CHAPTER III

THE WOUNDED SELF
THE WOUNDED SELF

In the cultural history of India, and even in the post-independent social context, the place of woman in society is defined by man. Kamala Das seems to be very much aware of this. As has been noted in the preceding chapter, all her frustrations, doubts, and anxieties seem to stem from a single source, her early marriage. From the poems, we gather that she fails to receive love, as she construed it, from any source. This seems to create a wound in the self and a void around it. Some of her poems have the wounded self not only as their theme but also as their principle of organization. "Luminol," one of her early poems, exemplifies this point:

LUMINOL

Love-lorn,
It is only
wise at times, to let sleep

1Kamala Das, "Luminol," The Descendants, p. 11. This poem was later re-published in the volumes, namely, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems and Collected Poems, Vol.I.
Make holes in memory, even
If it
Be the cold and
Luminous sleep banked in
The heart of pills, for he shall not
Enter,
Your ruthless one,
Being human, clumsy
With noise and movement, the soul's mute
Arena,
That silent sleep inside your sleep.²

Although the poem has fourteen lines, it is just a single sentence with a neologism as its title. It maps out a dual consciousness of "luminous sleep banked in the heart of pills," and "that silent sleep inside your sleep," "the soul's mute arena." Luminol, may be a trade name for some sedative, gives the speaker no immunity from the encroachments

²Kamala Das, "Luminol," p.11. The entire poem is quoted here.
of ruthless one. This inference is reinforced by "Herons," wherein the speaker says:

**HERONS**

On sedatives

I am more lovable

" says my husband

My speech becomes a mistladen terrrian

The words emerge tinctured with sleep

They rise from the still coves 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.³

The speaker's speech is a "mistladen terrain," her words are "tinctured with sleep," and are "unhurried" like flying herons. The bird image gets caught up with "ragdoll limbs" that are the objects of his "versatile lust." The word "versatile" may be connotated as the husband's infinite capacity to gratify himself even in irksome situations. It is perhaps from this sort of embarrassing personal experience that the poet would seek a way of escape, or to devise a strategy to internalize what is painful to the self. In "Flotsam," the speaker of the poem, after disengaging herself from her lover's onslaught, wonders whether, "I should have fought at all to save this dubious/Asset, my aloneness, my terrible aloneness." Erotic indulgence keeps the self within the orbit of a relationship, without making it brood over its own wounds. Isolation some-

times causes inexplicable fear that makes the self vulnerable to despair. In the poem 'The Freaks,' the speaker says:

Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? the heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence ... 
I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.5

The speaker thinks that she is a freak. The freakishness is an internalization of the speaker's urgently felt need to save her face because none helps those "who have lived so long and have failed to love."

5Kamala Das, "The Freaks," Kamala Das: The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 11. This poem was first published in Summer in Calcutta.
Having ascertained to herself that the man with nimble finger tips cannot unleash anything but the skin's lazy hungers, the speaker also feels that she is an empty cistern, waiting to fill itself. This sad feeling generates thoughts and images that sometimes swamp the self, as, for example, in "Ferns":

... and our Bodies stacked on beds will mimic the slow Gestures of the mind and take on the blame In silent sin. Escape now from such bonds And from the precious staleness that we drag From one country to another, waiting Patiently at counters, evading no Law, and which to willing arms are thrust with A sigh and "I've waited so long for you." 6

6Kamala Das, "Ferns," Kamala Das: The Descendants, p. 13, 16-24. This poem was republished in Collected Poems Vol.I.
In order to overcome the male domination or to emancipate the self from the bonds of conjugal relationships which often oppress the self with conflicting loyalties, the creative strategy of a woman poet is to reverse her passive gender role. She achieves this by invading the outer-world to seek alternative source of love. Let us consider the poem, "The Stone Age." The counter-creative strategy is graphically presented. The tone of the poem is anything but soft and sympathetic:

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room,
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye.

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The speaker of the poem addresses her husband as "fond husband" and the epithet "fond" is definitely ironic by the time we come to the end of the poem. The images, "ancient settler" and "Old fat spider" suggest the genealogy of the husband and the hoary past of male domination, which petrify the speaker and bruise her sleep. She also feels that on daydreams strong men cast their shadows, and they sink like "white suns" in the swell of her Dravidian blood; as she says:

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 peep-holes, the neighbours watch,
They watch me come.
And go like rain. Ask me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called
a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a
hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price ...

These lines convey the feelings of the speaker to pay the husband in his own coin. The anatomical imagery, coupled with a sense of cock-sureness and social defiance bring the speaker to the verge of hysterical outburst. The question the self poses to itself, "what is bliss and what its price ..." The answer to the question is creatively suggested in "In Love." "The burning" reminds the speaker of the poem, "In Love," of "his mouth." The limbs of the lover are like pale and carnivorous plants


9Kamala Das, "In Love," Kamala Das: The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 15. This poem was first published in Summer in Calcutta. It was again published in Kamala Das: Collected Poems, Vol. 1.
reaching out for her. She is aware of her expanding sexuality, and she reflects:

Where
Is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each
Embrace a complete thing, a
Finished jigsaw, when mouth on
Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor
Moody mind, while pleasure
With deliberate gaiety
Trumpets harshly into the
Silence of the room ...  

