CHAPTER III

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF KAMALA DAS AS A POET

"My poetry ... generates in each reader a particular song that he has heard in his youth or childhood. It is not as if the words have to be supplied by me; the song is generated and the mood is created."

(Das, Personal—2)

Kamala Das is the first woman writer of Indian English Literature to attempt to bring into writing, personal experiences unexpurgated. She has broken away from the conventional form of writing and created her own style. She has given voice to the Indian woman. "To be seen and not heard" had been the fate of the Indian woman for a long time. Das, however, "burst upon the Indo-Anglian scene like a darting fascinating spectre of unconventionality blasting to smithereens the traditional reticences of Indian womanhood" (Nandakumar 383). Das's poetry is not merely Indian, like that of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu before her but a passionate expression of the universal experience of love, despair, anguish and failure apprehended through a feminine sensibility, which is also Indian. A growing tendency to take her work seriously is indicated by the reaction to her work, including comments on her
frankness (Parthasarathy), her search for truth (Venugopal), her need to dominate (King) and her freedom to decompose (Brewster).

Regarding the actual process of writing poetry Das says: "When you write poetry, you are free of country, religion, relatives everything. No nationality, no family, no roots. Poetry has none of them. It's so strong... it's like a storm, an experience, a typhoon or tornado which suddenly carries away roofs of houses. Poetry is like that. Totally unexpected" (Personal).

"Das is a master craftsman when it comes to depicting everyday life straddling both the English and Malayalam literary worlds" (Menon). It is impossible to herd her into a category, or some kind of clear boundary, as she is too passionate, too moody and forceful for that. Extreme honesty and truthfulness are the main characteristics of Das's poetry. She is of the opinion that we should be what we are without any pretensions. She also feels that given the chance everyone would love to be natural “To be what we are, to accept what we feel and to come up without a mask”(Personal ) is absolutely essential for her. Autobiographical voice governs her narrative voice in poetry. Her honesty and candour appeals to us; at the same time we also suspect the truth in her words when she says, “I have no secrets” (My Story, 207) because she also says, “I’m a practised teller of white lies”(113). Das
resembles her favourite poet Whitman when she omits, exaggerates and even contradicts herself. She also matches Whitman in his grandeur, the way in which he embraces everything, like a God. She says, “All the people who have come into our life— the lunatic, the teacher, all, have to be included in the sweep. You have to distribute yourself to every character, only then creation is possible. All the characters are in our embrace and we give them compassion and love equally— That’s how we are able to write about them all of a sudden” (Personal).

What comes through in Das’s poetry is that she is on a quest, a search for completeness, which involves her search for true love and her search to discover her own identity. The loss of identity is perhaps due to “the problematic quality of modern life— the loss of tradition and the constantly shifting grounds of our beliefs which makes one wonder as to what is Real” (Gardner 718).

Going through the various collections of Das’s poems one is forced to agree with Devindra Kohli who points out that the arrangement of Das’s poems in the different volumes are obviously in a wrong order. He cites the following as an example: “The poem celebrating the son’s birth (Jaisurya) follows the one (The White Flowers) which “wishes him a long life” in the face of the outer threat of violence and death” (Kohli, Virgin Whiteness 27). For an analysis of
Das's poems, therefore, I have chosen to work on them classifying them as given below. The classification does not follow a chronological pattern but is based on the themes of Das's poems, which offers a way to trace Das's questing journey.

1) “When we were children...” — Poems relating to her childhood.

2) “The mind's striptease” — Her confessional poetry.

3) “Amidst scorpions of fashionable women” — Social poems.

4) Individual / universal “I” / O Krishna, I am melting, melting... — Philosophical and religious poems.

5) “Wondrous raiment fit for Gods” — Das's poetic craft.

1) “When we were children” — Poems relating to her childhood:

Involved with the process of self-search Das oscillates between her nostalgic past and nightmarish present:

What shall I give to you? The hum of dreams
trampled into childhood soil? The clutter
of wheels drawn by a string on gravel at
nightfall?..........................................
..........................................
..........................................
I know we made paper-boats and stored them
in a tin. But do you remember? No?
Then what can I gift you? I wish I knew.

("To a Big Brother about to be married", Sou/ 100)

Caught in the mesh of time and ageing the poet appears to clutch and cling to the lost dimension in her blood. The poet's attachment to the past lays the foundation for her sense of identity. Her memory helps her to establish relations once again with her beloved grandmother, the ancestral Nalapat house with the rituals, the servants and the open spaces.

Devindra Kohli has rightly argued that it was in keeping with her general criticism of male character for its failure to give her tenderness and warmth, that the only figure that she presents as an ideal is her great grandmother (119). In today's world where even love is selfish and weighed against other things she yearns for her grandmother.

Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death,

I wonder why the ache still persists. Was

She buried, bones and all, in the loose red

Soil of my heart? All through the sun-singing

Day, all through the moon-wailing night, I think

Of her, of the warmth that she took away,
no longer was

There someone to put an arm around my

shoulders...

("The Millionaires at Marine Drive", Soul 68)

According to Das's sister, Sulochana, their grandmother believed that Amy (Das's childhood nickname) was the reincarnation of her husband who had died when she was only thirty-seven years old. Sulochana believes that this was probably the reason for the intimacy that existed between Das and her grandmother (14-19). Besides her grandmother, Das's ancestral house, the Nalapat house, features prominently in the poems belonging to this category. It is the central metaphor in poems such as "No Noon at my Village Home" and "Evening at Old Nalapat". In "Composition" the "red house" looms large as a symbol of comfort and ageless dignity as a contrast to the poet's present life of despair.

