let.
A traveller in...

(“A Half-Day’s Bewitchment,” OSKHTS 102)

Nalapat House serves as a backdrop to the poet’s childhood memories. The poem “A Hot Noon in Malabar” abounds in reminiscences. The poet recalls the activities of the people in “A Hot Noon in Malabar”. The childhood promise of rebuilding the house has a boomerang effect upon the poet. In the poem “Blood,” she remembers with agony the
promise made to the grandmother to rebuild the house when she came of age and became rich:

I have let you down  
Old house, I seek forgiveness;  
O mother’s mother’s mother,  
I have plucked your soul.  
Like a pip from a fruit  
And have flung it into your pyre;

(“Blood”, TOPHAOP 16)

As stated by Kalaithasan:

The piteous cry of the poet’s guilt-ridden heart is heard as she has failed to retrieve the house from ruin, thereby letting down the oldest house and therefore, the great grandmother too (Kamala Das: A Critical Study 97).

The crumbling of the house, if allegorically interpreted, stands for the loss of traditional values. It’s nothing unnatural for the poet’s grandmother, a paragon of virtue, yearning to see her granddaughter become a model of virtue. Time again and again readers can hear the voice of the grandma advising the granddaughter not to deviate from the path of innocence. The voice of the grandmother is heard in the lines that follow in the poem “The Suicide”:

My grandmother cried,  
Darling, you must stop this bathing now.  
You are much too big to play  
Naked in the pond.

(“The Suicide,” OSKHTS 109)

The poet also remembers in her nostalgic mood someone or other always objecting to her life style that will cast aspersions on her character:

... Don’t sit  
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.  
............................................................  
... Don’t play pretending games.
Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love...

(“An Introduction”, *OSKHTS* 120).

The grandmother’s concern and care for Kamala Das, the poet remembers in the poem “Composition.” The very advice of her grandmother asking her not to sleep alone under the tottering roof of her 400 years old house and her act of keeping a light and a lantern on the windows sill while waiting for her grand- daughter Madhaviklutti are reflected in “Composition.”

The Sea in “The Suicide” (*OSKHTS* 107) reminds the poet of the past -- her childhood memory of swimming in a “pale-green pond” in her house in Malabar: “I swam about and floated, / I lay speckled green and gold/ In all the hours of the sum.” The sea in the poem “Composition” symbolizes the guileless love she enjoyed from her grandmother.

But, lying beside my grandmother,
quite often I thought
that I could hear at night
the surf breaking on the shore.
The sea was only two miles away.
That was long ago.

(“Composition,” *TOPHAOP* 3).

Kamala Das pays tribute to her grand uncle Narayan Menon whose house was a centre of scholars and became a beehive of literary and philosophical discussion. The Nalapat house hummed with intense intellectual talk. She had fond recollections of her granduncle Narayan Menon’s finest library of palm leaf manuscripts. As a child she had a temptation to steal into her granduncle Narayana Menon’s study. She had the chance to see the renowned works of Anatole France, Turgenev, Nietzsche and Maurice Materlink stacked on the lower shelves. Kamala Das’s grandmother and the Nalaphat House cannot be thought of as separate entities. It is always green in her memory.
To quote Kalaithasan:

Any remembrance of the Nalapat house or of her grandmother symbolizes a retreat to the realm of undefiled love which Kamala Das experienced in the past and which she, afterwards, lost forever. Her occasional trip to the Nalapat House is suggestive of the conflict in her between the attraction of sophisticated Western education and the pull of traditional Hindu values (Kamala Das: A Critical Study 19-20).

The formative years spent by a person both at home and school play a vital role in determining the type of man or woman a person is to emerge in later years. A physically unattractive child with a swarthy skin, and a protruding tooth, Kamala Das was the second child of Balamani Amma, a noted Malayalam Poetess and of V.M. Nair, an executive in a British owned automobile firm in Calcutta, who later became the managing Director of Mathrubhumi publications.

Kamala Das was denied of love at home and at school. Not to speak of the authoritative father and loveless mother, even the servant was not affectionate nature. He thought the children savages lacking in table manners. Even at home the children kept awake hiding themselves in the vicinity of the kitchen. The father because of his flair for Western education admitted Kamala Das and her brother into a European School at Calcutta. Kamala Das and her brother felt isolated from their class mates and teachers at the English boarding school at Calcutta. Untold were the humiliations suffered by them at the European school because of their colour. Kamala Das recalls how the white boys made fun of her brother and tortured him by pushing a pointed pencil up his nostril and left him bleeding, and even the Anglo Indians fought for their white men’s rights. Thus she and her brother were tortured by the white. Even the privilege of reading the poem composed by her was not given to her but to a white girl. Even when the children were taken out for a picnic, she felt lonely for no one seemed to desire her company.
Kamala Das recalls how she felt isolated in the company of white children. Her white classmates at her European school laughed at her brother who was plump and dark, though he was the cleverest in the class. She records in *My Story* how the coloured children were instantly made to feel inferior and how they were called “Blackie” by their white companions. She recalls her painful experience and how they were pushed out of sight whenever a white VIP visited the school. She often wished that she had been born to English parents. She and her brother were tortured by their white classmates only for wearing under the school uniform “white twill nut – brown skin”. “We did not tell our parents of tortures we underwent at school for wearing under the school uniform of white twill, a nut brown skin” (*My Story* 2).

Kamala Das was sent off at the age of nine to a Roman Catholic boarding school. Here, she shared her room with three other girls, all of whom, according to her, spoiled her with affection. The atmosphere was full of sin, and hell-fire phobias which follow upon them were the inevitable fantasies, frustrations and harg-ups-sexual and otherwise. Kamala Das also had an early exposure to lesbianison while in school. The convent atmosphere was full of sin:

```
My first school-house
is now a brothel,
and
the ladies sun themselves on the lawn
in the afternoons
with their greying hair,
newly washed,
left undyed
Who can say, looking at them,
that they are toys
fit for the roaring nights?
```

(“Composition,” *TOPHAOP* 8)
As a child, Kamala felt alienated in the company of White children. The frock, the father brought for her whom she disliked was also white: “I dislike the white frocks which my father brought for me and I wish to wear silks of different colour” (*My Story* 21).

The repeated use of lexical items such as “neglect”, “pampered”, “hated”, “white”, “opposites” is indicative of the poet’s painful awareness of her lot as compared to that of her White classmates like Shirley who carried up the bouquets when the dignitaries arrived.

The poet writes:

> When the visitors came the brown children were always discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company. (*My Story* 3).

The father felt that Kamala Das must be no longer in an English school at Calcutta but in one known for its support to Gandhism and nationalist movement. The pupils, all Indians, were a mixed group of various oddities and animosities which characterise Indian life. Her responses are predictably stereotyped, but they have authentic flavours and are even comical.

The Bengalis had their Sarat Babu and Rabindra Sangeet, their lunches of fried prawns, fish, curry and rice and sweets made from cream. The Tamils devoured their curd and rice and conversed about M.L. Vasantakumari and Mrs. Subbulakshmi. The Bengalis mocked the Tamils and muttered *antra puntra antra puntra*. And through this simmering, hissing melting pot floated Kamala aloof and clutching her clear and wholesome sandwiches.

The familial past of Kamala Das is interwoven with her personal past as exemplified by the following findings of the researcher. *My Story* describes how the women of the house had journeyed a considerable distance to listen to Ghandhiji and donated their jewellery to the Harijan fund. Kamala reacting as a child, found the Gandhian principles too Spartan to be attractive.
Kamala Das’s marriage marks the second stage of her alienated self. The poet has a nostalgic peep into her married life. The recollection of her married life brings to her mind only bitterness. She was married at the age of fifteen. As a different kind of girl, she was given to a different kind of love, somewhat unorthodox, unconventional, and unacceptable to others.

The rumour was thick in the air about her alleged relationship with someone or other. This scandal so much worried her father that he phoned up Madava Das to take her off his hands as a perspective husband. She had gone to the airport to receive Madava Das when he got off the plane. His luscious behaviour towards her on the way back home while coming by car left a bitter memory. To quote her: “In the car on our way home, he pressed my fingers amorsously. The driver was watching us in the rear view mirror with amusement” (Jay Walk 25).

Equally distasteful was his behaviour in the room in the Best Hotel where she was left alone because her father had thought that she would enjoy being alone with the young man. To quote Kamala Das:

Wherever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin. He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maid servants in his house in Malabar. (My Story 79-80).