As Eliot's Gerontion asks, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" the speaker of the poem "In Love" thinks that there is no "room, excuse or even need for love" because "each/embrace a complete thing, a/ Finished jigsaw." The jigsaw image suggests the price

10 "In Love." p. 15.

of bliss that love, in the guise of sexuality, demands. The jigsaw patterns of love/sexuality is reflected in "pleasure/with deliberate gaiety/trumpets harshly into the silence of the room."

The coupling of the crow's image with the corpse-bearers' cry reduces the speaker to a state of restlessness in whom million questions throb, and she feels that she is just a skin-communicated thing. The crow's blackness and the night's darkness fused with the cry of the corpse-bearers, "Bol Hari Bol," generate a synaesthetic effect which is very rare in Indian poetry in English and modulate the mood of the speaker.

The wife-and-husband relationship and its adverse effect on the poet's self constitute the thesis of the poet's harsh and glittering lyrics in which she does not hesitate to make functional use of anatomical imagery. The counter-strategy or the antithesis consists in creating a dramatic lyric in which a lover appears, perhaps, to make the
husband jealous. Sometimes, these lyrics have an angry tone. But all these do not lead to a state of mind in which the poet feels that the self could bathe itself in the sovereign light. The wounded self seems more vulnerable than it is when it contemplates humiliation, ugliness, and the unending search for love. Caught in a vicious circle, the self often broods over its own wounds. "A Man is a Season" illustrates this point:

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 with shadow,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others' 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 hear her husband call?¹²

The "you" of the poem is embedded in the blurred image the speaker beholds in her glass. Moreover, the words and gestures seem familiar. This suggests the vicious circle in which the speaker is caught. The "you's" strategy is to make the speaker realize what he is and what the other men are, as the first two short lines of the poem indicate. The angry mood of the first part of the poem leads to a mood of isolation. The speaker's creative efforts which

¹²Kamala Das, "A Man is a Season," Kamala Das: Collected Poems, Vol. I, p. 80. This poem appears only in this volume.
"echo beyond world's unlighted edge" do not bring harmony to the self. They remind the self of its wounds, thereby making the speaker say, "Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps/I went astray." The speaker's/wife's "blindness" and "deafness" prevent her from seeing and responding to her husband's call. The poem "Captive" reinforces the point:

My love is an empty gift, a gilded empty container, good for show, nothing else . . . . . . . . . .

. . . . . . . . . .

. . for years I have run from one gossamer lane to another, I am now my own captive. 13

From the foregoing analysis one point seems to be clear. Kamala Das is not a love poet in the sense

we call Donne, Shakespeare or Judith Wright the Australian woman poet, love poets. In the entire canon of Kamala Das, we do not come across a poem which celebrates love in its usual sense of separation, union, and fulfilment. The poems we have discussed so far only convey the impression of frustrated, thwarted, and distorted view of love. When a woman poet writes about love, it takes the form of pain and suffering largely because a woman's body is weak and knows only pain as most contemporary American women poets say. This creates a feeling of emptiness. In the poems, we have studied, we come across metaphors like the "latest toy," "bird of stone," "granite dove," "a high bred kitten," "rolling for fun in the gutter," "ragdoll limbs," "finished jigsaw," "a guilded empty container," "empty cistern," and "convicts hacking and breaking the clods at noon," which powerfully enact

14 Deborah Pope, A Separate Vision, p. 17.
the drama of the wounded self. The candour with which the scenes are presented does not lead to a positive reconstruction. The wounded self is its own prisoner, and it seems to fall a prey to purposelessness that engulfs it. "A Cask of Nothing" drives home the point:

**A CASK OF NOTHING**

If I close my eyes I see nothing.
If I shut my ears I hear nothing.
Nothing but nothing
Inside or outside
the nothing that resides
as an ache within
the only content
the human cask can contain.\(^{15}\)

The feeling of negation does not put a full-stop to

the creative quest for identity. The positive thrust of this negative mood is to search for metaphors of identity so that the self may enter into an empathic relationship with existence in terms of landscape and seascape that draw the self out of its self-conceived prison. In order to clarify this point, let us consider the poem, "Loud Posters."

