CHAPTER III

USE OF MYTH IN THE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

This chapter is an attempt at studying the use of myth in the poems of Kamala Das. The use of myth by a poet gives a fairly accurate picture of the poet's participation in it either consciously or unconsciously, because the influence of the myths working in the socio-cultural and religious background will have coloured the creative process of the poet. The use of myth in Kamala Das is not as conscious as that of Sylvia Plath in the sense that one cannot find the meticulous manipulation of autobiographical elements to suit the mythical schema. Myth, as already discussed in Chapter I, provides a nearly readymade framework onto which the poet can transfer the mundane conflicts of life, deeply personal ones in order to give them a universal overtone. The object here is not to elevate Kamala Das's work on to a mystic level or her into a spiritually hungry person. The poems are not considered as spiritual sufferings of a soul seeking union with supreme soul, although this topic is superficially touched upon. The study undertaken is to emphasize the inevitable influence of the mainstream consciousness in her works. In the west the myths come from Jung, Frazer, Freud, Kafka, Camus and the Bible, dealing with different aspects of man's life in society, categorizing his various inclinations into social, economical, political, psychological, religious, etc. Contrary to this we have the Indian culture, especially Hinduism wherein all polarities exist not in exclusion of others but co-exist working towards
the complete upliftment of man as a spiritual being. They aim at the
wholeness in man as a part of the infinite, omnipresent divine.
Hinduism, which does not believe in categorizing, has the Vedas, the
Upanishads, the Aranyakas, the Puranaas, the Smritis the epics the
Ramayana and the Mahabharata etc., to guide the lives of its people.
These holy books have umpteen parables, which help the Hindus in
understanding everyday problems. With the help of these parables
either narrated regularly during festive or funeral occasions, the abstract
myth is diluted and made comprehensible even to the layman. Thus
even an illiterate Hindu can elaborately speak on the significance of
these myths. In Indian contexts realities - social, political, economic,
religious, personal, psychological or philosophical put on a spiritual
glow and the Indian sensibility strives to, assume an additional
dimension of transcendence over the mundane facts of life. Thus, the
mythic element in Indian poetry, becomes a creative grapple with
reality. The poet becomes involved, in the creative process either due to
unbearable oppression or due to spiritual inspiration. Either of the
reasons helped Kamala Das in gaining an insight into the feminine
experience in relation to the myths ingrained in her through rites and
rituals performed in the family. As literature has an infinite capacity to
touch upon anything and everything, from the basest to the most
sublime, from physical to ethereal, it becomes the appropriate medium
for overflow of personal expressions.

In order to understand an Indian poet one needs to have an idea
of the position of myths in the poet's life. Mythology in Hinduism is not
just stories for the enlightenment of learned people, neither is it a code
of conduct imposed with threat of punishment. It aims at inspiring through precepts and laudable examples, to strive to pitch up one's life to the highest ideal. It consists of stories, parables, and legends, sometimes without historical basis.

Thus, the Hindu mythology works as a lever in lifting up the mass mind to spiritual heights. In the first place, it presents abstract ideas regarding God, Soul, and Nature through concrete imagery, in the form of pictures and stories. These pictures and stories are not the truth but they impress the common man; through them, the myths are inculcated into the Hindu mind. Myths in Hinduism are not taken at the literal level; they are just the markers towards something else. They indirectly control the daily life of the Hindus. They provide wonderful solutions to puzzling and confusing situations (conflict of loyalties). They give a working formula for solving conflict of duties. They provide the Hindu society with countless ideas, regarded as model patterns to be emulated by all. Every human being, in every comparative role - brother, son, father, grandson etc - has a character as a model. The themes of stories too have a direct bearing upon their life and conduct, and the specific duties are ordained regarding religious practice or social obligation. Almost every aspect is taken care of, and thus these myths come directly into the everyday life of the Hindus, in their personal, professional, social, religious, and cultural roles. At the same time, these myths become steps, which lead to the understanding of the subtle metaphysical truths, through scholarly interpretations. In the Vedic period, specific instructions were given for the interpretation of myths. The main one being the 'Avatāra,' where the divine is seen in
the human form. It impresses the Hindu mind about all pervasiveness of God. Thus, Rama and Krishna seem so much alive that we can almost see and feel them. They seem as close as any contemporary being in flesh and blood. Their characteristics are recognized in the people around us. The Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and their incidents are regularly referred to in everyday life. A good obedient wife is called ‘a Sita’, a good husband or son ‘a Rama’, a good brother ‘a Bharata’. A wicked person full of wile is called ‘a Shakuni’, fight between brothers is called ‘Kurukshetra’. A godly person, but smart and diplomatic is called ‘a Krishna’. Almost even without the knowledge of the Hindu, the ‘Dharma’ or way of life that he leads is guided invariably by the sacred laws, which are found in the books that come down the centuries. The Hindu faith, thus regarding God and nature, has come down through the Shastras from the Vedic period. With the passage of time they have been verified by realization of the seers with their significance to the respective contemporary society. These realizations have endorsed certain unalterable truths about life and existence like the immanence of God and the divinity of the soul. These two concepts are the fundamentals of the working Hindu faith and the way of life is thus called the Eternal Dharma or Sanatana Dharma.