Madava Das had had other women before and could talk with zest about their sexual skills. He spoke admiringly of several sluts and nymphomaniacs. At times, he talked himself into frenzy and, when I lay near him, I was merely one or other of these attractive women (“I Studied All Men”, 14).

She confesses:

I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and
warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life... (My Story 80).

The initial behaviour of her husband on the wedding night shocked her. She writes in My Story:

Then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack. I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace. Then bathed in perspiration and with my heart palpitating wildly, I begged him to think of God. (84)

The poet found her husband far from being virtuous or a loving or a loyal husband. During her husband’s stay in Malabar, he spent more of his time with his cousin and sister-in-law never bothering to care for her or converse with her. Isolated from her own Nair community that throughout misunderstood her, she felt alienated and she sought love and understanding in her husband but she was disappointed. She felt:

I was sent away, to protect a family’s Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some Abstractions, sent to another city to be A relative’s wife, a hausfrau for his home, and A mother for his sons, yet another nodding Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to Warm his bed at night.

(“Of Calcutta,” CP 58)

The poet poignantly realized that her husband’s love was never to be hers. She was merely one of those attractive women-sluts and nymphomaniacs whom he admiringly spoke of. She felt she was in love with a husband who did not learn to love her. His relationship with her was more physical than personal. Madava Das was a sexually over passionate husband and Kamala Das was like a rag-doll in his hands responding to his urges and
advances with no comparable physical or psychological responses from her. The poet recalls her frustrated married life:

He folded
Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
Pleasures that had come this way, richer harvest of
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine; the embers died
Within me then. In silence I lay at night and
Thought of human love.

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

Here in my husband’s [sic] home, I am a trained circus dog
Jumping my routine hoops each day, Where is my soul,
My spirit, where the muted tongues of my desire?

(“Of Calcutta,” CP 59).

The poet’s actual experience totally belies all her fond expectations. She is shocked by her husband’s indifference towards her and of his infatuation towards a young friend of his. Her husband’s open display of homosexual advances in her presence made her think for a moment to end her life to throw herself down from the terrace.

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

(“An Introduction,” OSKHTS 30).

The incident is narrated with similar poignancy in My Story. The near-identity between the prose account and the poetic presentation testifies to the veracity of the incident and to the intensity of the concomitant trauma (qtd. in Irshad Gulam Ahmed 82).
As stated by her, “My husband was immersed in the office work there was the dinner, followed by dinner, followed by sex” (Debonair 41).

Any moral delinquency on the part of Kamala Das can be attributed to her ancestral past as discussed below. Mr. Madhavadas the man the poet married is no way different from the members of the Nair community. He does betray the representative traits of his community as told by the poet about the hurried sexual behaviour on the occasion of the first encounter with her fiancée and by the extreme brutality of sexual attack on the wedding night of her marriage. Elias views the man’s behaviour as representative of the Nair community.

Before applying the crusted moral yardsticks to judge the character and personality of Kamala Das, one has to study the influence of her ancestry on her. The poet is not to blame for all her deviant sexual behaviour of her philandering nature in search of libertine lovers and her seeking extra fulfilment at another’s door. These traits of her character are embedded in her genes. It can be traced to the Nair heritage.

The poet echoes age old sense of insecurity of Nair women in My Story. She belongs to a sub-sect the Kiriyath Nair’s whose women “Parusuram” (an incarnation of God) allowed to be free and to change husbands at will” (Kamala Das, “Aubrey Menon’s Relatives” 19)

As stated by Robin Joffery, the Nairs were the Sutras brought by God Parasuraman to act as the servants and body guards of the Nambudiris whom God Parusuram is introduced to populate Kerala:

He bestowed on the Nayars the marumakkattayam or matrilineal system of family inheritance, and decreed that Nayars should have no formal marriage and that their women should always be available to satisfy the desires of the Nambudiris. (qtd .in Elias 15)
The poet’s description of the Nairs is in keeping with the age old sense of insecurity of the Nair women condemned to a matrilineal system which did away with formal marriages. Kamala Das echoes this historical tradition of the Nair community in *My Story*.

The marriage of the Nairs, particularly that of the poorer ones, was extremely simple, the ritual lasting only a minute or two, for, all that the man had to do was to hand over to the woman a length of cloth and when she accepted it she became his wife. Cloth was presumably an expensive commodity in olden Malabar and was precious. It was not easy then for the heads of the matriarchal families to clothe daintily the nieces, although the girls required only two and half yards as underwear and two yards as over wear. The breasts were covered solely by the heavy necklaces they wore (*My Story* 22).

In *My Story*, there is no elaboration of why the Nair women had to go bare breasted. The law required such a practice as stated by Jeffery: “although they had the right to wear a scanty upper cloth, they [Nair women] were required to bare their breasts before temple deities and caste superiors” (qtd. in Elias 17)

The implication is Nair women were obliged to go bare breasted by law. “This sort of forced nakedness could not but have engendered a sense of helplessness and insecurity away the more sensitive women of the community (qtd. in Elias 17)

The sexual humiliation suffered by Nair women is highlighted by Kamala Das tragically in *My Story*:

No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed. They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished[sic] due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi’s legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her. It was customary for the Nair girls to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also customary for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night. The only heroine whose sex life seemed comparatively untumultuous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jamuna for her blue-skinned lover. But she was another’s wife and so an adulterous. In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence (23-24).
Elias writes:

The husband is throughout cast in the mould of the ancient Nair men who climbed the social ladder from the lowest rung of bodyguards to the highest of Rajas while their womenfolk endured the humiliation of barring breasts to satisfy their betters. Mr. Das “left for his office every morning before nine and returned at ten in the Night” (115). In these intervals Mrs. Das was vulnerable to all sorts of assaults. A drunken man performed “an incomplete rape” (121). A man with grey eyes whom she had met at a tennis club proved to be a more successful ravisher (18).

In support of his assertion, Elias quotes Kamala Das:

One evening when I was seated on the top step of the porch, the grey-eyed friend came to sit at my feet. His lips had a tremor which delighted me. I hope you are not falling in love with me, I said, smiling down at him. He hid his face in the folds of my sari. Outside my sons were playing with the neighbour’s children. Inside our drawing room my husband was working on his files (128).

Apparently the husband did return home earlier than the usual time of ten in the night on occasions like this but he is still cast in the typical posture of indifference of the Nair community towards the honour or virtue of their womenfolk. This is symbolic of the indifferent attitude of the Nair community as it is evident from Mrs. Das’s comment in a letter that the grey-eyed lover wrote to his wife. The life style of the Nairs of those days in Kerala reveals that many low caste younger women were sexually seduced and exploited by the upper class caste men. Many such women killed themselves to protect their honour or were killed in one way or other by men to protect themselves.

The poet is painfully aware of the injury, pain and humiliation inflicted upon the weaker section of the Nair community. The poem “Nani” portrays the tragic death of a hapless woman who was a victim of the carnal hungers of a rich Nair:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself
In the privy one day. For three long hours
Until the police came, she was hanging there,
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us, a comic
Dance...
…Grand mother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And started at me. Nani, she asked, Who is she?
With that question ended Nani.

("Nani," *TOPHAOP* 40)

Kamala Das identifies herself with the dead and looks upon Nani’s suicide as an eye opener on women’s plight in the world of today. Nani represents the unlucky farm maids who are the victims of the physical hungers of the bawdy Nairs and who, unwilling to make their shame public, resort to suicide.

To quote Kalaithasan:

It is indeed an irony that while alive, these unfortunate women were playthings in the hands of the feudal lords to appease their physical hungers. Even in death, they were “puppets” turning gently on the rope to delight children with a comic dance (*Kamala Das: A Critical Study* 126).

The poem “Honour” is an ironic expression of the theme of suffering and dishonour to which women of lower caste are subjected. The Nairs, the poet claims, had a passion of honour, and did everything to flaunt it during daytime but went on doing heinous acts of crime in the darkness of the night, behind the laws of the land. The poor and the frail women had to undergo humiliation and even death in the hands of rich Nairs to suffer little censure or arrest or prostitution. Mr. Madava Das’s sexual behaviours and his indecent advances towards Kamala Das even before their marriage and his tearing of the bra of hers and his hurried sexual behaviour during midnight are suggestive of the Nair community’s excessive indulgence in sex. The poem “Honour “gives a realistic portrayal of the poet’s feudal ancestors.