I am today a creature turned inside
Out. To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thought, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire, but all I
Do is lurk in shadows of culs de sac,
Just two eyes showing ... oh, never mind, I've
Spent long years trying to locate my mind
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone. I've stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I've put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech. 16

16Kamala Das, "Loud Posters," Kamala Das: The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 47. This poem was first published in Summer in Calcutta.
The speaker thinks that she is a creature turned inside out. She spreads herself across wide highways of the reader's thought whom she addresses as "stranger." Although her desire is like a loud poster, what she achieves is to lurk in the shadow of a blind alley, just showing two eyes. She does not bother about her ghostly existence. She confesses that she has spent long year to locate "My mind/Beneath skin, beneath flesh, underneath/The bone." And she has stretched her two dimensional nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, and quarterlies - "A sad sacrifice." This suggests the speaker's truncated existence. What is lost is not the creative urge, but the personal involvement. This de-personalization makes her adopt the typewriter's click as her only speech:

Click -click, click-click tiresomely into your Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of Me, I go on and on, not knowing why ... 17

17 "Loud Posters," p. 47.
It is this sort of de-personalization that makes the self free to identify itself with images that suggest an attempt to evolve towards integration and healing.

"Forest Fire" is a variation on the theme under consideration, but the poem is more graphically structured. This poem has three significant images: "Bald child in open pram," "Slim lovers behind the tree," and "Old man with a paper in hand basking in the sunlight." The speaker's eyes lick at them like flames, and her nerves consume them. Later she spits out small heaps of ash; but within her the sights, smells, and sounds thrive. This fiery absorption of experience is objectified by the metaphor, "forest fire." The fiery re-baptism draws the wounded self out of its cocoon and makes it a part of the flux of human activity. In "Forest Fire," the self gains a new dimension in terms of empathetic identification.

18 Kamala Das, "Forest Fire," The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, o. 39. This was first published in Summer in Calcutta.
Kamala Das' poem, "The wild Bougainvillae," seems to dramatize the self's disencumbering activity. The speaker of the poem tells us that when she was sad in Calcutta, a few summer days, when her bed gave her no rest, when she was yearning for a man from another town, gradually her love wilted. She takes long walks on roads she has never seen. She beholds faces, and likes them for their charm. It is not significant to know why she calls roads and faces of Calcutta "a good world;" but it is significant to know the reason for her compliment. It is because Calcutta is "packed with distractions." Distraction is disastrous to a contemplative self.

but it is a boon to the wounded self. Walking through the streets of the city, she comes to old cemeteries and sees:

Where the dead are so dead
That even their tombstones have lost their names in
The rains, and are pale now
And yellowed like grotesque teeth, a harvest of
Old teeth, and no mourner
Ever she'd a bouquet for them or a tear
But, I did see beside
The older tombs some marigolds bloom and the Wild red bougainvillae
Climbing their minarets. I walked, I saw and I heard, the city tamed
Itself for me, and then my hunger for a Particular touch waned
And one day I sent him some roses and slept Through the night, a silent Dreamless sleep and woke up in the morning free.20

The two stones are like grotesque teeth. This suggests the atmosphere of decay all round with neither a mourner nor a bouquet nor a tear. But even in the midst of decay, the speaker notices blooming marigolds, and the wild red bougainvillae climbing their minarets. These organic images, amidst what is grotesque and what is decomposed, imply life. In this context, the speaker's hunger for a particular touch seems to wane. She sends her lover some roses which imply clarity of perception, emerging from a shattered emotion that brings her dreamless sleep.

IV

From the foregoing analysis, a few points emerge: The foremost one is the poet's sense of insecurity, vacillation, and an intense brooding that are the signs of a wounded self. Moreover, the wounded self has become a prey to real and imaginary fears. There are a number of poems which exclusively
deal with one sort of fear or the other that oppresses the self. These fears appear to have their origin in the self which is caught in its contemplative cocoon or prison. A study of the images of doubt helps us see how fear stands in the way of a clear perception of the self. There are images in her poems that are fraught with anxiety, restlessness and disorder. Her social, political, economic, physical, psychological, and even spiritual impediments are the hurdles to her creative quest towards realization. But all of them signify, even emerge from her sense of fear. In other words, fear is the main obstacle to the self in its onward progress.

The poet sometimes painfully touches on the sense of guilt which the self is afraid to acknowledge directly. Again, in her poems, there is a sense of loneliness, a sense of privation. There are in her poems images pertaining to death, images of hospitals, and many other images that signify multitudinous facets of fear. All these diversified forms of fear are
capsulated in her poem, "Tomorrow." In a way, "Tomorrow" may be construed from the point of view of the political unrest prevailing in the world, and also from her social, psychological and spiritual crises:

**TOMORROW**

Tomorrow they may bind me with chains stronger than 
Those of my cowardice, rape me with bayonets and 
Hang me for my doubts 
Courage is the blood's silent flowing out of wounds 
And the homing bird of death that ends in haste 
A story half told 
But lays new white legends in its nest. Resilient Gods, 
Seal the high notes of pain, still the faltering will's 

Ultimate groan, grant 
Me silence below the gallows and an easy 
Farewell to the child in memory who loved me 
And called me Amma 

Tomorrow they may bind me with chains stronger than
Those of my cowardice, rape me with bayonets and
Hang me for my doubts ... 21

The speaker has fear not of today, but of tomorrow. Hence the title "Tomorrow." The fundamentalists and the fanatics of various "isms" may torture her for her doubts. There is nothing to aid her except her plain confessional torch. It lights her way in the darkened wilderness of the world with its wild-growths of many "-isms" that nurture the prowling man-eaters ready to thrust their paws to incarnadine the way-farers. The speaker is most explicit in her expression of her fear of tomorrow. The chains of involvement that bind an individual woman today are nothing before the torturing ropes that may bind her cruelly tomorrow. The question that comes up here is, why does the speaker imagine gruesome tortures?