2) "The mind's striptease"— Das's confessional poetry:

Das's search continues into her youthful days. This time the search is for an ideal lover. She also makes an attempt to perceive the self through confession. Her writing now resembles that of Western confessional writers such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath,
John Berryman and Theorore Roethke. Like their writings Das's too are highly subjective with a strong autobiographical touch in it. Confessional poets place no barriers between their own selves and direct expression of that self. They do not accept restrictions on subject matter and anything within their private experiences may form the theme of their writing. There is an air of unconventionality about Das's writings and we are left wonderstruck when confronted by the frank manner in which she articulates the theme of sex and love. In fact, the celebration of the body is one of the main features of Das's poetry and painting. She does not give a clinical analysis in the manner of Gieve Patel, but instead, her personal approach has a touch of delicacy and charm to it as seen in the following lines:

I swam about and floated

And dived into the cold and green

I lay speckled green and gold

In all the hours of the sun. ("Suicide", Soul 87)

She is particularly proud of some of her lines. She picked out the following lines during a personal interview:

I shall serve myself in

Bedroom mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter.

("Gino", Soul 92)
Throughout her poetry she shows a longing for an emotionally stable life, which can be achieved only through true love. She expresses her need for love uninhibitedly:

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead, just dead. ("Suicide" Best 28)

Das, however, is not obsessed with sex. In fact she rates understanding and mutual respect as being the basis of love. Unfortunately, she was married to a person who was totally different from her, who was more interested in the co-operative movement and the bank. Marital disharmony is the theme of her poem "A Faded Epaulet On His Shoulder". It is a painful poem, where she speaks with startling frankness and suppressed sarcasm of the unfeeling bureaucratic husband, "a signer of files" who is indifferent to the "parijat" in her hair and the aroma of her sandalwood-smeread breast,

............................................................even a
Fair-skinned maid servant could take him away for
hours and
while returning his eyes looked not at mine but at the
trees the
brown flowers of the mango as though they were to be
blamed for his
fever (Soul 124)
The humiliation of being treated as a sexual object and vassal in the
house underlined for her the shallowness of the marital bond. Her
rebellion against the requirement to become domesticated, to cater to
the master, children and kitchen, and whenever necessary to be on
display as a showpiece, can be seen in “Descendants” and “Substitute”.
Her disillusionment in marriage leads her into extramarital relationships,
which end up leaving her totally frustrated and unhappy. “Captive” has
the protagonist relieved at having broken free from her most recent
lover—“So long, so long, sweet slavery” but she is forced to admit that
the labyrinthine web in which she remains trapped is of her own
choosing:

............. For years I have run from one
Gossamer lane to another, I am

Now my own captive. (“Captive”, Soul 91)

Though the poet takes us from one relationship to another, each
one is found to be equally fruitless, constituting towards a progressively
greater sense of loneliness, betrayal and guilt. Das now turns to Death, which appears to offer a way of escape from this desperate situation. Suicide interests the confessional poets as a way out. It becomes their way of confessing that the world is too much for them and they cannot make any sense of it. Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* says “Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognised even instinctively the ridiculous character of the daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering”(13).

William Packard (Qtd. in Daruwalla, 11) believes that confessional poetry, being autobiographical is associated with a certain purgation and can be therefore classified as a therapy. The poets attempt to reconstruct their fragmented selves through therapeutic confession; by peeling off layers of pretence they try to regain lost values. Das admits:

I also know that by confessing

by peeling off my layers

reach

closer to the soul

and

to the bone's

supreme indifference. (“Composition” *Best* 81)
Das's urge to peel the layers of herself to reveal the terrors, pain, miseries, frustrations and vexations is obvious here. She realises that an understanding of the true self is possible only by doing away with the pretensions and superficialities that human beings are usually surrounded by.

Reference to illness—physical and mental is a common trait in confessional poetry. A threat of the disintegration of the self and an attempt to put it together is also seen in most confessional poems. The desire to escape makes suicide very attractive for the confessional poets. Das too shares this tendency, and this can be seen in the following lines of her poem "Composition":

All I want now
is to take a long walk
into the sea
and lie there, resting
completely uninvolved. (Soul 26)

In the "Suicide" and "Invitation" the poet contemplates death by drowning. In the first poem her intention is to search the inner chambers of the sea where she expects to find "a sun slumbering" very different
from the "hostile cold" of the surface. In the second the sea invites her in:

................. Come in,

Come in. What do you lose by dying

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

End in me, cries the sea. (Qtd. in Dwivedi 127 )

Das's later poetry reveals a more mature and profound expression on the theme of death. Now death appears serene and silent resembling the closing of lotuses at dusk. She realizes that the soul is immortal and that death is only a temporary cessation. She states, "I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence" ( My Story 280). "A Holiday for Me" ( Soul 61) has the poet in a wistful mood wishing for death. She sees it as a holiday jaunt and adds, "I shall leave all my luggage behind" in the ready sense of detachment that comes with age.

I shall carry with me only a laugh

I shall travel as light as I can... ( Soul 61)

Das in comparison with other confessional poets:

Das was born in an aristocratic, orthodox South Indian family. Traditional values and responses had been inculcated within her from a
very early age. She had had her early education in a convent and spent a number of early years in various cities of India. This resulted in a clash between inherited values, acquired knowledge and her natural temperament causing the schism in her personality, which is the basic characteristic of Das as a confessional poet. Her confessional poetry is an attempt to end the war between passion and reason, flesh and spirit, body and soul. However the haste and urgency that are typical of the "procrastinations and incarcerations " (Singh, 95) of the Western confessional poets like Lowell, Roethke and even Plath are absent in Das's psychological probing. The confessional poets of the West were troubled by manic depressions, their personalities were found to be balanced on the razor-thin edge between sanity and insanity. They were aware of their mental condition and this made living even more difficult for them. They had to steel themselves and be determined so as to prevent themselves from succumbing into the dangerously depressive state. At the same time, there were situations when they existed in an uncontrollable, euphoric state and this was when poetry happened for them. This gave their poetry a tremendous power and intensity. Das did not sink into such depths though she did have a minor breakdown at the age of nineteen. She is said to have contemplated suicide a number of times though she never actually tried anything so drastic. She says, "I
wanted, for a moment, to fling myself down, to spatter the blanched brilliance of the moonlight with red blood stains.” (My Story 104). The perpetual restlessness and memory of the hurt she had suffered would have led the poet to commit suicide if it were not for the robust wisdom in her, which is born out of her inner spirituality. She confesses:

I tell you, sea,
I have enough courage to die
But not enough to disobey him
who said: Do not die
And hurt me that certain way. (“Suicide”, Soul 86)

Das has a lot in common with Plath as a poet. Chris Wallace-Crabbe (222) points out that Das’s poetry with its assertions, plaints and elisions keeps building and flaunting a poetic personality marked by excess, which could be said to be Rousseauesque or Byronic. This Byronising of the poetic subject leads us to associate Das with Sylvia Plath. However, the distinctions between the two contemporaries are very clear. At the subject level Plath presents violence whereas Das presents sexual desire. Plath’s poetry is vividly metaphorical but Das works through metonymic accumulation and though she does make use of metaphors they cannot be said to be the mainspring of her verse as it is in Plath’s. Another important difference is that Plath never sacrificed
the so-called well-made poem. Even when she was fighting against the male domination of culture, her poetry kept to the norms prescribed by phallocentric criticism. Even her later poems like "Tulips", "Sheep is Fog" and "The Arrival of the Bee box" are conventionally beautiful pieces of literature. Das is totally unconventional in her writing. Her poetry is often “anti-structural”, “anti-elegant” and “anti-establishment” (Dwivedi 49).

However, a number of similarities can be discerned in the works of the two poets: Das's poem “Composition” has the following lines:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
autobiography. (Soul 23)

A similar associative use of the word “striptease” is found in Plath's poem “Lady Lazarus”:

The peanut-munching crown
shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot
The big striptease. (Thomas 472)

Both writers, being women and biological mothers too, they saw childbirth as being a very important event in their lives and as one which
deserved celebration. Thus we see in Plath's "Morning Song" a very evocative description of the moment of the child's arrival:

...have set you going like a fat gold watch

The midwife slapping your foot soles and your bald cry

Took its place among the elements (Hughes 31)

Das's poem, "Jaisurya" is rather similar to the above poem. Besides childbirth another theme common to both poets is poetry written on their fathers. Both their fathers had been powerful people, each having his own domineering personality and an air of superiority, which kept even their children at a distance. Both the ladies had lived in awe of their fathers during their lifetimes. Plath however, adored her father. She is said to have had an Electra complex. She saw her father as being God and his death had a devastating effect on her. She confesses:

I have always been scared of you

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledy goo

And your neat moustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue. ("Daddy" Plath 61)

This is in total contrast to Das's "Requiem for My Father". Das did not consider her father as being omnipotent. On his death, her only regret was that her reverence and awe of him had prevented her from
expressing her love for him when he was alive. Now that he was dead, she can only sob brokenly saying: "I loved you, Father, I loved you all my life" (Soul 114).

The hurt they felt at the manner in which woman is treated in society, is hidden behind ironical humour in their poetry. A wife's role as a mere puppet or plaything is dealt with in Plath's "The Applicant" which is again very similar to Das's "The Old Playhouse":

Here is a hand
To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it. ("The Applicant". Qtd. in Nair 38)

The loss of personality and the mechanised routine of the "Wife" is presented as an ironic caricature here as well as in Das's poem:

.............you called me wife,

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and

to offer at the right moment the vitamins.

("The Old Playhouse" Soul 30)

The mental layout of both the poets were similar too. Plath and Das suffered nervous breakdowns and contemplated suicide. Das was
cured, but Plath could not be and she was finally successful in taking her life.

Another curious comparison can be made between Das and another writer, Anne Sexton. The resemblance in the writing of the two poets is evident in the undercurrents of longing or desire in their poetry. For both of them the experience of love is something beautiful and tender. Sexton's powerful feelings are projected through sex in a manner very similar to that of Das.

We're circling around the Bourne Circle, Bourne
Then I know you in your dream and prayed of our time
Then I would be pierced and you would take root in me
And that I would bring forth your born, might bear
The you or the ghost of you in my little house.

("That Day", Qtd.in Ayaz 111)

There is however no reason to believe that Das followed the model set by the Western confessional poets, when, in fact, a classic Indian model is available in Meerabai's poems. Meerabai was a Bhakti poet of the Middle ages. From childhood she had been devoted to Lord Krishna. She worshipped his idol and considered the Lord as her
husband. Her poems reflect her ardent longing for her union with the Lord. The longing, the pain and accompanying intense emotions are the striking features of Meerabai's poetry. Other than Meerabai there were many other poets of this time who wrote love poetry. A number of them were male, e.g. Chaitanya and Nammazhvar, they were ardent devotees too but their writings were not curbed as they were males. A still later example of a woman writing confessional poetry is that of Muddupalani, an 18 century Telegu poet who has written a classic called "Radhika Santavanam" (Tharu 2). It was a "sringara prabandham" a genre associated with the history of Telegu literature in the Thanjavur era. The principal rasa evoked was "Sringara" or erotic pleasure. Epic poems in this genre usually retold with significant transformation of plot, atmosphere, theme and worldview, the story of Radha and Krishna. What is striking about this work is that here it is a woman's sensuality that is central. She takes the initiative and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution (7-8). Thus, in approaching Das's evident concentration on sexual themes, it would do well to remember that erotic sexuality is strongly inscribed in Indian mysticism, especially in Hindu culture. As Mohanti puts it, “We think God is half-male and half-female and that says a lot about the Indian attitude to sex and sexuality. We don't have any conflict about it really.
This conflict came to India through Christianity and the Moghuls” (Masini 387).