The Nairs are imaged as base and bestial, who at night “took to bed the little nieces” of their low caste tenants, ravished and murdered them, then threw them into pools and wells. During the day they watered the hypocritical plant of honour. The poet unveils the ugly
secrets of these ancestors whom she holds guilty of the most heinous crime against humanity. They masquerade as protectors of family honour pass in the eyes of society as “honourable men.”

This opening of the corpse – filled Nair cupboard exposes the poet to the wrath of her community and earns her ostracism. The tone of the poem as a whole is bitterly ironical.

A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge bellow her navel, yes,
The dead confess their brutal games and they guffaw through
My mouth
Today, they laugh at laws that punished no rich, only the
Poor
Were ravished, strangled, drowned, buried at midnight behind
Snake, shrines (qtd. in Irshad Gulam Ahmed 120).

“A bruise on her throat” typifies the brutal strangulation of the innocent women by the feudal lord, while “a soft bulge below her navel” only suggests the pregnancy, the burden of shame, which the innocent victim is made to carry for the rest of her life, if alive (qtd. in Kalaithasan Kamala Das: A Critical Study 128)

The ancestors and ancestress of Kamala Das stalk before her while she is engaged in her literary writing. She herself informs the readers:

I must tell you that we are members of a matriarchal community and that our children take the mother’s family’s name instead of the father’s (qtd. in Irshad Gulam Ahmed 47)

She is painfully aware by the vast dividing chasm between the status of a Nair male as sanctioned by a historical tradition and the actual subaltern status accorded to women by a feudal patriarchy.

The Nair husbands making indecent suggestion to their wives is poignantly recorded by Kamala Das when she describes social life in Calcutta as a sex trap where rich industrialists make a point of inviting Government officials with young wives to their parties.
These parties often end up with the husband passing out after a dozen free drinks and his wife sitting with tears in her eyes “while tender-hearted men paw her and coo into her ears” (165).

As commented by Elias, Mrs. Das was well trained to cope with the situation, and even to turn it to her advantage. “They were at last a dozen men deeply infatuated with me” (166). But the husband was least bothered about this. Once he warned her against a man who “cultivated the habit of stroking my legs during conversation and caressing my long hair” (167). When asked if this was love the man had told her: “I like you.” But Mr. Das knew better. “He is not capable of loving anyone except himself,” my husband said. “You are always a child in my eyes, Amy”, he said, “you may play around with love but be choosey about your playmates. I do not want you ever to get hurt in your life.” On the other hand he encouraged her to go with men he approved of such as the young drama critic they had met in Delhi. “Whenever I looked depressed or bored, my husband asked me to take the young man and go for a stroll” (181).

In Kamala Das, the connection between sexual eccentricity and ethnic identity is explicit when she writes: “I plead for the return of a social order that allowed a woman to have more than one husband if she so desired. Things change or end. But the blood is an external river, and in my veins flows the robust blood of my ancestress who married two or more men and were happy” (Kamala Das, “Why Not More Than One Husband” 31).

This nostalgia for a supposedly happy millennium of female sensuality is echoed again when she makes gloating and at the same time poignant references to the gem encrusted jewellery and the red palanquins of her ancestress. She adds. “Like the rolled gold bangles on our maid servant’s arms, the colour of our skins grew tarnished. We forgot that
we were descendants of those beautiful women loved more than life itself by their husbands.”(21)

The source of Kamala Das’s sexual philosophy is thus located in her own cultural heritage derived from the South or Dravidian India. Elias concludes his essay on Kamala Das’s Nair heritage with the remarks “indeed there is little that Kamala Das has written which is free from direct or indirect expressions of a bitter – sweet nostalgia for the world of the ancient Nairs of Kerala.”

In the poems of Kamala Das, past is viewed as a repertoire of memories of pains and pleasures that blossom into poetical flowers. The poetical artefacts of Kamala Das demonstrate an undeniable undercurrent of ancestral memories flowing through them. These memories, though buried in the distant past, became alive in the poet’s dynamic consciousness.

The poet’s agony arises from her perception of the yawning hiatus between the legitimate places of the Nair women as sanctioned by a historical tradition, and the actual subaltern status given to them by a feudal patriarchy. This leaves the poet in an agonising state of ancestry as evident from her following observation in one of her columns.

In the family I was born into, all women behaved like bonded slaves in order to survive. And nobody seemed to think it funny. I belonged to the matrilineal and matriarchal community of Nayars but there was not a single matriarch in my family who had the courage to make a decision without consulting a male. Cleanly there was something wrong with all of us. Perhaps it had something to do with our admiration for Mahatma Gandhi, then the national hero (qtd. in Irshad Gulam Ahmed 48)

The extract reflects that she has been considerably distanced from her roots; it generates an existential crisis in the poet as is evident from the following extract form one of her articles.
I don’t know why I keep going back there, because there is nobody to welcome me except the servants..... Besides, that’s the only time we feel we have an address, that we are something. Here in the city you are swallowed up – like cockroaches that move round at night – what are you? (Kamala Das, Society, Nov 1980, 65)

The poet’s historical past and the poet’s familial past overlap and at points become inseparable. The poet’s grandmother, the great grandmother, the confidence-honouring maid servants on the one hand and the feudal Nair ancestors and others belong to the feudal as well as the familial past of the poet. To quote Irshrd Gulam Ahmed: “past is perceived as a vast assemblage of memories of pain and pleasure that crystallize into poetical artefacts. The memories of her feudal past give her songs of experience” (49).

Kamala Das does not experience a happy union with her husband but only unhappy relationship. She receives carnal pleasures from him. It is not the physical love that Kamala Das longs for. What she craves for is an emotional bonding with her man. Her man indulges in passionate advances without responses from her. She gets utterly disappointed at his sole stagnations at the level of lust and at his sole concern with her “body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow/convulsions.” She is reduced to the mere position of a bed fellow to afford him physical pleasure and a domesticated woman to entertain him with her own cuisine:

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

(“The Old Play House”, TOPHAOP 1).
To quote Kalaithasan:

The oft-repeated bedroom experiences with her man leave her a frustrated play-goer in an old playhouse which is often frequented and where the play is put up many a time with no newness or freshness: “There is / No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old/ Play house with all its lights put out” (Kamala Das: A Critical Study 50).

Kamala Das is for love which seeks emotional fulfilment. Tied to an unsatisfactory relationship, she feels the only way open to her is to seek a pure total freedom. She now desires to be free and live without any restrictions.

There are poems which bring out the contradictory aspects of Kamala Das’s character. There is a divided self in her – the one seeking freedom from her unrewarding marital relationship and the other seeking union with her husband in the manner of a conventional bound wife.

The poem “I Shall Someday” is a self-revelation of the past of Kamala Das. Its theme is the return of the “prodigal” wife…the rebellious and feminist, Kamala Das, who after having drunk her love life to the “lees”, returns to her husband in a typical traditional surrender of an Indian Wife:

….But, I shall someday return, losing
Nearly all, hurt by wind, sun and rain,
Too hurt by fierce happiness to want,
A further jaunt as a further spell
Of freedom, and I shall someday see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded
Just a skeletal thing, then shut my
Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,
Here in your nest of familiar scorn…

(“I Shall some Day,” SC 52)

But there is a painful awareness that there is no more meaning in her “jaunt” for freedom. The plurality of her sex experiences leaves her disillusioned. She is hurt by the
various facets of her intensities of love symbolized by “wind”, “sun” and “rain”. “too hurt by fierce happiness…” by satiety in her love-relations….” To want/a jaunt as a further spell/of freedom”, she sees her “world de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded/just a skeletal thin”.

The Hindu woman in her, realizing the end of life in a heap of bones, “just a skeletal thing” devoid of flesh and blood, returns to her husband, and takes “refuge” in his “nest of familiar scorn”….abjectly, devotedly.

In another poem “An Apology to Goutama” the poet confesses to her lover that her emotional loyalties to her husband are unquestionable and that he should have no illusions about it.

………………and yet Goutama,
That other owns me while your arms hold
My Woman-form, his hurting arms
Hold my very soul.

(SC 19)

“This apology coming from the poet leaves no room whatsoever for any speculations as to her fidelity to her husband” (Surya Nath 180).