The answer can be that tortures are floating very much "in air." At present the havoc is so much hovering in the sky that living is reckoned as insignificant. This, perhaps, is the fear that unnerves the speaker. By a rape, a woman's courage to face life in all the whiteness of a pure virgin will be completely dried; and there is no wonder if she becomes a psychological wreck afterwards.

Courage, in the poem, is metaphorically presented as "the blood's silent flowing out of wounds;" it dries the spirit. As long as blood flows inside the body, it nourishes the life of the tissues; once it flows out of body, life gets extinct. In the same way, courage is the spiritual nourishment of the being. As long as it is there, the self enjoys security. Like all other images in the poem, the image of "courage" in terms of streaming blood, is governed by an emotional logic. Through this image, physical suffering, mental agony, psychological, and spiritual unrest are all fused.

The lexical items like "bind," "rape," "bayonets,"
"blood," "wounds," "pain," "groan," and "gallows" suggest the same emotional connection and parade the speaker's sense of fear. The speaker calls death, "Homing bird," for it "ends in haste/A story half told." Hence death is not terrible. The terror is in the brutality of the world: women are raped with bayonets. Death, homing bird, perhaps, a dove, a symbol of peace, gives rest to the self in torture. Like most modern poets, Kamala Das is very much pre-occupied with the thoughts of death which are a physically insurmountable and mentally incomprehensible phenomenon. But the poetic self can catch mystically, in moments of elation, the unfathomable depths of its mystery. She visualizes life after death. The poetic expression that death "lays new white legends in its nest" suggests that the speaker who is terribly obsessed with the tortures of tomorrow must be turning her thoughts to a life after death as well. "Composition" is one of her celebrated poems. There she emphasizes this aspect
of life and death:

The ultimate discovery will be
That we are immortal.
The only things mortal being systems and arrangements,
even our pains continuing in the devourers who constitute the world.\textsuperscript{22}

Surprisingly the situation hinted in the lines is amplified in "Tomorrow," "Our pains," "the devourers who constitute the world" are the expressions in "composition" which are solidified in "Tomorrow," with an expanded vision of cruelty, shame, and dastardly acts against the individual self. The image, "Resident Gods," is highly paradoxical; but, unfortunately, we have many supreme "Goi-heads" on

\textsuperscript{22}Kamala Das, "Composition," Kamala Das: The Descendants, p.35.

This poem was published in the rest of the three volumes of poetry, namely, Summer in Calcutta, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, Collected Poems, Vol. I.
earth that control our destiny. There is irony in the use of this expression. "Resident Gods" may be political, religious and social bosses that preserve order in the world by hushing the agonised cries of the individual. They have the knack to still her "faltering will's ultimate groan." The ultimate irony of the poem is that it is to these "Gods" the speaker appeals to grant her silence "below the gallows," and "an easy/Farewell to the child in memory." These deities who preside over life seem to hold in ransom not only life before death, but life after death. "Tomorrow" is the poem shaped under the relentless pressure of modern civility. It is an imaginative construct in sharp images of the unconscious promotings of murky fear that makes the self stumble in its progress. The speaker, however, tries her best to clear the haze of doubt and of fear through her expressive and creative activity. Yet she is mysteriously involved in the anxieties of life. These anxieties are evoked by a series of
images in a few poems. Whatever is the fear of horror that oppresses the self, one thing appears to be certain. It is the positive value she puts on the child-mother relationship. In the poem we have been discussing, the speaker shows herself redeemed of her fear through the "memory" of the child "who loved me/And called me Amma." (mother). The motherly attachment works at the subconscious level of her self. This child-mother relationship is a liberating source from which the self draws its sustenance.

In "Requiem for a Son," the speaker asserts that "A mother's love often fashions a kind of eternity ..." This poem is about the son who died in an air crash, and whose death is silently mourned by his mother. The blowing of cold wind from the airfield makes the mother tremble "with unease, remembering again the son who/did not return from his play." The Mother's premonition comes true, falsifying the boy's hope that the air is "My father, it will not betray me."
It wrung out of his
Throat first cry of terror and scattered him
over the trees
Among the white and purple bougainvillia bloom,23

As the speaker recounts the death, the image of "The white and purple bougainvillia" with bloom crosses the speaker's mind unobtrusively to convey the idea of life after death. Again, a few lines later she says "with/
A quiet joy the saplings bursting from the cracks in stone and/know for certain that life will go on."24

To this incident, the public response is that

The public liked what it saw, the mangled son,
A silenced lion wrapped in a flag, the cry-eyed
mother.25


24 ibid.