Love for Krishna, whose love is more important than his infidelity, is an ancient traditional theme for Indian women poets. Bhakthi literature mainly comprises of the very passionate and varied feeling, which gathers around Krishna’s life. Besides the Bhakthi literature, there are the Hindi poems from the 16th century, many of them written by women, where the physical love for Krishna is lingered over in almost endless detail. This kind of emotional and autobiographical openness, the extravagance, the constant yearning for experience makes it clear that Das hardly needed any impetus from American “confessional verse” to write in the way she did. However she has common features with them, which is sure to invite further penetrating study. In fact comparisons have already been drawn up between the frank sexuality of this tradition of Indian mysticism and the mystical writings of St.John of the Cross and St.Theresa of Avila (Jones 203).

3) "Amidst scorpions of fashionable people”— Das’s social poetry:

Some of Das’s poems as social poetry deserve critical analysis. Das is not a social analyst; she does not suggest remedies for social problems, she is not even a social satirist as Nissim Ezekiel is in some of
his poems. Das focuses attention on the dehumanising effects of some social injustice and inequality and she is worried about the deterioration of human psyche, socially and morally. She has been fully aware of the social maladies around her and has reacted emotionally to social injustice, cruelty by the rich, inequality and poverty among the poor.

Honour was a plant my ancestors watered

In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres. At night their

Serfs

Let them take to bed their little nieces and pregnancy

A puzzle to the young toys, later thrown into wells and ponds

From which they rose like lotuses and water lilies, each with

A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge below her navel, yes

(Best 138)

These lines are from the poem "Honour" which is a merciless exposure of the seamy side of Nair hegemony. Das is not committed to any ideology in her poetry but she is committed to humanism and love. Pondering over the rich-poor divide, Das felt that it was a wonder that
the poor had not risen like a locust storm and devoured the rich till now.

She writes:

I watch the little boys crowding around the bhel puri wala's handcart, only to have the pleasure of watching the richer ones eat. I have seen their wise eyes and their lengthy contemplation. The poor are fatalists by nature and by tradition. Or else where would we be now, the selfish, self-centred ones?

(My Story 210)

Das's emotions are stirred when confronted by the sight of the less privileged and the oppressed. Poems such as "The Housebuilders" and "The Lunatic Asylum" speak of her love and compassion for humanity as a whole. In the first poem Das admires the house builders' frail figures, "toy men of dust" who work hard to create beautiful shelters for their more privileged brethren. In "The Lunatic Asylum" Das almost envies the lunatics for being able to break away from "brutish" routine. Das is filled with contempt at the situation the human beings have created for themselves—the so called "civilization". "Sepia", "After the Party" and "A Faded Epaulet on his Shoulder" are poems where she makes satirical comments linking human beings to reptiles, insects and so on:
The party, found all men dark and sleek like drones, women parakeet. ("After the Party", Soul 71)

Scorpions of fashionable women running me down with cold fisheyes ("A faded....", Soul 124)

There is utter disgust in the following lines from the poem "Sepia":

They are faceless, many cousined,
sad, they rush at every call,
they only sulk in privacy.

scorch to the very narrow
this sad mouthed human race. ("Sepia", Soul 140)

The confession of "animal lust" in My Story shocked the utter complacency of our society. Of this she says, "I needed to disturb society of its complacence. I find this a very ugly state. I wanted to remove gender difference. I wanted to see something happen to society, which had such strong inhibitions and which only told lies in public"

("It is Animal Lust", Kaur, Poetry 5).
Human suffering anywhere in the world has created compassionate stirrings of indignation in Das. She is one of the few Indian poets who have been involved in the fate of a people so distant from them. Her "Colombo Poems" are an example. What hurt Das was not the magnitude of the killing alone but the suffering of the soul, the indignity and disgrace done to the essential goodness and innocence of man. The agony that caused the Tamils to shrink and shiver is clearly suggested by the evocative imagery in "A Certain Defect in the Blood".

... like spiders exposed

To a water jet we curled ourselves into

Tight balls... (Best 135)

Kamala Das's sympathies are stirred up even by individual tragedies. "Requiem for a Son" written on the death of Sanjay Gandhi is wet with the wails of a mother. A personal experience is transformed into a universal one evoking sorrow in the hearts of all. Das focuses on the courage required to live and the terror that envelopes human destiny.

Das's triumph lives in the manner in which she is able to identify with others, sharing in their joy and sorrow. This raises her to the level of being a universal poet, known and respected in the international literary scene.
4 a) Individual / Universal “I” — Das's philosophical poetry:

The endless search for an eternal and perfect lover is one of the central themes of Das's poetry. "The Old Playhouse" introduces an interesting perspective of love where through sexual passion and the giving and receiving of love the poet is totally involved in a quest for identity, a quest for completeness. Identity is not to be found in the medal of a name but in the inner commitment to living, according to her (Soul 30).

Das's poetry, like that of Ezekiel's describes the entanglements of life's complex situations that ensnare the unwary and those deluded by the sensory gratifications of the most corporeal desires, but her distress is not so much on detachment brought out by a conscious severance of the self from emotional involvements as on the search and identification and its association with the Divine. In "Contacts" she explains what she means by "I":

When I sleep, the outside
world crumbles
all contacts
broken in that longer sleep
only
The world
shall die and I

Remain, just being

Also being a remaining... (My Story 135)

“That Longer Sleep” refers to death. Here too it is not "I" that dies but the world. “I” remain not only as a being but also as a remaining. The world of plurality exists only as interpretation of the five senses. A disunion with the world does not constitute the death of “I”. Mortality is the fate of all living beings. A discovery of this nature of “I” liberates one from the fear of death. A greater consciousness that transcends all experiences cannot be captured within the net of physical sensations. The consciousness that distinguishes between Sath (The manifest) and the Asath (The unmanifest) is the Self or I. Das explains in “Someone else’s Song”:

I am a million, million people
talking all at once, with voices
raised in clamour, like maids
at village wells.