The above facts illustrate the role of mythology in the life of a Hindu, in the form of religion. For the Hindu, it is the religion, which governs all his thoughts and actions. It succeeds in giving everyday life and its activities a religious glow.
The influence of mythology in India definitely is more on the woman-folk, as they are the repositories of family tradition. The men too have role models to be emulated but women from birth are moulded through rites and rituals into the mythological female characters, the most favourite being Sita the obedient wife and passive sufferer. During the Vedic period women enjoyed equality with men in religious and social standing. With the advent of the Smritis especially Manu Smriti the woman’s position was relegated to that of a subordinate. The bold lady like Draupadi who had five husbands is referred to derogatively, and scholars like Gargi and Maitrey are conveniently forgotten in the modern times.

Another important factor that plays a dominant role in the concretization of myths is the Hindu joint family with not less than three generations living under one roof. The men in these families naturally become the decision makers, and decisions taken are with the community and family in consideration and not the individual. Major decisions like selection of marriage partners too are taken with hardly a thought given for the individual concerned. This system had its own positive and negative aspects. The positive being the strengthening of unity and bondage among the community and family members, which protected the members from emotional, financial and social insecurity. The key word being security. The role of wealth was not as it is in the West, where it plays an integral role in the survival of the individual. Wealth in the Hindu joint family was only for the continuation of traditions handed down from generations. Food, clothing and shelter
were provided free for all the members irrespective of their age and earning capacity.

This way of life did not necessarily ensure a Golden Age or a society free from maladies. There were rebels, demanding acknowledgement of their individual grievances, there were those who played with the religious concept for selfish ends too. Yet, for all these digressions, which the Hindu religion had foreseen as human frailties, rites of repentance, rites of purification, rites for passifying of forces of nature and Gods etc., were made available. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration if one said that the Hindu life-blood is made of mythological precepts ingrained in the form of religious concepts.

It was the advent of the British with their schooling which ruffled the surface of the smooth running culture. The emphasis is on the word surface; because Hinduism has been able to withstand various types of onslaughts and yet remain the same deep within. Externally, it does seem disturbed, but then when everything seems to be lost the ‘Avatāra’ or the incarnation of the divine comes in human form to save it from total destruction, offering an explanation for the changes occurring, once again pacifying the agitating Hindu mind.

Yet, with the advent of the English, the importance shifted from community and family to the individual, a new notion entirely alien to the existing system. There was an awareness created regarding individual freedom, both in thought and action. The desire for individuality, a solely western concept, entered the Hindu culture in the guise of English education. The English language became a window to the Western world, creating conflicts in the minds of the young Hindus.
The youths fascinated with the idea of freedom, became vasectomized of their feeling of filial love and obligations, thus alienating themselves from their cultural and religious heritage. The freedom gained, in no way, brought the expected happiness. The duties, which seemed like commands or shackles, continued their hold on the sub-conscious. Their attempt to become modern Hindus a contradiction in itself rendered them rootless and their behaviour thus became fraught with linguistic and behavioural conflicts. The Westernization with its promise of greener pastures induced the youth to reject the principles, which shaped their lives. Freedom became an unbearable responsibility. Life, which was orderly with markers made by elders suddenly, became an open space with absolutely no guidelines. Against this backdrop one needs to study Kamala Das, a modern Indian woman, traditionally nurtured with English schooling, who says in *My Story*:

Had we not grown up listening to the firm voices of Chekov, Flaubert, Maeterlink, Mansfield and Virginia Woolf? The sounds that our real parents made in our presence had been so indistinct while the dead ones filled our ears with their philosophy. Isabella Duncan told us that love was best when free.¹

She called these voices, the voices of ‘foster parents.’ It was the influence of these writers which made her move away from tradition.