25 ibid.
The public only offers its blurred pity, and "hurriedly left to print the story." The speaker is shocked by the indifference and callousness of the public. The poet broods over the tragedy in order to conceive a poem on mother-child relationship. The reconstruction of the mother's experience of walking through "the corridors of this prison" seems to activate fear. "Death," the speaker says, "is ordinary." We have to remember also that for the mother to live a life of bereavement is "extraordinary." The poem seems to bring life and death together, not as opposites, but as parallel moments. The living mother shows her courage to note with a quiet joy the saplings bursting from the cracks in stone. She is content with old wisdom, "for certain that life will go on." She also recalls;

"But when you died you seemed to take away mine."26

With these thoughts, the mother sleeps in the night which appropriately is described "as a woman in widow's weeds." But her sleep is only "the hangman's troubled

26 Kamala Das, "Requiem for a son," p. 29.
pre-morning slumber." Her thoughts always haunt her that her son "Blazed with a wondrous life," and died. Pining of the mother is brought to us effectively in the last line of the poem:

A mother's love often fashions a kind of eternity.  

V

The dynamics of life and the agonies of death make the self preoccupy itself with the images which are violent and which are, sometimes, obsessive. In the poem, "Life's obscure parallel," the speaker tries to bring a correlation between life and death. She says, "Life's obscure parallel is death," and there is no difference between the two except the former is known and the latter is inconspicuous and unknown. But both run parallel to one another: one complementing the other, extending in the same direction.

27 Kamala Das, "Requiem for a Son," p. 29.
The speaker says that death does not frighten her because any fool can achieve it effortlessly. In the poem, "Suicide," which we discussed in the first chapter, we find that the speaker craves for a better life, and not for death. "The tragedy of life," the poet says in a different context" is not death, but growth:"28 As a child grows into an adult, it faces problems. Life is an endeavour to forge womanhood overcoming the temptations of flesh. In this task, the poet feels that her self is thwarted at every point by doubt and fear. "Life's obscure parallel" clarifies the point. Death is the negative, hazy unknown thing; whereas, life is a positive known thing. Many times she gets the doubt, and says, "I wonder if what I seem to do is living/or dying."29 The urgency of the problem is such that the speaker


wrestles with it calling reason and logic as aids:
"A little of each is in every Gesture, both my mind's and my body's." For instance, she says, the sights we see reside not outside but within. The built-in terrors in her mind puzzle the will as they "swoop down on me from the treetops at dusk." They are, of course, unreal. But for the wounded self of the speaker, they are all real. Again, the image "in the kitchen's unlit corners, large birds of prey/perch with rustling claws," conveys the fear of darkness resembling death-like devourers. The self which experiences intense pain, forgets its minor ailments for the time being. The speaker's doubt is so intense that it causes anxiety in the self. The image of the mother with the "goblets of breasts swelled burdened with milk and love" evokes the doubt of a mother whether a sudden drought settled on "the sun bleached estuaries" of her blood. This is a strongly felt realization pertaining to the theme of life and death. The verse
by means of a clearcut, lucid pattern of images best serves the feelings of the poet more than the built-in logic of prose. The awareness of it is enough to enable her overcome the impediments that stand in the way of achieving lucidity of the self. The cobwebs of illusion, doubt, and fear are swept away to provide a brighter view of the self. It is only the self that is capable of achieving itself when its perception is blurred by the hazy doubts and fears. No doubt, fear impedes the self in all its myriad forms. But if the self is left to itself, it can make itself a sort of mirror so that it can see clearly its own image. This is the impression we get as we close read some of Kamala Das' poems.

VI

There are a few poems of Kamala Das that deal with the serious ailments envisaging fear and despondency. In such poems, there is an intense brooding on the problematic of growth and decay. The poem,
"The intensive Cardiac care unit,"\textsuperscript{31} is about the patients lying in the intensive cardiac care unit under the light of the "lidless fish\textsuperscript{2}eyes of bulbs."\textsuperscript{32} They are travellers pitching a tent in the oasis for a night's rest. The expression, "the lidless fish\textsuperscript{2}eyes of bulbs," conveys the searching eyes of care for something beyond the ordinary ken. These bulbs burn on, and create an atmosphere quite different from the world outside where "Night's thinning out into light beyond the wall."\textsuperscript{33} The day that spills itself out in crowding streets can never be noticed here. This place is an oasis for the patients who take their rest forgetting the fatigue of their journey, crossing the desert under the scor\textsuperscript{2}ching heat of the sun. \textsuperscript{3} This simile signifies how the


\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 51.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 51.
speaker keeps alive in her mind the essential features of life even in her description of the patients lying in beds during their illness — it is a long journey across the sand. The lines, "each lies in his own white tent/under harsh desertmoons/buried only neck deep in sleep," apply both to the travellers and to the patients who are sedated. The speaker, then, says that all the patients await their execution at midnight as the tall dark doctor comes. During the interval, they have "half-grown nightmares crouch under beds, " They are moody as distant drums sound the heart-beat.