I am a million, million deaths
pox-clustered, each a drying seed
someday to be shed, to grow for
someone else a memory.
I am a million, million births
flushed with triumphant blood, each a growing
thing that thrusts its long nailed hands
to scar the hollow air.
I am a million, million silences
strung like crystal beads
onto some else's song. (Best 40)

Thus for Das, "I" is the self that is found everywhere, in all forms of creation.

In her search for identity, she becomes every woman and the men she met and loved become every man, what is called the ultimate man. She does not want it to be confined to the circumscribed limits of a name as seen in "Introduction". In this poem she describes herself in a series of identities progressing from physical and emotional to the spiritual level.

Her search for ideal love gets intimately connected with her identity as a woman. It becomes more difficult with such superimposed conceptions of what she should be — wife who can rightfully claim her husband's love or seducer in masculine garb, natural feminity or enforced masculinity— a bewildering schizophrenia by no means mitigated by her many names Amy, Kamala or Madhavikutty. The
dilemma is solved by rising to the subtest of all levels of existence namely the “I”.

...I met a man, loved him. Call him not by any name, he is every man who wants a woman just as I am every Woman who seeks love. In him the hungry haste Of rivers, in me the oceans tireless Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and everyone,

The answer is, it is I. (Soul 97)

“The Anamalai Poems” provides a peep hole into the troubled psyche of a third world female, quite unaware of her position in a world growing increasingly mercenary. Das is obsessed with herself and one of the recurring paradoxes in this group of poems is that each of its inward movements towards an isolated self covers an intricate pattern ultimately becoming a movement in the direction of the larger reality. These poems remain a record of the poet's obsessive celebration of the Self. There is a muted identification of the hills with the poet's subjective self in all the poems of the series. The identification is near complete in “The Anamalai Hills” which can be treated as a kind of prologue to the series. In this poem the hills are described as occupying a space outside time with neither “clocks” nor “Cocks” to crow the
morning in. The whole area is enveloped in an all-embracing mist, which however, seems to rise from somewhere within the speaker's own heart. There is a clear indication of the external landscape becoming an extension of her inner landscape, a conception that becomes quite distinct towards the end of the poem and acts a governing metaphor for the series named after it,

The mountain

seems deaf-mute, but the flesh of her

spirit is but its flesh,

and, her silence, despite the tumult in her blood, its
destined hush. (Soul 47)

These poems are different from her earlier poems in that here the poet overcomes the several anxieties and allow herself to luxuriate almost erotically, in the crisis of the self. There is a movement towards absolute subjectivity, pure interiority illustrated in the following lines from a poem in the “Anamalai” sequence:

...other

journeys are all so easy but

not the inward one, the longest

route home and the steepest
descent... (Soul 111)
Das has been conscious of an inner void that troubled her throughout. She has lived in two worlds, the harsh world of outer reality and the ambiguous but autonomous world of inner compulsions. She muses, “One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only one who has decided to travel inwards will realize that his route has no end” (My Story 109) and again in Anamalai poems:

The longest route home is perhaps

the most torturous, the inward

path you take that carried you step

by weary step beyond the blood's

illogical arrogance, yes

beyond the bone and the marrow

into that invisible abode of pain. (Best 157)

She travelled inwards and inside, she passed through all the intricate pathways of the world, often condemned by a hostile society but never cowed down by scandals and vilifications. She has been subjected to the bondage of sin, suffering and disease; she finally realized that true peace lies in transcending the purely physical: “that is shed as slough at the end of each embrace has to be transcended” (“Jaisurya”, Soul 57).
4b) “O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting” — Das's religious poetry:

Her search continues, now directed towards finding “The obscure God with wise lenient ways” ("The First Meeting". Soul 90). The difference between physical love, and the fulfilment and complete satisfaction that is obtained through Divine love is explained in the poem "Ghanshyam":

We played once a husk game, my lover and I
His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me.
In panic I asked don't you want me any longer, don't you want me
Don't you, don't you? (Soul 94)

The “husk game” of love, which the unwise play is not only temporary, it brings only a fear of loneliness and insecurity. The mumbling words of physical love is in contrast to Divine love with which a raiment of words can be woven into a sky of song and music that stirs and causes to dance and exposes the comparative impotence of sensual pleasures.
"Compositions" contains the poet's major preoccupation, namely the entanglements of worldly existence that constitute captivity and the method of overcoming these ties to achieve freedom. It is in essence the teaching of the *Vedas* condensed and interpreted through the *Geetha* to form the backbone of Hindu philosophy.

There appears to be a lot of contradictions in both Das's poetry and her autobiographical/fictional work *My Story*, for example loss of self, projection of self, her consciousness for appearing clothed or naked, the need to be silent or verbal. These are the polarities of stress rather than balance — yet for all this there is the sense of authenticity that Das conveys. In order to avoid confusions Das has to be read as a religious poet also — whatever she speaks of, or does or says she must be taken within the context of Hindu predisposition and beliefs. Das's religious poems are of a kind:

...which would be impossible to find in any other woman writer now writing in English: the poetry of a woman who knows that she is moving through the paradigms of myth. It is only this, which saves her poetry from extravagance. But not to give the mythic the same importance as the writer himself is to deny their cultural placing is the view taken by Vincent O'Sullivan (190).
Das's poems show a tendency to view the body in combination with the soul and not in isolation from it. The body is the medium through which all the exaltations of the soul are communicated. P.K.J. Kurup in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman as a Rebel* comes out with a new understanding of religiousness. According to him it is the search of a private value system that can regulate and give meaning to one's existence rather than a blind adherence to convention and tradition.