Kamala Das or Madhavi Kutty as she was earlier known, was born on 31 March 1934 in Malabar, Kerala. She hails from the Nayar Matriarchal family. She was educated in Kerala and Calcutta. Her

childhood in Calcutta made her familiar with the English language. Kamala Das comes from a family of poets. Her mother Balamani Amma is a poet of renown in Malayalam, who celebrates motherhood in her poems. She used the imagery of Krishna as a child and his foster mother Yashoda. Kamala Das’s granduncle Nalapat Narayana Menon was a poet-philosopher. At home, she grew up drenching in the rhythmic strains of her mother-tongue, side by side being influenced by the above mentioned foster parents who promised a different vision of life.

Kamala Das was married in 1956 to K. Madhava Das. He was much older than her, and as Kamala realized incapable of tender emotions. Kamala Das’s married life was filled with disappointments. The shifting of her residence to Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, along with her husband proved hazardous to her health. Kamala suffered from loneliness caused by the fast moving city life, which had no time for human emotions. Kamala missed the abundant love of her grandmother who lived in the ancestral Nalapat house. Listening to the grandeur of her grandmother’s glorious past and taking part in religious ceremonies, Kamala Das had become a part of an ancient and royal tradition. A tradition, found disintegrating with the advent of the British rule. The advent of the British, which dethroned the aristocratic families, had also created a sense of inferiority in them. She had spent most of her childhood in the old traditional house, which became a symbol of love and tradition to her. The Nalapat house was more than 400 years old and a repository of rare palm-leaf manuscripts and books of mantras. The house was Kamala Das’s sanctuary to which she
returned for recovery after a nervous break down, suffered due to the impersonal attitudes of people in the city. This house, the sea and her loving grandmother keep cropping up in her poems as images of strength, permanence, innocence, stability and traditional values in opposition to the weakness, transient, corrupt and unstable modern values of the city life. One can dare to attribute the contradictory strains and sense of rootlessness found in her work to the conflict between the ingrained traditional values and the acquired modern values. Moreover, being a woman she was burdened with the responsibility of maintaining a fine balance between the two set of values. Being part of a joint family she had many roles to play eg., role of a daughter, granddaughter, wife etc., to the satisfaction of the members of the family. She couldn’t even dare to express herself for the fear of offending someone or the other. This fear haunted her and also led to her rebellion, when it proved too much for her. Weaned from the traditional values and security of her grandmother’s house, she tried her best to absorb the values of a city-bred middle-class housewife. She tried, for a short time to bask in the materialistic and lecherous love of momentary heat, proffered by the city life as a substitute for the unconditional love and warmth of the joint family left behind.

Kamala Das is a bilingual poet - writer and writes in English and Malayalam. In English her works include four collections of poetry, Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Play House and Other Poems (1973), Collected Poems Volume I (1984) and her Autobiographical work, My Story (1976). She has won the P.E.N Asian Poetry Prize (1963). The Kerala Sahitya Academy Award.
fiction (1969) and The Asian World Prize for Literature (1985). Kamala Das’s most celebrated poem “An Introduction” and her autobiographical work My Story brought her into lime light along with the title of a ‘Confessional Poet’.

Summer in Calcutta, has fifty poems, which deal with her favorite theme love. In My Story she indicates some of the aspects, which influenced her poems of this volume:

Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights, which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw, for the first time the eunuch’s dance. It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute, gaudily painted like a cheap bazaar toy. It was at Calcutta that I saw the ox-carts moving along the Strand Road early in the morning with proud heavy turbaned men, their tattooed wives with fat babies dozing at their breasts like old drunkards in clubs at lonely hours.2

“The Dance of the Eunuchs” is the first poem of the volume, which sets the tone of the volume. Its ironical tone, externalizes through familiar sights her internal cravings, i.e., of a woman with intense longing for fulfillment of emotional and physical urges. The tone is that of a woman hurting inside, seeking solace in external things. The protagonist camouflages internal sufferings with external expressions of joy and satisfaction. The ‘Vacant Ecstasy’ exhibited by the Eunuchs is the externalization of her inner drought. There is a bold perception of external images, which serve as metaphors to her frustrated feelings both as a seeker of love and as a poet. There is a search for the real self in mundane trivialities. “The Freaks,” too emphasizes un-requitted love especially, of an Indian woman made helpless by traditional shackles.