The sleeping posture is dramatized to suggest that they are the "breathing saints" who cannot afford to forget even in their sleep the memory of their past. The spectacle of the dark doctor on his rounds is significant. He moves mechanically from

34 "The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit," p. 51.

35 Ibid.,
one bed to another to make a routine check up of the patients. The misery in the hospital life is made explicit by the expressions of "the bulbs blurring," and "the ageing faces blurring." The patients' hope for redemption from the doctor's visit is belied:

The bulbs blurring in his eyes, the ageing faces blurring
On their pillows, while sleep grazes at his brow, his great shoulders, his knees, and like a vagrant cow nods its head and moves on

This is the spectacle for which the whole intensive Cardiac care unit watchfully awaits. This poem concretizes the sleepy postures of the patients and the intensive world of care in the hospital against the background of the life outside.

36 The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit, p. 51.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
The poem, "I shall not Forget," is a thematic extension of "The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit." The speaker, here, refers to her own illness which "wove for me a grey shroud." Her body is a blighted seed, withering in depression and it is "moulted/Rotting to the core." Her mind which she calls "my third eye" sees "nothing familiar." Her troubled mind is conscious of the vague pangs of death:

At midnight hour whose black bird feet beat
A tattoo on my patio

In the poem, we find a telescoping of the past and the present, her fear of death with the memory of her father's death:

His smoky eyes died long before he died.
The earth had entered the skin
Soundlessly, days before the burial. 45

The vision is communicated through the image of "a black bird with claws." It is a symbol of death. This bird tries to clasp with its "white hands at my gate." 46 The speaker cannot possibly forget the experience of seeing her father die. As we know, death is common; but it is a most uncommon experience for us to witness the actual sight of a dying man. If one has that, one shall not forget it in his/her life-time. The speaker of the poem has this experience which haunts her mind when she is hopelessly ill.


46 Ibid.
The poem, "Age," reinforces the theme of fear we have been discussing in the poetry of Kamala Das:

**AGE**

One night I woke to find age stick a crusty finger down my throat
The street was empty. The night an unripened fruit still on the bough
Love is youth time's magic; am I still entitled to its lure?
Do not call on me, fastening your eyes on mine,
Cold is the truth of my words today, a cold new born baby.
You have fathered it, dear love, and you cannot now reject.

The speaker feels that ageing is not a pleasant experience, but its inevitability has to be faced by

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48 Ibid. The entire poem is quoted in this page.
everyone in his life. The finger that age thrusts in one's throat is crusty: this implies that age chokes one's sensibility and response. The empty street, the night, etc., instead of making the speaker of the poem despondent, make her think of love as "youth time's magic." But she wonders whether a person after crossing youth, and at the threshold of age can say, "am I still entitled to its lure?"

The point to be noted here is whether the speaker is supposed to feel and respond to the invitation and attraction of love. As it happens in Kamala Das' poems, it is difficult to say where lust begins and love ends, or vice versa. But in this context, it appears to be that her words have the quality of truth. But it is cold; and it appears that love in the sense of "youth time's magic" is a phase in the growth of one's awareness, and the later awareness makes love appear not entirely different from lust because love which is "time's magic" loses its fascinating and compulsive power. Ageing body is cold, and it suffers from psychosomatic atrophy. "You have fathered it, dear love, and you cannot
reject it " conveys the feeling that the speaker also reminds herself that she cannot reject her own cold new born baby which is also her awareness of, and the experience of the crusty finger of age that sticks in her throat. The entire poem in terms of its tone, and imagery is not positive but negative in the sense that it suggests a lurking fear of age.

"Another Birthday"\textsuperscript{49} is the complementary poem to "Age" because it explores in detail the mood of the poet through the familiar images of spring and autumn:

**ANOTHER BIRTHDAY**

Autumn has a loosened grip. Why hope to retain
The leaves that fall, to yellow on the ground
and brown,
Or the ovate, velvet graces of the spring?
The dry winds unset the graying hair, the legs

\textsuperscript{49} Kamala Das, "Another Birthday," Kamala Das: Collected Poems Vol.I, 42.
Forget the easy canter of their past, and all
The birthdays unrememberei, the loves dwindled
To a twolined message at each year end, the cold
Farewells at the airport's stockade, a pale palm
raised
Like the flag of a lonely country, all these grain
The skin and cast on a once loved face pain's
august toreutics.