P.P Raveendran (xii) is of the view that the poet's desire to be united with Krishna is one of the ways in which the indigenous culture manifests itself. Sunanda Chavan using the Jungian concept of animus explains that Das tries to realise the animus in the human form. ("Animus" in the Jungian phraseology is the mental register in the consciousness of the female of an ideal human form). Das's search for genuine love, which would mean impenetrable security, now makes her identify with the Radha-Krishna syndrome. Using this traditional symbol for the soul's quest and confluence with the Divine, the poet reveals the fulfilment attained through uninhibited surrender in as many as seven poems— for example, "Radhakrishna", "The Maggots", "A Phantom Lotus", "Sunset", "Blue Bird", "The Blind Walk" and "The Paper Moon". Das uses words like "our" repeatedly in these poems highlighting both spatial and temporal proximity of the eternal lovers.
There are evocative descriptions that conjure up visions of Brindavan with flowing rivers and spreading leafy trees under which Radha and Krishna meet to reaffirm their fidelity to each other. These poems also operate at a deeper level. The river signifying the ceaseless flow of life becomes a possession of Radha and Krishna for with each succeeding generation, the moments of fully reciprocated love experienced on earth is the perpetuation of the love Radha and Krishna had for each other. In “Phantom Lotus” Das has identified love with truth, with beauty, a thought as profound as Keats’s identification of truth with beauty. She arrives at the conclusion that every form of human love is an embodiment of the Divine, though the experiencer very often does not realize this and attributes feelings to objects of desire. Experience being the best teacher, Das had to discover for herself the immortality of Krishna through the impermanence of man, she delves deep into the mythic past and finds the archetype of her predicament in that of Radha’s:

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 Radha is every woman in pursuit of love, Lord Krishna is the source of pure love and Das seeks redemption in surrendering herself to the Divine lover. In an article titled "I studied all men" Das wrote, "I looked for the beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna". Das inverts the Krishna-Radha tradition in two ways — first, her poems speak from the female rather than from the male point of view and second her experience tells her that erotic love represses rather than releases the finer sensual-spiritual feelings embodied in the idealised lovers of the popular myth. She therefore invests in the conventional terminology, presenting Radha and Krishna as perfect, fulfilled embodiments of their sex thereby exposing the conventional hypocrisy, which dresses up lust as love.

O'Sullivan draws our attention to another aspect of the Krishna legend. He says that there is another stage in the Krishna story — here the Divine lover goes beyond the erotic role and draws his followers away from their passionate adherence to the body and to time. This is the Krishna of the Mahabharata when God reveals himself to Arjuna. It is where he speaks of the soul's necessity to go through the cycle of rebirths and of that personal love for God where the soul firmly rests. Das's ideas too follow along the same track:
In me shall walk the lovers, hand
In hand and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of the sun. In me, the street lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, the
Wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl coloured
Skirts and sing sad songs of love, the wounded moan.

(Soul 134)

The poem “Forest Fire” brings to our mind the legend where Krishna confronts conflagration and sucks the flame into his cheeks. “The world is swallowed by God, as the reincarnated soul draws all experience into itself” (O’Sullivan 191). Das’s references to Radha and her love for Krishna indicates the two extremes love has to offer, ecstatic abandon on the one hand and on the other a sense of devastating loss leading to a death-in-life existence.

Das’s return into the mythic past thus takes her back into the Puranic world and becomes a symbolic return of the wayward human into the fold of the Divine.

5) “Wondrous raiment fit for Gods”— Das’s poetic craft:

Kamala Das did not have a formal education as such and holds no pompous university degrees, she is conscientious artist who is mainly
guided by her impulse and instinct for precise and harmonious words. She is fully aware of the value of words and their finer shades of meaning. She can make subtle distinctions in picking up or turning down her words and phrases. Nair seems to be right when he says, “She is ignorant of the morphology or even the grammatical nuances of words but she recognise their vital power and emotive effects”(171). The choice words, phrases and expressions render her poetry beautiful and precise. She is not able to pinpoint the precise source of her works, however she speculates that they possibly spring from “a silence deep within”. Das's poetic diction is lyrical and musical. Simplicity is the hallmark of her language and she does not indulge in unnecessary verbal juggling or pedantry, as some Indo-English poets are prone to do.

Das's poetic devices:

i) Use of contrasts and paradoxes:

The poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs” gains its impact from the series of contrasts the poet weaves into its structure for example, the eunuchs celebrating the birth of a child are compared to "half-burned logs" from the funeral pyre, drawing at once a sinister birth-death contrast. The frenzied dance of the eunuchs with their wide skirts going round and round to the accompaniment of cymbals and jingling anklets is contrasted to the hotness of the afternoon. The poet's strangled
sympathy with the eunuchs and her emotional participation in their agony are kept on leash by the deft use of imagery and paradox. "The Apology to Goutama" has a strikingly ironic structure. The sexual and ascetic aspects of life are contrasted through a parallelism of images till they culminate in the strange mingling of the two aspects:

...while your arms hold

My woman form, his hurting arms

Hold my very soul. (Qtd. in Nair, 15)

The comparison between the lover and Goutama is a symbolic juxtaposing of the sexual and the ascetic and the irony lies in the assumption that Goutama holds only her body whereas the lover still holds her soul. In "The Music Party" there is a contrast between the temptations of the senses and the undying instinct of the self to withdraw inwards. Quoting from the poem "The Seashore", "And feel the loss of love I never once received" (Soul 43). Here the hope-despair contrast is symbolic of the agony and restlessness of the poet's soul. "The Descendants" has the following lines:

We have lain in every weather nailed, no, not

To crosses, but to soft beds and against

Softer forms, ... (Soul 80)
The juxtaposing of the spiritual (crosses) with the sensual (bed) suggests the venality of the lover's engagement.