The search for a union, which leads to wholeness, is thwarted by the physicality of the lover's approach. All the poems in the volume reflect a tendency of equating love with sex and vice versa. The poems also record the agony of the aftermath of such equating. The memory of the grandmother's house along with her love, loom large during the periods of depression as she recollects, "... I who have lost / My way and beg now at strangers doors to / Receive love, at least in small change?" 3

The movement of the poet away from this house has made her heart into an 'Empty Cistern', and is to be reconciled with 'Coiling Snakes of Silence' instead of love. "Spoiling the Name," is a little different from the others that it becomes thoughtful and argumentative. The burden of an abstraction i.e., a name, which controls the actions of a physically live-person is resented. The conflict between submissiveness and rebellion co-exists with the desire for the security of value-bound tradition. The poem, which invited much criticism from the readers, "An Introduction" is from this volume. It was this poem, which earned her the title of a confessional poet, due to its autobiographical contents where she confides, "... I am Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar, I speak three languages, write in / Two, dream in one ..." 4

One could say that all the themes of almost all her poems are found in this volume. The significance of the volume lies in its keen perception of surroundings even when the poet is steeped in internal

4. Ibid. p. 59
conflict. The futile attempt at transcending the private voice is seen in every one of these poems, making them truly confessional. The main theme that runs through the volume is man-woman relationship, within marriage and outside it. Loneliness, and search for companionship along with the scorching summer heat, a mind oscillating between the present and the past, and the natural landscape form the pattern of the volume.

The Descendants – is her second volume of poems with twenty-three poems. This volume too continues with variations on the theme of love and sex. If in the first volume she merely writes about physical decay and filth surrounding her, in this volume she seems to have accepted these as an inevitable part of life. Growth and decay are observed not with fear, which lead to urgency of enjoying life seen in the first volume, but with a compassionate, sometimes, indulgent tone. The facts of defeat in love are accepted coolly. The inevitability of death, growth and decay, which cannot be stopped are seen as aspects of life, which continue irrespective of an individual’s failure or success in life. Time, marching forward towards death is observed as pregnant with silence. The desire for union of male and female; not for physical satisfaction but as the union of elemental forces of nature is described in this volume reminiscent of the original act of creation as she pleads in “Conflagration,”

... But lay on me, light and whitembers
Over inert firs, Burn on, elemental
Fire, warm the coal streams of his eternal flesh like
At last, they boiling flow, so turbulent with life.  

The discrepancy between what one wishes to have and what one has is the tension involved in this volume. The title poem "The Descendants" has a ring of finality, that one cannot be free of one's destiny. The brightness of the Sun pervades the first volume Summer in Calcutta. In the second volume, the sea as a symbol of permanence in contrast to the dying images of 'dead' 'tomb' 'funeral pyre' 'corpse' 'embers' 'buried' is found in seventeen of the twenty three poems. The poet's pre-occupation with death, both as the final destination and predator is seen. Her love for physicality is so strong, that it controls her urge for total surrender and equates sex with death. Yet, sex here is no longer the burning desire of the first volume, it is more of a torture as it reveals the temporary fulfillment of love. Physical love, which was confused with emotional love, is now described in completely physical terms, devoid of any delicacy as an inevitable elemental urge. A desire to return to the sea, and to her childhood is also seen. "Jai Surya" a poem about her giving birth to her son as a celebration of motherhood belongs to this collection.

The Old Play House and Other Poems has thirty-three poems in it. Fourteen are reprints from Summer in Calcutta. The new poems have nothing new to offer, the old theme of exploration of true love and sexual satiation is continued. The pre-occupation with death and decay, which began in the The Descendants gains more intensity. The transient

nature of human body becomes the main concern, its vulnerability, leading to illness, and decay, its limitation in responding to physical pleasures is dealt with, giving an illusion of the poet's maturing mind, both as a seeker of love and a creative artist. There is more restraint in the length of the poems. The poems don't appear running into pages like thoughts immersed in ink. "Blood" is the only new long poem. The nostalgia for the old Nalapat house, and the values it holds is fondly dealt with. There is no idealization of the old people or old values, just a reference in contrast to actual present. Kamala Das does not accept defeat. In fact, the poem shows her 'self' in control in the face of the disappointing situations, with grace and equanimity.