The season, the speaker says, has a loosened grip
because the autumnal leaves fall "to yellow on the
ground and brown." There is no hope to retain leaves
that fall from the tree. In the same way, in our life's
autumn "The dry winds unset the greying hair, the legs/
Forget the easy canter of their past." It is foolish
to remember, by then, the "ovate, velvet graces" of
youthful spring. As the joy of spring abates, memory
ceases to operate on all birthdays. Even love
"winkles into a two lined message at each year end;"

50The entire poem, "Another Birthday," is quoted
in this page.
the greetings which had the thrill before one's autumn "grain the skin." It is but inevitable to have such a loose grip on all attractions of the past. All these have a bearing on her face as "pain's august toreutics." This is the physical and mental image of a middle aged woman. The stock images of autumn and spring are brought to our notice by the collocation of words in the poem, "falling leaves," "to yellow on the ground and brown" "The Ovate and velvet graces." The truth of reality is succinctly stated by the rhetoric of the lines:

Why hope to retain
The leaves that fall, to yellow on the ground and brown,
Or the ovate, velvet graces of the spring?51

Here the poetic integrity is established by means of the objective images corresponding to the mental

51"Another Birthday," P .42.
state of a middle aged woman. It also suggests the correlation between the change in nature during the autumn, and the change in both physical and mental features of a woman as she grows into the middle age. No doubt this poem has all the objective graces; but it lacks the subjective charm of "Age," though things are hazy in the latter.

VII

The poet has familiarized herself with the Indian city-scape. In a few poems, it is foregrounded in such a way that it reinforces the thematic complex which we have been analysing. "Summer in Calcutta,"52 "The House Builders,"53 "The Dance of the Eunuchs,"54

52 This poem of Kamala Das was in her first collection of poems published in 1965 with the same title to the volume.


and "The Fear of the Year" illustrate the point.

It was in Calcutta that the poet saw the eunuchs' dance. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" is the opening poem in her first collection of poems, Summer in Calcutta:

**THE DANCE OF THE EUNUCHS**

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round,
cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling. Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They danced, oh, they danced till they bled ...
There were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmine in their hair, some were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices

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Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers lying and of children left unborn ...
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry
breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.
They
Were thin in limbs and dry, like half-burnt
logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions.
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice ...

The poem is a well-wrought, perhaps, an over-wrought
piece of composition in verse. Eunuchs' dancing, frisking,

56 Kamala Das, "The Dance of the Eunuchs,"
Summer in Calcutta, p.9.
jumping, and singing on festive occasions is not an uncommon sight in our country. But placed as it is in a collection of poems that deal with the socio-cultural enervation that prevails in a city-scape, the poem earns semantic depth and evocative power. Given the context of the poem, it seems inappropriate, to assume, as Devindra Kohli does, that "The dance of Eunuchs' objectifies through an external, familiar situation the poet's strangled desire within ... The poem is as much a visionary reconstruction of the irony of the dance of the eunuchs as a judgment of the dance of the sterile, unfulfilled, eunuch-like desires of the woman within the poet." Since the entire poem is cast in the past tense, the critic assumes that it is "a visionary reconstruction." On the face of it, it is obvious that it is not a visionary poem. On the contrary, it is a part of the city-scape that the entire collection, Summer in Calcutta, dramatizes. The eunuchs appear as a possessed lot because

they danced till they bled. They have long braids, dark eyes, they have jasmines in their hair which suggest that they appear as women, but "their voices were harsh," "their songs were melancholy," and "they sang of dying lovers and unborn children." The other details like "thin and dry limbs," and the image of "half-burnt logs" from the funeral pyre, suggest that they are victims of a serious spiritual atrophy. They seem to suffer from a drought and rottenness that have set in them. People generally, believe that at the end of any sacred rite or a temple festival, rain comes. Ironically enough, the rain that follows the dance is meagre, and it smells dusty and excremental. The poem begins with a dance accompanied by clashing of cymbals and jingling of anklets, and ends in the poor creatures' convulsions. What appears to be an ecstasy is in fact a nervous fit. From this, it follows that eunuchs are not only physically castrated beings but also men and women in whom growth and experience pull in the opposite direction. The semantic horizon of the dance of eunuchs would gain more clarity
THE FEAR OF THE YEAR

This is no age for slow desires,
Desired on lengths of idle beds
Beside indifferent faces,
For no smile, however fond, can
Settle time like a paper weight.
The time survives and moves beyond
This moment's diminutive pride
Is itself an incredible
Thing, for fear has wrapped us all; even
In the freedom of our dreams, it
Thrusts its paws to incarnadine,
The virgin whiteness, so that we
Perceive the flying steel hands sow
Over mellow cities those dark,
Malevolent seeds and the red,
Red, mushrooms hotly sprout and grow

58 Kamala Das, "The Fear of the Year," Summer in Calcutta, p. 11. This poem was re-published in Kamala Das: Collected Poems Vol. I p. 158.
On an earth illogically
Stilled, and silenced, and dead, dead, dead. 59