My body’s wisdom tells me and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayer’s arms….

(“A Relationship” CP 67)

In the poem “Daughter of the Century” also she expresses her ardent desire:

But a sunny porch and my husband beside me, alive;
That is all that I would ask for
In my old age
I shall retire from youth without a murmur (131).

Ironically Madhava Das died in Kamala Das’s arms. No doubt the phrases she uses…. “Nest of familiar scorn”, “His hurting arms”, “My betayers arms—do not glorify or idealized her marital life. It’s a relationship too difficult to as it is severe.
A story of her mis-matched marriage is recollected in poems like “My Predecessors”, “Ethics” and “Larger Than Life Was He”. In “My Predecessors”, she recalls the lack of personal bond in her husband:

   He had been busy all his life and that he
   Had no time for play. How shall I believe this man? (123).

In “Ethics” she admits that the dismal experiences of married life have simply emboldened her to put up with the troubles of existence—“Today, in me there is a newness/that he has brought about”. In all these poems written in subdued tone, there’s the absence of earlier sexual bite.

In the poem, “Larger Than Life Was He” written within five months of her husband’s death, she discloses the emotional frustration that engulfed Kamala Das’s family life. There is no more bitter recapitulation of the past in the concluding lines – “Do I miss him?/of course, I do, for larger than life/was he’. She seems to suggest that the insensitivity and carelessness of her husband was partly compensated by his promoting her literary activities and handling her manuscripts “as unwed mothers did their illegitimate offspring”.

   My life was bad at the beginning, but I changed my husband
   To suit my needs and towards the end it was a good marriage
   Anyway, my husband had Parkinson’s disease and I looked
   after him. I had always had this romantic longing to cook
   For a poor man I loved (De Souza 35).

   In My Story, the poet narrates an incident. There she appreciates the sense of honesty and commitment with which he served his employers. She claims, she belonged to a family of values where people “believed in one being scrupulously honest to oneself”. When her husband informed her telephonically of his having been insulted by his boss at the airport, Kamala Das burst into anger:
I was angry. ‘Resign immediately, get out of this humiliating job, we shall go to Nalapat House and live with dignity,’ I cried over the phone…. My husband, when he does not stoop,[SIC] stands six feet without his shoes, whereas the bully who made him lose his self-confidence, was a tiny marionette of a man who had the jerky movements of a tin soldier (189).

Kamala Das’s empathetic identification with her husband shows how as a true Indian wife, she stood by her husband in times of crisis and she reveals her concern for the dignity of her husband.

The poet’s recollection of her past life, with the husband is painful. She has no soft word for her husband during his lifetime but it takes a sudden turn towards identifying herself with him in the last days of his life to the extent of her willingness to breathe her last in the arms of her husband. Her angry outburst at the insult done to her husband by his boss is revelatory of the care and concern for the dignified treatment of her husband by others.

There are poems in which Kamala Das voices her concern about her children. Mother in Kamala Das has given rise to a number of poems on children and about her children. As pointed out by Kalithasan:

She (Kamala Das) gives a poetic representation of the delight and thrill of giving birth to a child in “Jai Surya” (The Descendants 27-28). “The white flowers” is a poignant portrayal of the mother’s concern and fear about the child in a war-torn world. The baby-sun in the white flowers refers to Das’s youngest son Jaisurya. He was born in the year 1965. “The War” refers to the Indo-Pakistant was of the year. The poet places herself midway between death and destruction by war on the one hand, and a serenity born out of filial love and affection on the other, and hence the white flower, the red rose, and the red cherry wine seem to suggest symbols of love and re-birth in direct contrast to bloodshed and despair. The mood is one of prayer for her son’s safety and benefaction for his welfare and long life (“Kamala Das: The Other Facet of her Personality” Studies in Indian Writing in English” 113-114).

The poem “Afterwards” focuses on the mother’s concern about the fate and future of the child in a joyless, songless world in which it has to grow. Despite the mother’s continued affection and concern for children, they, in the changing perspective of the youthful awareness, no longer looked upon their mother as they did before.
In the poem “My Sons” there is a poignant registration of a mother’s feelings towards the changed attitude of grown-up children in the fast changing world:

No, there is nothing like love. I used up
My blood as ink to praise its worth, it was
The unborn generation rattling in
My pen, angry at my delay, and his.
Where is he now? Who remembers the small
Of his skin or the words he murmured in
My ears? My sons are old enough to take
Their own women, old enough to forget
The lullabies I sang and the prayers
Recited near their beds when they were ill.
Users of vulgar words and of jeans that
Chafe desire to a hot flame, they swing
Round and round with the females of their tribe.
Yet another generation awaits
At the closed doors behind their faded jeans....

(“My Sons,” OSKHTS 58)

The words “My Sons are old enough to take/Their own women, old enough to forget/the lullabies I sang and prayers/Recited when they were ill” express the mother in Kamala Das who fondly and poignantly remembers the days when she used to sing lullabies to lull her sons to sleep and pray to God for their recovery from illness and ailment.

But the mother is no longer remembered but she is pushed into the background. The sons are drawn more towards the pretty looks of their girl friends than towards the filial love of their mother. “They swing round and round with the females of their tribe”.

The anguished soul of the mother undergoes an agonizing experience at such a sight:

“Middle age” is a ruthless portrayal of the silent sufferings the poet undergoes as mother because of the distance between her and her children. The mother faces losing her identity when the personal relationship between her and her children is not what was before because of advancing times. She is not needed any longer when she mellows into old age and when the children turn to her like critics and remind her: “Mother, / you are no longer as young you know”. Indeed, mature and older people recede farther away from the intimations of youth (qtd. in Kalaithasan, Kamala Das: A Critical Study 99).
The poet’s sorrow-laden heart at the sight of even children, though innocent, being put to death, during the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka bursts into a following poem, “The Sea at Galle Face Green”. The motherly feeling of the poet triggers off a number of unanswered questions:

But how did they track
Down the little ones whose
Voices rose each morning
With the national flag

How did they
Track down the little ones
Who know not their ethnic
Inferiority?
The “little ones” who sang the National Anthem at
The hoisting of the National Flag had their voice
Muffled by the gunshots

(\textit{CP} 12-13)

The poet wonders if this is the price paid for their patriotism (Kalaithasan 50).

The poet in a poignant mood recalls the Reign of Terror let loose following the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India leading to the murder of Sikhs and the rape of Sikh women. This ugly scar caused to Sikh women rankles in her memory. In the poem “Delhi 1984” she writes:

The turbans were unwound, the longlimbs
Broken and bunched to seek like faggots
So that when such bundles were gifted
To their respective homes the women
Swooned as their eyes lighted on a scared
Knee or a tattooed arm…….

If such an act of barbarity enjoys the sanction of the scriptures, then the scripture is nothing but a madman’s guffaw:

………………………….. The spiritual
Chanted sounded like a lunatic guffaw,
Only God with his name would hasten
To disown there dry-eyed adherents
Of the newest cult

(“Delhi 1984,” CP 44)

The poet being a woman cannot stand gang-raping “No breast was left/unfounded no ripe pubis overlooked”. The tinge of irony in the concluding lines cannot be missed. In the funeral Indira Gandhi lay “Cooling” while the raped women were burning with revenge for the rape committed on them.

The poet was in Colombo during the outbreak of ethnic violence in the Island country of Sri Lanka in July 1983. She was the eye witness and a silent spectator to the scenes of murder and massacre and loss of lives and property of the Tamils. To quote Kamala Das:

Colombo I had to write because I was there those two years when things were going wrong. I had watched people being killed so that those poems had to be written, certainly, and that was the time when I felt that I must write about what I saw around me. I am also chronicler. A writer is not merely a lyrical poet, but is a chronicler of events that happen around her. I was a witness to the event when a neighbour was done to death (qtd. in Irshad Gulam Ahmed 127.)

The harrowing scenery she witnessed before her own eyes affected her to such an extent that she poured forth her feelings of anguish and anger in her poems.

In the poem, “The sea at Galle Face Green”, Colombo “That once splendid city” resembles “a half-burnt corpse” with smouldering corpses and burning buildings. Even Nature was a silent mourner of the sad fate of the Tamils:

............... And
Even the small leaves of
The Katurmuringa
Stopped their joyous tremor
While the sea-breezes blow
No birdsong in the trees

(CP12-13).
The terrible toll of lives of the innocent men, women and children of Tamil population in the hands of the blood thirsty Sri Lankan Sinhalese army made the poet, wield her pen to expresses her poignant feelings in accents of anger in the poem “Smoke in Colombo”.