Juxtaposition of lust and death is a common device in Das's poetry and it projects the consciousness of futility that wraps all lust activity. The metaphor of lust dissolving into one of death can be seen in "Gino":

... of morgues where the highlights

Glow on faces sheltered by the soul's exit. (Soul 92)

Vincent O'Sullivan remarks thus on Das's work, "I have tended to look for ways to unify those apparent contradictions in her work, but how often in both poetry and prose might oppositions and contraries be seen as working towards some kind of reconciliation"(193). As an example he cites Das's comment on love "Love is a happy thing; I hate it when love is made evil and furtive. Every middle-class bed is a cross on which a woman is crucified. A woman can get to a man's heart only through his loins"(Time 9). These four lines in a single paragraph are riddled with elements that prevent their being brought into a single view. It is an example of aporias so dear to deconstructionists — those impasses of meaning that work against the supposed rift of discourse.

Anne Brewster has observed that an important dimension of Das's poetry lies in the contrast between surfaces and depths: Das's poem
"Ghanashyam" has the following lines, which clearly reveal her expertise in the use of this poetic device:

Life is moisture
Life is water, semen, blood
Death is drought
Death is the hot sauna leading to cool rest rooms
Death is the last, lost sob of the relatives
Beside the red-walled morgue. (Soul 96)

The polarities of life and death, moisture and drought, cold and heat are synthesized in the last two lines where the loving relative mourns for the dead person in the morgue, the moisture of tears implied in the sob, contrasts with the dryness of the corpse in the "red-walled morgue". The moisture of blood, semen, water are all life giving, while the moisture of the hot sauna is intended to remove dead cells from the body by opening out the skin's pores. The "hot sauna leading to cool rest rooms" perhaps refers to the flaming dead body that releases the soul into the cool restrooms of "life after-death" or "immortality".

Thus the poetry of Das makes a discovery of the many levels of paradoxes through which the self passes in order to define, authenticate and validate its total involvement in the affairs of life. These paradoxes such as male-female, physical-sensual, immortal-mortal, worldly-divine,
real-mystical, subjective-objective, gynocentric-phallocentric, mundane-ideal, fettered-liberated help in shaping the vision of Das. In her later poetry we discover that her vision comprehends such paradoxes and attempts to transcend them.

ii) Repetition:

This is another technique that Das uses in her poetry. These are deliberate devices she uses in order to communicate her sense of agony. In the poem “Substitute” the phrase “I will be all alright” is repeated thirteen times. Each repetition is a substitute for each aspect of the poignant, emotional stances the poet assumes such as sense of loss, contempt for society, defiance, disdain and so on. According to K.R Srinivasa Iyengar, repetition has a telling effect and helps to create an ironic effect essential to the structure of the poem. T.S Eliot uses similar repetitions that internalise the emotional and intellectual dilemma of the speaker in “The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock”. Eliot expresses the dilemma in the line “it is impossible to say what I mean”.

A few more examples from Das's work:

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but you. (Soul 136)
The repetition of the word “melting” heightens Radha's suffering in love. Repetition is a device seen in works by more eminent writers like D.H.Lawrence, Dylan Thomas and it can be seen even in the Bible.

Das in “The Testing of the Sirens” plaintively cries:

Ah, why does love come to me like pain,
again and again and again? (Soul 136)

iii) Irony and understatement:

Kamala Das makes use of such devices in order to give vent to the rebelliousness welling in her. Irony is a subtle device by which the actual meaning is hidden and what is said is almost the direct opposite of it. There arises a contradiction in terms of what is said and what is meant. According to Nair (118) in Das's poetry, irony serves four purposes —

a) they serve to clarify the theme and deepen the impact.
b) they function as a comment on social practices, situations and customs.
c) it channelises rebelliousness and despair along the civilised pathways of protest.
d) it expresses a mature sense of resignation and compromise with the sorrow of the world.
“A smile is such a distant thing, I wear it like a flower” (Soul 136). This line is from “The Testing of the Sirens”. The title itself is ironical. On the surface the world “siren” refers to the device used in factories to signify shift change or as a warning signal, here the poetic persona is, herself, a seductive woman — in other words, a siren. She is tired but still tries to win man’s approval by putting on a smile and doing just what is required of her.

I want your photo lying down, he said,
against those rusty nineteen-thirty-four guns,
will you? Sure, just arrange my limbs and tell
me when to smile. (Soul 136)

The smile does not come from the heart and the girl is able to don it whenever required “like a flower”. Das uses irony as a device to conceal her hurt, for example, in the poem “Next to Indira Gandhi” she addresses her father who is no more. She had always had an inferiority complex about her dark skin and was under the impression that her father was disappointed in her and that was the reason why he had never attempted to get close to her. The poem reveals her misery and despair in life, which was totally dominated by her father — he chose her clothes, her tutors, hobbies and even her friends. As already
mentioned, she was very unhappy in her married life too and in words loaded with sarcasm she says:

And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me a husband
I am grateful
For choosing for me a man
And a life of suburban dullness (Soul 118)

Das is very critical of the nature of the marital relationships in our country. She says:

I don't believe in the institution of marriage. A man is given a girl and asked to beget children through her. What is needed is the understanding of the hearts. Society is happy with a perfect couples masquerading as perfect partners. It doesn't matter if they fight violently at night. I hate the superficiality that exists in society (People).