"The Inheritance" is a poem full of irony but the angry tone of youthful, robust cynicism is absent. It deals with the cruelty induced by intolerance that goes in the name of religion, be it Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. The inheritance of the, new generation, is hate and not love for mankind in Kamala Das's view. The insensitivity of the rich towards the poor and the double standards of the male sex are new themes, dealt with a tone of bitter resignation. Guilt, in built in the Indian female psyche regarding love outside marriage is also one of the themes in this volume. The whole tone of the volume is the acceptance of the nature of body, which is subject to old age disease and decay. The volume introduces the Radha-Krishna myth and the search of the soul for eternal union. The poems on the myth taken for study have not been analysed in the study of her works in general.

My Story of Kamala Das makes compulsive reading for many reasons. The critics here before have read it to analyse her as a feminist
and a poet of carnal hungers. This study views it from a different point of view. The book is an illustration of all the aspects of Hinduism discussed in the initial pages of the chapter. The whole work is populated with mythological characters and references to mythological incidents exactly in the way it is seen in a Hindu family. The remarks of the illiterates, scavenger about the thieving monkey, "Thakur, don’t speak so to any monkey. He may be Lord Hanuman himself, come to test your devotion." shows the concept of ‘Divine Immanence.’ The religious ceremonies, and the role of the Hindu joint family in enforcing the myths are finely knit in the autobiographical incidents. The book also describes the dethroning of the aristocratic families with the advent of the British. The inferiority complex induced is poignantly described from childhood days. The humiliation of a brown child in an European School, the first chapter initiates this long saga of the protagonist life of the humiliation along with the callous attitude of the Nayar males, and impersonal city life. The migration from rich, traditional backgrounds to in search of life into duty, crowded cities, and the resultant effect on the protagonist are vividly described. The characteristic of the Nayar men, the hypocrisy found in name of the propriety are worthy of mention. The book also provides enough instances in which the protagonist gets acquainted with Lord Krishna. The dreams of being Krishna’s beloved, along with influence of the Gita and Bhagavatham are mentioned. On the whole, My Story, succeeds in conveying the causes for the rootlessness experienced by the protagonist due to the

conflict between the inherent aristocratic confidence and the acquired inferiority complex, caused by the advent of the British.

The work My Story does reveal the themes dealt within poems, and at times works as notes to the inspiration for the poems. One finds the same theme of love and sex in the poems, the autobiographical works and short stories and Essays. If it is not celebration of physical union, it is indignance against its temporariness.

India did not witness any such movement as in America with the publication of Life Studies, by Robert Lowell, and Kamala Das has been labelled a confessional poet, due to her bold depiction of emotions. She has earned more notoriety than fame. In a country where woman is worshipped as a Goddess/mother and slighted as a wife, it comes as no surprise that she has been relegated to the category of feminists. The awards won by her are by no means an assurance of respect for her work as a poet. It is just that she has come up with a voice too loud to be ignored, and too realistic to be brushed aside. Kamala Das is a poet serious of her creative career. Although, Kamala Das hails from a matrilineal background, she did not enjoy any freedom. Here before the significance lay in the fact that all poetic voices were male, from Sri Aurobindo to Nissim, Ezekiel with Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt dotting the line in between. Now Kamala Das, with her powerful voice, if not spiritually disturbed voice, has come upon the scene. The demand is not for equality but acknowledgement of existence as a human being with similar desires that of a man, a human being who too has passed through the evolutions from past immemorial and is a receptacle called human being with hordes of experiences stored in the unconscious
which tends to come out when triggered off by some certain situations. Kamala Das’s poetry is a long journey of the feminine psyche from childhood to motherhood and beyond.