The poet recollects how she was all on a sudden stopped by a Sinhalese army. The concluding lines bring out the poet’s wrath against the futile will that “delights in meaningless distraction”:

They stopped us, a somnambulistic
daze was in their eyes, there was no space
Between us and their guns, but we were
Too fatigue to feel fear, or resist,
The abrupt moves
Of an imbecilic will

(“Smoke in Colombo,” CP14)

The poet was “too fatigue to feel fear” she had lost all sense of fear. Fated to die in the hands of the gunmen, she had not had the stamina either to fear or to resist the senseless act of the mad man.

Again and again this homicide sponsored by the Sri Lanka Government comes to her memory. The bitter recollections of such scenes of horror are reflected even in the poem “After July”:

After July, in Colombo there were
No Tamils in sight, no arrangetrams
Were held in the halls, no flower-seller
Came again to the door with strings
Of jasmine to perfume the ladies hair,
Like rodents they were all holed up in fear

(CP 15)

The poet sees the image of Hitler in the perpetrators of this heinous crime.

Hitler rose from the dead, he demanded
Yet another round of applause: he hailed
The robust Aryan blood, the sinister
Brow that absolves a man of his sins and
Gives him the right to kill his former friends

(\textit{CP} 15)

Even the native salesgirls carry in themselves the image of Hitler whose avowed purpose was to exterminate the non-Aryan race.

The poet sees the very “avatar” of the inhuman Hitler in the Sinhalese salesgirls at the shopping centres at Colombo:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\textit{………………but when atleast} \\
\textit{I reach the cashier’s counter, the salesgirls} \\
\textit{See through my guise, and their cruel mouths bleed} \\
\textit{When they make attempts to stab me with a smile}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

(“\textit{Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo,}” \textit{CP} 16).

The poet recollects how the books she studied greatly influenced her especially the library kept by her grand-uncle, Narayana Menon, a leading philosopher and the poet of Malabar. It was he who presented the poet, a copy of Walt Whitman’s “\textit{The Leaves of Grass}” As a child, she was fond of stealing into her grand-uncle Narayan Menon’s study; she records her reminiscences thus: “On the lower shelves were stacked Anatole France, Turgenor, Nietzsche and Maurice Maeterling” (“\textit{Leaves of Grass on the Kerala Coast}” 30).

About the impact left on her by the household library, Kamala Das says:

If I has spent all my childhood in a city and gone only to city schools where the school mams taught the children to recite the nursery rhymes, cutely gesticulating, I would not have had the sheer ecstasy of reading geniuses like Maeterlinck or Walt Whitman. From nursery rhymes I would have graduated to Hans Christian Anderson and the brothers Grimms but at my grand-uncle’s place, living as a part matriarchal, matrilineal society, I ripened on adult diet (“\textit{Leaves of Grass}” 30).

Unloved at home and teased as a dark-complexioned girl at school, the poet hungered for love. The books she turned to whetted her yearning for love. She recalls the impact of the books she read:
It was easy falling in love when I was young. I was not qualified for any other sport. Poor health and loneliness had driven me to take shelter in the world of books. I had, read, before I was thirteen, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Abbe, Provost, Tagore and Kalidas, dwelling longingly over the passages describing the lovers’ trysts. There was also, among the prayer books at my home, a dog-eared Gitagovindam (a devotional lyric on love for Lord Krishna). Which formed the foundation of my knowledge of love (“Fifteen was the Right Age” 29).

The questions may arise in the minds of the reading public as to why she defied society’s mores and ran counter to conventional behaviour. The answer to the questions can be found in what she states:

During those years (When I was a thin child) I dreamt of becoming plump and of being able to attract men. Perhaps such thoughts came to me because of the books that I read as a child. Anna Karenina, Mono Lascaut, Madame Bovary… (“When I was a Child” 19).

The literary influence on Kamala Das’s mental makeup and literary output can be traced from her reading of the novelists of her choice. Her favourite poem was Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.” The study of Oscar Wilde may be said to have determined the mental climate of her formative years. Byron, an English romantic poet was also her favourite poet. This is clear from her having on a dressing table, Byron’s photograph. Even a defect in her son Monoo’s foot did not sadden her but only delighted her. The poet’s confession and consolation is revelatory of her delightful sadness: “Did not Byron have a defective foot too? (My Story 98).

Of the British short story writer’s she was very fond of Katherine Mansfield. She herself admits the influence of English and French writers: “I have been influenced by English Literature and French literature in translation: Abbe Provost, Flaubert and others have influenced me” (qtd. in Caf 11). The possibility cannot be ruled out that Kamala Das was influenced by the biography of George Sand, the French novelist who, as an ardent feminist, flouted the conventions of society (Kalaithasan 22).

The poet also catalogues the novelist and the short story writers whose books she read in the past tremendously influenced her attitude and outlook. Her favourite novelist includes
Yasunari Kawabata, Katherine Anne Porter, Erskine Caldwell, and William Faulkner, Katherine Mansfield, Scott Fitzgerald and Ray Bradbury (qtd. in Ram 6).

There was no poet to influence her so greatly as Walt Whitman. In a very personal memoir she admits how as a young girl she enjoyed reading Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. To the question put by her grand-uncle, “Who taught you to write poetry in English? “she said, “Walt Whitman”. She feels, “Afterwards there was no poet to influence me so greatly”.

(Kamala Das, *Leaves of Grass* 31).

As stated in *My Story*:

There is every reason to suppose that she came under the influence of Isodara Duncan, an American dancer, who advocated unconventional living and practised free love, posing a challenge to Victorian morals. The impact of Isodara Duncan on Kamala Das reflected itself in her attachment for Carlo: “Isabella [sic] Duncan told us that love was best when free. We (Carlo and Kamala Das) looked at each other in nervousness could we follow her example?” (*My Story* 127)

Kamala Das, immensely cherished reading Amirta Pritam’s poetry. There is a close parallel between her poetry and that Amirta Pritam, her counterpart in the Punjab. In her, she finds a like-minded crusader for the emancipation of women from the domineering male ego:

That’s why I appreciate Amirta Pritam I adore her. She once wrote a poem, a woman saying to her lover, “Leave your body with your clothes on the chair before you come to me….“ Isn’t that what we’re looking for? What we all say to our men? How beautiful it would be. (qtd. in Gopal 69)

In a number of poems, the poet confesses, finding herself tied to a hollow married life and getting frustrated with unfulfilled love, she turned to other men. Kamala Das developed amorous passion towards a number of individuals and her poetry is an expression of her personal experiences, the most intensely personal of them being the experience of love.

To quote Kalaithasan:

The disappointment and the disillusionment she encounters and the agony and the anguish she experiences drive her to go in search of a more fulfilling relationship. She begs “now a stranger’s doors to/Receive love, at least in
small change” (“My Grandmother’s House”) she groans and moans and constantly years “for a man from/Another town” (“The Wild Bougainvillea”), she runs up “the forty/Noisy steps to knock at another’s door” (“The Stone Age”), and she enters “Other’s/Lives and makes” of every trap of lust/A temporary home at “Glass” (Kamala Das: A Critical Study 122).

The poet goes in search of love but she finds lust in others. The poem “Captive” (The Descendants 17) deals with the consequence of the poet’s clandestine experiences. It reveals her getting ensnared in the lustful arms of more than one, like a little insect getting entrapped in the glistening gossamer of a spider, only to find herself her own captive of the “Womb’s blinded hunger the muted whisper/At the core………”: “For years I have run from one/gossamer (sic) lane to another, I am/now my own captive.” There is a deep-felt realization on her part that love is “an empty gift, a gilded/empty container, good for show, northing/else”.

“A pure woman” though she is, she degenerates into a woman that seeks love. She, in a tone of utter frankness, reveals the course of her life in an anti-elegant style.

With a cheap toy’s indifference
I enter other’s
Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home.

(“Glass,” TOPHAOP 21)

She defies the established convention of finding her anchorage in marriage and goes in search of love “at another’s doors”.

When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another’s door.
Through peepholes, the neighbours watch,
They watch me come
And go like rain.