She advises:

Husbands and wives
here is my advice to you.
Obey each other's crazy commands,
ignore the sane.
Turn your home into a merry
dog-house,
Marriage is meant to be all this any way arranged in most humorous heaven. ("Composition", Soul 25)

"A Faded Epaulet on his Shoulder" (Soul 124) is a severe indictment of her husband. She uses irony to point out her husband's offensive ways—the way in which he gets carried away by women—"even a fair-skinned servant maid would do". He is referred to not only but also as a "signer of files", and as a "prematurely aged husband floundering and blundering all the way". In "The Stone Age" (Soul 67) the tone is set with the ironic address "fond husband", she goes on to call him "an old fat spider" who is totally different from what she had expected in a husband or a lover. There appears to be neither understanding nor respect in their married life. "You stick a finger into my dreaming eye", she says of her husband. In "The Swamp" Das recalls the words of her great grandmother who had said that virtue is the richest jewel, Das sardonically comments, "Virtue is the richest jewel, yes, yes, yes, but he is the jewel I prefer to wear once or twice a week with pride" (Soul 28).

Irony in Kamala Das is a form of protest against the dominating male culture, it attempts to undermine them by making fun of it, e.g. in
“The Looking Glass”(Soul 55) there is a stark description of the male forcing him to see himself as he really is. “Herons” is a poem of sustained irony where the husband tells the wife that he loves her more when she is on sedatives. The exploitation is brought out in the lines:

And my rag doll limbs adjust better
to his versatile lust. (“Herons”, Soul 69)

There is no love or respect here but only lust, which make the whole affair sordid. An ironic tone of resignation, a sign of spiritual maturing is evident in “Old Cattle”(Soul 84), where she envies the cattle being taken for the slaughter. They are unaware of their impending death though they have been physically hurt by branding with hot iron. Das feels that the mental torture that human beings face is more difficult to bear as they are not branded but are sent home with “their electrocardiographs and sedatives”. She wishes she could join the cattle and be blissfully unaware.

Social criticism is another area where irony proves to be very useful. The poet forces the people to take a hard look at themselves and at their so-called “civilization”. Quoted below are a few lines from Das’s various poems, which are relevant here.

In “Requiem for a Son”:

The public liked what it saw, the mangled son,
A silenced lion wrapped in a flag, the dry-eyed
mother; it
offered its blurred pity and hurriedly left to print the
story. (Soul 78)

In “Substitute”:

It will be all right when I learn
To paint my mouth like a clown's
It will be all right if I put up my hair
Stand near my husband to make a proud pair
It will be all right if I join clubs
And flirt a little over the telephone. (Soul 52)

In “Sepia”:

They are faceless, many cousined,
sad, they rust at every call,
they only sulk in privacy.
their religion?
the newspaper-hate, the bulge
in wallets, the scent of morning tea
and of course, the weekend's
tired lust.
Are they the distinguished
human race? (Soul 139-140)

In “The Dalit Panther” the poet reveals her intense dislike for the affluent people in the society who are totally indifferent to the sorrow and suffering around them, they are only concerned with their personal comforts, “The rich / Roost in warm beds like microbes in pus” (Soul 37)

The strong words that Das uses are brilliant in the manner in which they communicate her feelings very aptly. “Pus” here reveals the disgust she feels for the corruption and filth that exists in our society today and the manner in which the “elite are wallowing” in it.

iv) Use of symbols and imagery:

An imagery brings to the focus of our consciousness a sensory picture of experience, recognizable image, a perceptible idea or notion by the deft combination of connotative words: “this is to be a blind walk this is to symbolize my life i / have always had a passion for symbols” (“The Blind Walk”, Soul 140). Das expresses her fondness for symbols here — the blind walk is symbolic of the lives of almost all human beings who stumble along trying to find the right path, we often make mistakes and some among us even fall into ditches, a few give up but a few others struggle and find their way out and continue with their “walk”.
Symbols are used in literature as well as in painting. It gives deeper meaning to what is written or printed and allows the audience to interpret for themselves. The symbols most commonly seen in Das's work are the “sun” and the “sea”. The poem “In Love” (Soul 89) opens with an expansive image of the burning sun in the sky symptomatic of the spiritual and physical symbiosis. The master images — the lover's mouth is the burning mouth of the sun, his limbs are like carnivorous plants reaching for her, drawing her up in embraces each one like a finished jigsaw. The sea is an open-ended symbol that returns with several significances in Das's poetry. In “Advice to Fellow Swimmers” the sea signifies eternity whereas the river stands for the temporal. The poet advises the swimmers to aim high transcending all barriers to reach eternity:

Go swim in the great blue sea,

Where the first tide you meet is your body,

The familiar pest,

But if you learn to cross it,

You are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe,

For even sinking would make no difference then...

(My Story 208)

The sea becomes a symbol of life in “The Sea at Galle Face Green”
(Soul 59) where it stands as the unflinching sentinel protecting the life and destiny of a people distraught by ethnic violence. In the “The High Tide” the wildness of the sea symbolises the wildness of the king who has lost his power and glory.

O Shyam, my Ghanshyam

With words I weave a raiment for you

With songs a sky

With such music I liberate in the oceans their fervid dance.

(Soul 94)

The oceans refer to the subconscious mind which responds to the music of praise while the raiment of words and the sky of songs connoting the conscious state and the subconscious levels respectively suggests a total involvement in the act of adoring the Lord.

Besides the sun and the sea the other images we see in Das's poetry are tree, snake, toy, fire, house, animal, blood, mirror and theatrical performances. In the next Chapter, the artistic devices that Das uses in painting will be discussed in an attempt to see if they are similar to the ones that she uses in her writing.

In concluding, I would like to quote T.S. Eliot who argues:

The notion of appreciation of form without content or of content ignoring form, is an illusion; if we ignore the
content of a poem we fail to appreciate the form; if we ignore the form, we have not grasped the content, for, the meaning of a poem exists in the words of the poem and in the words only. (14)

In the poetry of Das the distinction between form and content disappears because it works synergically on several planes of sensibility and consciousness. She chooses words by their tone of voice and uses them with unmistakable instinct to convey the perpetual burning within her.

Having reached the zenith with regard to her writing, Das found that "vacant spaces" continued to exist within her. To fill these spaces she ventured into painting in her quest for completeness.
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