India, as already mentioned, did not witness any confessional movement, although, there have been random voices where the demarcation between the ‘Universal I,’ and ‘Confessional I’ has been literally indistinct. The language was poetic, either following the Western poets, or saturated with Sanskrit lyrics filled with mythological significance. The importance lay in man’s spiritual awakening, all day today problems were equated with destined sufferings planned by the Supreme Soul for the testing of the mere mortals. Poetry depicted the anguish of the soul struggling towards its final destination. The mythological events and characters filled the pages with a hallow of spiritual light. The emphasis was not on man-woman relationship but man’s movement towards spirituality with the woman trailing behind in his footsteps.

Kamala introduced the topic of ‘sex’ into her verses, writing openly about it from a woman’s point of view. A subject, shunned like leprosy, by the society, has been transformed into a subject of analysis by Kamala Das. She transcends the genre of confessional writing by the use of myths in her poems. The myths that are woven into her poetry are three in number.

The first is the myth of Parasurama, which led to her Dravidian ancestry and the Nayar Heritage, which she holds responsible for her dark skin and desire for sex outside marriage. The second is the Shaiva mythology, which is complementary to her Dravidian ancestry and
celebrates the union of the male and the female forces of nature. The third is myth of 'Agni' (fire) and the last myth is the Radha-Krishna myth, which she uses to reconcile herself to her fate both as a woman and a soul.

In order to get a comprehensive approach to Kamala Das's poetry, as a confessional writer using mythological elements, the study of her Nayar background proves highly relevant. This study would render her work less outrageous when viewed through the theory of the collective unconscious. Although her frankness sometimes stands out like a sore thumb one cannot fail to recognize the depth and philosophical seed that transcends her poetry from the genre of confessional to the mythical. Her Malayalam background boasts of two major varieties of literature. The first is 'Paattu,' meaning 'song' and 'Mani-pravalam,' a mixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit. The former is purely Dravidian, whereas the latter is a synthetic formula containing both pure Sanskrit words with inflection and pure Malayalam words written in Sanskrit meters only. The 'Mani-pravalam' is of erotic element. It sings in praise of devadāsi or dancing girls who are the heroines of these poems. It is also known as love lyric. These lyrics give more emphasis to the exquisite beauty of the girls, their qualities, description of love in union and separation and finally depiction of amorously lustful life. The image of the woman here is not complementary. 'Mani-pravalam' of the later era depicted the traditional image of the woman. We find in Kamala Das a desire for worship in love, a desire for the exotic as a reflection of this influence.
Akavoor Narayanan speaking about the renaissance says,

... in the renaissance of the 19th there was an awareness about the problems of woman. A new light was thrown upon the image of the woman. The exposure of hollow traditional idealization took place. She was seen as victim of social injustices...  

Vallathol Narayan Menon (1878-1958) and Ullorr S. Parameswara Iyer (1877-1949) are the other two poets of modern romanticism. Their heroines were sensuous and paragons of virtue. Then came N. Balamani Amma (1909- ) the Amma or mother, who writes and brings out the nobility of motherhood, Kamala Das’s mother.

In The Decline of Nayar Dominance, Robin Jeffrey notes:

According to the Brahminical tradition, the creation of Kerala resulted from the banishment of the God Parusurama from India. Having nowhere to live, he won the permission of Varuna, the God of the Sea, to reclaim all the land within a throw of his axe. Parusurama threw his axe from Cape Comorin to Gokarnam, the sea receded and Kerala was formed. To populate the new area, Parusurama introduced a special race of Brahmans, the Nambudiris, and gave them ownership of all the land and unique customs, which prevented their return to India on the other side of the Western Ghats. Next, he brought Sudras – the Nayar – to act as the servants and bodyguards of the Nambudiris. He bestowed on the Nayars the marumakkattayam or matrilineal system of family inheritance, and decreed that Nayars should have no formal marriage and that their women should always be available to satisfy the desires of the Nambudiris.