(“The Stone Age”, Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 82).
Kamala Das holds her husband responsible for her deviant attitude and free social movement. With the grant of freedom by her husband, she launches into an exciting love-life.

Kamala Das’s experiences with other men turn out to be as frustrating as those with the husband.... The “band/of cynics she turned to” for a rewarding relationship had their minds set on the gratification of sensual instinct. Each of them said, “I do not love, I cannot love, it is not/ In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you...” The three flamboyant negative statements seem to reveal the lack of love in men, to whom the woman is after all a thing to be pitied, not loved (qtd. in Kalaithasan Kamala Das: A Critical Study 119).

In the course of her embracement for fulfilling her relationships outside marriage, Kamala Das poignantly records her several love relations in My Story of which a few are recorded. In My Story, she narrates how she felt the incredible sweetness of love in the company of a grey eyed handsome youngman.

She Adds:

Once or twice standing near him with his arms around my shoulders I whispered I am yours, do with me as you will, make love to me[...] but he said, no, in my eyes, you are a goddess, I shall not dishonour body.(My Story 115).

The youngman refused to “dishonour” her body, inspite of her willingness to be seduced. Soon the grey eyed friend disappeared from her life.

There was her pen friend, Carlo, whom she would never have married but with whom she was willing to have a love affair. The poet-persona is initially drawn towards physical aspects of love which, probably, reveal her as a poet trying to reach out from the physical plane towards another plane of experience, both from within and without the ambit sexual morality: “For her, ideal love is fulfilment on the levels of body and mind; it is the experience beyond sex and through sex” (Chavan 60-61).
In the beginning of her career, Kamala Das does not see any distinction between the physical and the spiritual. In fact, she does not envisage body and soul as separate, and therefore, “there is little qualitative difference between losing one or losing the other” (Kohli 113). Kamala Das herself admits in “The Suicide”:

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

(OSKHTS 107)

In her early poetry, Kamala Das celebrates the physical identity and skin-communicated ecstasies. She believes in the “body’s wisdom” and in the knowledge that comes though “exposure to life,” and refuses to hang her life on the “Pegs of Quotations”. Soon she realizes her man’s inability to offer spiritual fulfilment inspite of fulfilment at the bodily level. To quote Kamala Das: “Sex I can get in abundance from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for” (qtd. in Chavan 61-62). She becomes aware of the limitations of the physical self, and yearns for the release from the bars of the body. Kamala Das’s love aspires towards the sublime and the spiritual. I. K. Sharma rightly observes:

I agree, and for that matter everyone should, that Kamala Das is “Primarily a poet of love” but it is not yum-yum love. It repels her and most of her poems end on this note. One who has followed the curve of her poetry will see that she is gradually evolving into a poet of soul (69).

The persona in Kamala Das’s poems is only a projection of her personality. Every act indulged in by her man is a calculated move to draw her into a sex act. The man turns his “Sun-stained cheek” to her, and talks, with his uneven teeth gleaming and his mouth ravaging. He places his right hand on her knee to titillate desires of sex in her. The tonic effect of cutaneous touch is to make powerful reverberations is the sexual spheres of the woman. Despite this action of his, she remains insipid and passive.
He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee,

(“The Freaks,” SC 10)

The man’s physical features are symptomatic of this lustful nature. He is a libertine, as suggested by his “sun-stained/ cheek” representative of his roving habits- his being attached to one woman today and another a second day. His “mouth, a dark/ cavern” is emblematic of his infatuation, for “darkness” is associated with passion.

The man is capable of unleashing skin’s lazy hungers. “The poet is heart is “an empty cistern” filling itself with “coiling snakes of silence...”

The woman – person’s failure to sexually respond to her man’s advances is suggested by “coiling snakes of silence,” symbolic of her failure to be quickly roused by her man’s fiery sexual overtures. The repetition of sibilants attempting to portray the movement of the snakes highlights the slowness with which she responds to him. The static words “idle,” “lazy,” “wait” register her reluctance to his advances.

There is no psychological or physical response from her. She makes a social pretence that she is all for sexual love but it’s only a pose:

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

(“The Freaks,” SC 10)

The poem “Herons” a dramatic lyric, deals with a sexually over enthusiastic husband and also a wife who is fed on sedatives to free her from the tensions of life. He does not feel hesitant to force her to a sex-act, but she will not respond as eagerly and passionately as her partner. This poem lays bare her loneliness.
On Sedatives  
I am more lovable  
Says my husband  
My speech becomes a mist laden terrain  
The words image tinctured with sleep  
They rise from still covers of dreams  
In unhurried flight like herons...  
And my ragdoll limbs adjust better  
To his versatile lust .... he would if he could  
Sing lullabies to his wife’s sleeping soul  
Sweet lullabies to thicken its swoon  
On sedatives  
I grow more lovable  
Says my husband.  

(“Herons,” *OSKHTS* 85)

The poet – persona is on sedatives, and that wins from her man the appreciable comment that she is “more lovable.” She is like a “ragdoll” intensive to her man’s advances. Significant is the addition of an attribute “versatile” to “lust” as it indicates his capacity to get his physical hungers satisfied in all situations. Little does he bother whether she is well or ill, attuned or not at all. A symbol of lust that he is what he hungers for is physical pleasure. If only he were able to sing, he could sing “lullabies” to his wife’s sleeping soul to thicken its swoon, in personal appreciation of the one-sided pleasure he would derive from her adjusting body. That her soul can never be roused to his temptation is well brought out in the phrase “sleeping soul.” The last repetitive lines “On sedatives/I grow more lovable / Says my husband” drive home the passionateness of the man and at the same time, brings out psychologically the lack of joyous participation by the wife. Such a dichotomy portrayed in the poem “Herons” between a physically over passionate husband and a wife who is given more to the pleasures of the soul, leads to frustration in marriage in “The Old Play House”.

The poem titled “The Old Play House” revolves round the marital life of Kamala Das. A realization comes to her that marriage instead of being a partnership based on mutual love, understanding, and respect, becomes a bondage, a trap and a prison. Prior to her marriage, she has been “a swallow” with the inborn “nature to fly,” but is now rid of new freedom. Her man
indulges in passionate advances without responses from her. She gets frustrated at his sole concern with her “body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow/ convulsions.”

I enter others
Lives and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home.

(“Glass,” *TOPHAOP* 21)

Her story is a story of woman who, from man to man in search of sexless love, found lust and sex in every man. Consequently, she becomes totally frustrated: “My love is an empty gift, a gilded empty container, good for show and nothing else.” (*My Story* 67).

Kamala Das is against the concept of love concerned with the sheer bodily fulfilment. Can this skin communicative thing “be called love?” is the question the poet persona poses to herself in “In Love”. The rhetorical question in “The Freaks” “Can’t this man with/nimble finger tips unleash/ Nothing more alive that the skin’s lazy hungers?” expresses her disillusionment with physical fulfilment. So does the question in “Convicts” “What is the bloody use? / That was the only kind of love/ This hacking at each other parts.” The poet’s painful awareness of the soul-killing act of sex is suggested by “This hacking at each other’s parts.” According to Kamala Das, wifely devotion does not mean purely physical surrender to her man’s sex-hunger. Hence her rhetorical outburst: “Its time” to be alive to the reality of the woman’s world that is not conditioned by man’s corporal frame.

The world extends a lot
Beyond his six-foot frame
Thoughts that look like shadow deep inside be still.
Nail your laughs to the walls of my mind’s cavern
To hang as trophies. Fetter
That ominous wail. The
Joy of life does not lie in
Lying beneath a mans
The woman’s passive acceptance of the man’s above her is tantamount to mortification, as suggested by the words “nail” and “fetter”. In “Substitute” the poet comes down heavily upon love that is based on sheer physical fulfilment -- love which is a “swivel, door” that lets out one in order to let in another. Hence in her “Advice to Fellow Swimmers” (CP 100) she stresses the need to transcend the physical self. Sex is free from the poet’s thoughts.