In the poem, the most significant images are "time," "fear," "Virgin Whiteness," and "mushrooms." The speaker of the poem is conscious of the enervating city-scape in which she moves, and the rushing time. In short it is a fusion of the static and the dynamic aspects of the city-scape; whereas, In "The Dance of the Eunuchs," despite its graphacity of the dance, there is no movement whatsoever for the dance of the eunuchs is represented as merely static, "a drought and a rottenness." The speaker of the poem, "The Fear of the Year," says, "ours is no age" for slow desires musing "on lengths of idle beds." Nothing settles for time moves on and on. But she doubts, in such a context, whether "this moment's diminutive pride" survives at all. She answers herself that nothing seems to survive at all because all of us are wrapped in fear. In the context of the poem, fear is not loaded with any semantic specificity. But if we remember the


The entire poem is quoted in the dissertation.
context and the meaning of "The Dance of the Eunuchs," it is possible to say that fear is associated with the de-vitalized atmosphere that thwarts and obfuscates the self. It is like a wild animal that thrusts its paws to contaminate the "virgin whiteness" in the sense of clarity of consciousness of the self. This is contrasted with the red that is associated with cities in which the "malevolent seeds" sown by time sprout like mushrooms. But the saving grace seems to consist in the illogicality of the entire human context and environment.

VIII

The awareness of the poet that there is something in her that stands opposed to the self makes her dilate on the themes of anxiety, loneliness, and privation. As it has been pointed out in the foregoing pages, these are the manifestations of her wounded self which are inflected in terms of images of fear. They rush on the self to choke its breath and dull
Its sensibility. "Wood Ash" dramatizes the feeling of fear in a typical manner. The fear of losing one's identity by completely forgetting the tradition and the heritage of the land is internalized by the speaker of the poem. She tries to communicate her feelings in a breathless fashion:

In this new world I lack coherence listen differently for what I have to tell.

Let your blood listen and from within your descendants shall hear me.

Lack of coherence implies a generation gap. But a tradition is supposed to sustain itself inspite of the generation gap because it is biologically and psychologically transmitted from one generation to the other. The devastation caused by the wild fire seems


61 Ibid., ll. 1-2, p. 49.
to lose its impact even from the time of the speaker's ancestors. The devastation may be an allegorical reference to a tragedy that moulds the whole race. The speaker seems to isolate one incident from that colossal tragedy. The Dravidian King whose war cry terrified the beasts in their dens falls a victim to the pagan invasion. But when he fell, he cried in surprise, "Oh amma I die." This suggests that the dravidian king's cry, "Oh amma I die" is a heroic gesture in keeping to the last one's sense of identity. Unlike the chieftains who bartered their kingdoms away for trinkets, the speaker of the poem has learnt to listen to the thump of blood in her ear. This suggests that she is determined to struggle whatever may be the odds to achieve an identity of her own which stems from her ancestors. Now we see the reason why she began the poem with a doubt and a feeling that she lacks coherence in this new world.
In the preceding pages we have discussed how fear as a poetic emotion generates the subjective compulsions in the poetic self. In touching themes pertaining to this aspect of fear, the poet conditions the self so that the self cannot offer objective resistance. This lack of resistance creates a lacuna in the self. Since the self is not only a spiritual centre, but a psychic centre, its perceiving and conceiving activities go together. The poet is acutely aware of disorder and disturbance that shake the will. In most of the poems, the dilution of will is dramatized in terms of conventional images like youth and age, spring and autumn, and occasionally they are imaginatively translated in terms of an extraordinary image like "wood ash."

A thematic study of any poet will be uneven and imbalanced if the themes are not located in a powerful primal experience. The major sequence of Kamala Das' poems stem from her early arranged marriage,
and the psychic and domestic crisis in which it landed her. The one word that often turns up in My Story is "hurt," both as a verb and as a substantive. In her poems, it is this hurt that is analysed and explored in terms of sharp and powerful images. In the foregoing discussion, it has been shown that the images often suggest wound, vulnerability, inexplicable fear complex, and the enervating milieu of the city. In suggesting these aspects of the poetic persona, Kamala Das subtly explores the creative strategies of womanhood and identity. This consists largely in dramatizing isolation, and the consequences of isolation, and the urge to come out of it. As Deborah Pope has observed, "Women writers have a propensity to themes of isolation based on the nature of their unique relation to the world and to the self, and when they write about isolation, they reflect the special conditions that isolate them. The greatest distinction between isolation expressed by women and that expressed by men is that women perceive their isolation as a condition
determined by their sex." The major sequence of Kamala Das' poems we have been discussing brings to a central focus the wounded self, its isolation, its creative endeavour to reach an identity and womanhood. But as the analysis demonstrates, this is not achieved. However, in some of her poems which may for the convenience of the argument be called the minor sequence, we find a creative healing impulse and touch which may help the self make itself healthy and whole. In the next chapter, we shall examine the minor sequence from the perspective outlined in the preceding lines.