... go swim I am the sea,
Where the first tide you meet is your body,
that familiar pest,
but if you learn to cross it
you are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe

(CP 100)

The sea is a symbol of samsara sahara (the sea of life) which every Hindu has to cross to reach the Finite. The Hindu concept of the emptiness of human life is reflected in “A Request” (The Descendants 5)

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

(“A Request,” OSKHTS 104)

The heap of rotten flesh and broken bones tells the tragic tale of the impermanence of human life and the futility of physical love. Perhaps, ideal love is to be found in the world of the soul which is bodiless and boneless.
The poet in Kamala Das becomes aware of the limitations of the physical body and yearns for the release from the narrow precincts of the body. The poet in order to escape from the trappings of lust makes a study of the snares of her man’s physical body, just as a convict studies / His prison’s geography “to make good a projected escape:

As the convict studies
his prison’s geography
I study the trappings
of your body, dear love,
for, I must someday find
an escape from its snare.

(“The Prisoner,” TOPHAOP 29)

The terms “prison” “trappings” and “snare” bring home the limitations of the physical love to gratify the deep cravings of the soul. The poet persona yearns for a release from the lure of carnal love and from the blots and bars of the bodily prison for a final union with her divine Lover.

A study of the poems of Kamala Das reveals that there is a shift from gross physically to sublime spirituality. Finding no satisfaction in her husband, Kamala Das turns to other men for extraneous fulfilment. The experiences narrated here under are before her conversion to Islam. She wants more than physical love and yearns for an ideal love of Radhakrishna archetype. What emerges from the study of Kamala Das’s poetry is the image of Kamala Das as an anguished seeker of pure love in tune with Indian Ethos and tradition “Her poetic corpus configures an inner voyage, an awareness beyond skin’s lazy hungers. It enacts her quest of an exploration into herself and seeking of an identity (Prasad and Singh 35). She realizes the limits of the physical body disliking the redeeming of the soul. “Bereft of soul / my body shall be free/ Bereft of body/ My soul shall be bare” (“The Suicide,” OSKHTS 107). She longs for a release from the physical body and yearns for a final union with her bodyless lover, Krishna.
To quote Kalaithasan:

All human love is only an enactment of the great love between *Jivatma* (the individual Soul) and *Paramathma* (the Universal Soul or God). The real bridegroom is God whom the soul extremely seeks. Kamala Das lives and moves and has her being in the pursuit of the discovery of the true identity of herself. The individual Soul, *Jivatma*, is alienated from its identification with *Pathi* or *Paramathma* (the Supreme God) because of the pull towards worldly attachments, as represented by *Pasu* (the Individual Soul) and *Passam* (attachment). Human soul breaks these barriers and fetters, and flies into being with the Eternal through love. It is this bliss of freedom which the soul enjoys when it is conscious of its true identity. The soul ultimately seeks only *Pathi* or *Purusha* (the Supreme Lord) represented by Krishna in her poetry (34).

In her search for an ideal lover, the poet passes through numberless men, “like coins/into various hands.” Her multifarious experiences are only a revelation of the Divine will that her Soul becomes fit for its merger with the Divine mate only when it completes the terrestrial journey, passing through the purifying fires of all varieties of experience, the gross and the carnal, the snares and temptations of the world.

As Mohan Lal Sharma rightly observes:

The spirit moves through the snares of the world: its temptations and despairs, and only via this journey does it enter into the precincts of the Ultimate Reality. Before the Eternal Lover is embraced, the shadow – lovers have to be known for what they are (107).

According to Kamala Das, “Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways so that the soul turned humble for the change” (My Story 194). Through the vicissitude of her clandestine love affairs, it is Lord Krishna who has been her True Paramour. She seeks Lord Krishna lurking behind these masked figures – these shadow-lovers. She “saw each/ Shadow cast your blurred image is my glass, somehow/ The words and gestures seemed familiar.”

Throughout her various relationships the poet is in quest of her Spiritual Paramour, the Eternal Companion of the soul, Lord Krishna. In My Story, she states: “My mate is He.
He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to this desire?” She progresses towards a transcendence of the lusts of thee body. To quote her:

> When youth vanishes, and beauty recedes, you no longer love your body as you once did.... You are ready for the only lover who would satisfy your troubled heart, that one who has now no body to offer. And yet in dreams his conceptual body blinds you by its blue loveliness. (“Fifteen was the Right Age” 30).

In her ideal vision of life, the poet becomes united with the eternal lover Krishna in a spiritual embrace.

She has gone out of her marital ambit: “Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps/ I went astray.” In My Story she states the reason for going astray:

> I was perhaps seeking a familiar face. . . . It was to get closer to that bodiless one that I approached other forms and lost my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination... (112)

The lure of the Blue God (Lord Krishna) is constant through all the varied experience of love with different persons in different places.

The poet is in search for ideal love -- a love with a bodyless form which she feels can be achieved by her merger with the eternal lover, Lord Krishna. She surmises herself as Radha who goes is search of Krishna, the ideal lover, in spite of her marriage.

She realizes that her husband can never establish a rapport with her soul because “And each time his lust was quietened / And he turned his back on me…..” what she seeks is a total merger with her lover, but since it is not feasible in the actual world, she searches for gnanashyam, the ideal lover. She imagines herself as Radha and finds comfort in the arms of imaginary Krishna.

This is illustrated by the poem “Radha” where she depicts the ecstasy Radha experiences in Krishna’s embrace. She cries:
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You.

(CP 68)

But Radha does not snap her marital ties in spite of her love for Krishna as she considers her corporeal form insignificant. She is contemptuous of her husband who only wants the warmth of her body. The poem entitled “Maggots” embodies Radha’s experience with her husband which is analogous to the predicament of the poet. Radha does not experience rapture in the arms of her husband but remains as a corpse indifferent.

In The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, the poet confesses her entry into the bond of marriage to realise her true self but she finds him stagnating at the level of lust:

... It was not to gather knowledge
of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
what I was and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
lesson you gave was about yourself.

(“The Old Playhouse,” OSKHTS 38)

Self-realization is the first step toward the realization of God. Brahman (Supreme God) is the universal soul, Atman. A Hindu woman that she is, she must realize the Atman in her seeking to achieve spiritual perfection by its identification with Brahman. She considers her physical body as a stumbling block. It lies on her way to attain union with Paramatma. The only way open to her is to seek “a pure total freedom“ which can be had by shattering the “mirror” and erasing the water reflecting man as a symbol of power and lust as type tied by “Narcissus at the Water’s edge.”

for love is Narcissus at the Water’s edge haunted
by its lonely face, and, yet it must seek at last
an end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
to shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

(“The Old Playhouse”, OSKHTS 38).
She realizes that as long as she is preoccupied with the physical, self realization cannot be achieved.

To Kamala Das’s heightened consciousness, love by popular connection, is not the real thing but love of Lord Krishna, “the bodyless form” that is valid and worthwhile. The poet’s longing for the union with her spiritual paramour finds its expression in “Ghanashyam” (Tonight, This Savage Rite).

Wisdom comes later unto her and she realises that she loves “disguise” and that all her lovers are the shadows of the real lover, and she express her identity with the Eternal lover:

But if he is you and I am you
Who is loving who
Who is the husk who the kernel
Where is the body where is the soul?
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?

(“Ghanashyam,” OSKHTS 118)

The poet’s mind is in Ghanasgyam thus stands the guiding her towards the final home:

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

(“Ghanashyam,” OSKHTS 118)

The poet’s search for ideal love often takes the form of Radha’s yearning for Krishna. The poet identifies herself with the legendary Radha (the Beloved of Lord Krishna) in the poem “Maggots”:

At Sunset, on the riverbank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left ...
That night in her husband’s arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, what is wrong.
Do you mind my kisses, love? and she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

(“The Maggots,” OSKHTS 52)

To her, physical love in her husband’s arms, after having experienced the blissful, beatific state of Krishna – consciousness, is a tasteless, benumbing experience. There is no comparable participation on her part, even though, she may blindly return the kisses. The absence of emotional response on her part in response to his advances reduces her to the abject condition of an unfeeling “corpse” with her partner nipping like “maggots” at her body. In terms of soul – experience, she is a dead woman, for the soul does not sublimely reach out. The male partner’s carving for the flesh is brought home in the expression “maggots nipping the corpse”. The rhetorical question at the end of the poem registers the poet’s refusal to identify love with physical enjoyment. The poet’s love seeks for it “a respectable” in the poem “A phantom – Lotus”:

The only truth that matter is
That all this love is mine to give
It does not matter that I seek
For it a container, as alms

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

(“A phantom – Lotus”, Tonight, This Savage Rite 13)

She seeks “a blue face” that blossoms like “a phantom – lotus” on the waters of her dreams.

The poet’s yearning for union with the Divine Mate is portrayed in “A man is a season”:

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 shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in other’s arms. But I saw each
Shadow cast your blurred image in my glass, somehow
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 her husband call?

(“A Man is a Season,” Tonight, This Savage Rite 21)

To quote Kalaithasan:

The poet’s Jiva longs for the union with the Divine Lover, even when she plays the love-game with human counterparts. To her, “man” is a season but Lord Krishna is “eternity.” Man’s love, symbolic of “season,” with all its vagaries, caprices and changing character. In contrast, the love of the Divine mate enjoys the infinite, suffers no change, knows no time, and is beyond temporal experiences while human love is fleeting fragile and perishable and unchanging and undying (Kamala Das: A Critical Study 36).

In the soul of her soul she is wedded to Krishna and to Krishna alone, as she confesses in her autobiography: “Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beauteous smile of my Krishna. Always, always, I shall love you I told him, not speaking aloud but willing him to hear me, only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match mine” (My Story 87).

The poet expresses her joy at the discovery of her Divine Lover who is able to give her spiritual fulfilment: “He is the jewel I prefer to wear” (“The Swamp,” The Old Playhouse and Other Poems 53). There is her Eternal Lover guiding her footsteps towards the Divine Home: “Everywhere I look, I see him everywhere I do not look I see him in all I see him in everything like a blue bird at sunset he flits across my sky . . . .” (“Sunset, Blue Bird,” TOPHAOP 54)

The poet’s quest for the ideal lover takes the form of Radha’s yearning for Krishna. She confesses in My Story: “I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to
return to his Radha” (165). The poet’s longing for the union with the Divine is reflected in the poem that follows:

This becomes from this hour
our river and this old Kadamba
tree, ours alone, for our homeless
souls to return someday,
to hang like bats
from its pure physicality.


The union of Radha and Krishna is that of Jiva and paramatma. In that union, the individuality of the soul is lost, and the soul becomes one with or merges with God. The poet is consumed by Krishna Prema as Radha is. In her imagination, if not in real life, the poet-persona’s alter ego seeks a similar Radha Krishna - experience for the realization of spirituality from gross physicality.

In his explication of this short poetic piece, Kalaithasan states:

In “Radha Krishna” the poet is able to have glimpse of the infinite through Nature. Nature images – the river and the Kadamba tree – do not operate on the physical level. They help the poet to connect life and death in her transcendental vision of life. The Kadamba tree ceases to be a mere tree but assumes divine dimensions. The Kadamba tree where Krishna is seated is symbolic of the Divine Home – the celestial abode of God – towards which our “homeless” souls journey in their pilgrimage towards spiritual identity. The river too is no longer a sheet of water. It is the river of time. By crossing it, the “Souls” reach their destined home, the abode of God (198).

The transcendence of the body - consciousness unites, blends and harmonises all souls into one and the only one, that is Krishna. She attains Sachidanda (“the supreme state of spiritual attainment). The soul’s identification becoming Kadamba tree means that the souls become one with nature itself, for nature is only the external manifestation of the indwelling God or Krishna.
Similar is the theme of the poem “Vrindavas” (qtd. in Kohil’s Kamala Das 28). What K. Chellappan says of Bharathi’s “Kannan En Kathalan” (“Krishna, My Lover”) is true of Kamala Das’s “Virandvan”: “Krishna is the music on the threshold of every human soul, eternally awaiting the human call (50). In the tradition of Indian culture, Kamala Das visualises Krishna in the role of the lover.

As Chellappan says:

In fact, to visualise God as the Divine Lover seeking and sought by human soul is nothing new to Indian poetry Manickavachakar and Andal have spoken of the infinite yearning of the bride of the human soul for union with in great lover, God (49).

God is the Divine Lover when the soul externally seeks.

Kamala Das introduces a mythical frame work of her longing in the poem “Radha” where she worships her ideal lover as Krishna. She expresses her inner longings. She seeks an objective correlative for her own and identifies herself with Radha in search of ‘Radha’.

All most all Indians women poets are haunted by the theme of RadhaKrishna love of Mahabaratha tradition and try to identify themselves with Radha as a symbol of ideal or divine love. She has become mad in her love for all that is beyond body – beyond the flesh. The transformation has taken place in her attitude in life and in her vision. She celebrates her spiritual love through an elegant metaphor; she reveals the enchanting qualities and capacity of her eternal love

Shyam, O Ghanashyam
You love like a fisherman cast your nets in the narrow of my mind
And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like he chanted fish

(CP 95)

Kamala Das imagines herself as Radha to reach God. Her Krishna -consciousness finds its expression in “Radha”:
The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Every thing in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You.

(“Radha,” OSKHTS 77)

The woman in the poet longs for the sublimation of love as in the case of Radha
whose long waiting for union with Krishna chastened her love. In that supreme state, her
lover passes beyond the pale of mental process, and the hard core of the mind begins melting,
and she becomes united with Krishna in a spiritual embrace. The pangs of love, expressed in
the idiom of romantic agony, make the elusive Krishna come alive within the reach of the
poet. There is nothing but “You” everywhere, “You” representing Krishna.

The poet’s endless waiting for the invisible God and her preoccupation with Krishana
-consciousness find an echo in her nostalgic moments:

But illogical that I am, from birth onwards, I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child, I used to regard him as my old 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 would lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure.... Now in middle age, having no desire unfulfilled I think of Krishna as my friend.... And illogically again, I believe that in death I might come face to face with him. Then the shehnai [an auspicious musical Instrument played during marriage] can begin , the birds can sing, the river can start its lullaby, for another of his brides would have come home....( “Sex : Mindless Surrender” 19).

The sea is an archetypal symbol of immortality. The sea is a poetic symbol recalling
to her the intimation of the immortality of the soul and exposes the perishable nature of the
foul smelling body:
I throw the bodies out, 
I cannot stand their smell, 
Only the soul may enter 
The vortex of the sea. 
Only the souls knows how to sing 
At the vortex of the sea.

(“The Suicide,” OSKHTS 107)

The Sea, by virtue of its colour, symbolises Lord Krishna. The poet’s wish in the poem “Composition” to go down the sea express her soul’s yearning for a merger with Krishna. The poet wants “to take a long walk/into the sea.” She likes to “lie there...” The sea is the abode of Lord Narayana whose *avatar* [incarnation] is Krishna. It is this “great hunger” -- to be unified with the infinite -- that propels the poet to escape in the bed of the sea:

Greater hungers lurk 
at the basement of the sea. 
Ultimately 
I will feed only the hunger 
to feed other hungers, 
that basic one.

(“Composition,” OSKHTS 32)

The woman in Kamala Das realises she may reach her goal – her eternal lover – only when she finds her deliverance crossing the ocean of births and deaths: “we are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal and perishable. The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with god. My mate is He.” (My Story 180-181)

Kamala Das’s feministic self towards a Hindu way of life finds its eloquent expression in “Composition.” All that the poet wants is “to take a long walk / into the sea / and lie there, resting/ completely uninvolved.” The poet toys with the idea of ending herself in the sea. But the traditional Hindu woman that she is, she turns to Hindu religion. Man has no power to escape from the “cages of involvement,” his circumscribed life but to accept his destiny and commit himself to this phenomenal world. She realises:

201
What exists must exist. Only the composition will change. Tomorrow my soul
might migrate into the womb of a house- builder’s woman... I have no end.
Nothing has an end. Instead of an end, all that we suffer is a composition (My
Story 210).

Kamala Das, therefore, resigns herself to the Hindu view of birth and death:

I must linger on,
trapped in immortality,
my only freedom being
the freedom to
decompose

(“Composition,” OSKHTS 33)

As Anne Brewster observes:

The weltanschauung encapsulates the spiritual elements of Hindu philosophy,
fused with an existential acceptance of a secular responsibility for one’s action
in the world, as distinct being the inevitable product of Karma action in the
past birth deciding rebirth (105).

The foregoing paragraphs through an exercise in explication and interpretation of the
poems of Kamala Das have tried to establish the blended vision in Kamala Das. This chapter
is a careful consideration of the past in the career graph of Kamala Das viewed from different
angles such as the familial past, the ancestral past, the personal past and the religious past.
The different types of past variously designated have fused themselves into one another that it
is well neigh impossible to treat them wide apart. They are not exclusive but run into one
another proving the unified vision in Kamala Das.