This legend said to date from seventeenth century, certainly ascribes a less than aristocratic status to the Nayars. The Nayars due to their role as bodyguards, gradually acquired a military status. Some of them became local chiefs, and gradually rulers. The largest and most successful of these rulers claimed Kshatriya Status. It seems likely that they were Nayars who as a result of political and military success were able to raise their status in social hierarchy. The transformation of lowly Nayar from the state of a servant and bodyguard to a ruler was inevitable since the village headman in Kerala was usually a Nayar. Thus, in a strictly caste bound society, the Nayars by the merit of their warrior nature had a remarkable social mobility, where the men rose in accordance with their power, but the women remained where they were. This insecurity of Nayar women condemned to matrilineal system where marriage was informal is echoed by Kamala Das in My Story. “The marriage of the Nairs, particularly that of the poorer ones, was extremely simple, the ritual lasting only a minute or two, for, all that the man had to do was to hand over to the woman a length of cloth and when she accepted it she became the wife.” 9 The dress of the Kerala Nayar women was two and a half yards of clothes underwear, and two yards as overwear, yet, it must have been difficult for the matriarchal head to dress the womenfolk of the family. The breasts were covered with the necklaces they wore, as Nayar women were obliged to go bare breasted by law. Jeffrey continues to elaborate by saying “although they had the right to wear a scanty upper cloth,

(Nayar women) were required to bare their breasts before temple deities and caste superiors." 10 The enforced nakedness engendered sense of helplessness and insecurity among the more sensitive women of the community. This traditionally sanctioned sexual humiliation is what Kamala Das refers to when she refers to in My Story, when she says that:

The best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed. They had been fed on the mythological stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi’s legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her. It was customary for the Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also customary for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding-night. The only heroine whose sex-life seemed comparatively untumultous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jumna for her blueskinned lover. But she was another’s wife and so an adulteress. In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence. 11 

The above factors have their effect on her myth making consciousness and also the selection of the Radhakrishna myth. A desire to free, herself from violence related sex is seen clearly. One finds in her the rebel, who, with education has the capacity to judge her position in this society as an individual, and the courage to rebel against the social norms, which treat her as an object of sexual gratification, devoid of feelings. The norms of her heritage are unacceptable to her and she voices her thoughts in words scandalizing her people. As a woman, she

demands love and tenderness from the man she is bound to in the holy union of wedlock. In “An Introduction,” we find her life story in words, which make the readers shudder at the heartlessness of a society, which advocates marriage at a tender age as she says, “... I was child, and later they / Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs / Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.”12

Only the physical growth of the female child is noticed, and when she is physically fit for sexual relations, she is engaged and then married off to any man the family feels suitable as seen in “An Introduction”:

... when
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. 13

In My Story, her fear of her traditional nightmare turns real in her first encounter with her fiancé:

... when he came from Bombay and got off the plane wearing a woolen suit and his face unshaven, I watched him with distaste, leaning against the railings at Dum Dum. In the car on our way home, he pressed my fingers amorously ... 14 He was a perfect Nayar male... “whenever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin. He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in

13. Ibid. p. 59.
Malabar. The poor women born of peasant stock were accustomed to a clumsy rapid mating like that of the birds, for their men had very little time to spare for the niceties of any kind...”

The above confessions amount to unburdening of secrets hoarded as nightmares by the Nayar maiden. Kamala herself acknowledges in My Story that she had written it to “empty myself of all the secrets.” The rebellion towards a marriage devoid of mutual love is voiced in “An Introduction” when she mimics the voice of the society as,

... Dress in saries, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers.

Not only was her dream of love in marriage thwarted, even her personality and individuality was in the danger of being engulfed by a blind tradition. The Dravidian ancestry in her blood and indoctrinated through ‘Mani-pravalam’, which was used to amorous young men fighting for the favours of the women, their love, luxuries offered in return for sexual favour and free life full of sensual love, rose in rebellion against the insipid love of the so called cultured and respectable marriage which failed to satisfy her emotional and physical needs. On the one hand she had to be a docile wife waiting to satisfy

15. Ibid. p. 84.
her husband's needs "He was obsessed with sex' ... If it was not sex, it was the co-operative movement in India." 18

And on the other, she had to perform the role of a social ladder for her husband by mixing with men of higher status according to the Nayar tradition. Again in "An Introduction" she says, "I don't know politics but I know the names / Of those in power, and can repeat them like / Days of week ... "19

These lines show the Nayar trait of keeping in touch with those in power, the ambition of the Nayar men of gaining power through contacts. Kamala Das gives further evidence to highlight the callous behaviour of the Nayar men. Her husband being no exception, regards her as a public sex object and a social ladder. The virtue or honour of his wife is never his concern, he is only concerned about the power gained in the society through his wife. Love and tender emotions are worthless sentiments to him. Indirectly, one can dare to state that the Nayar women had no right to exhibit emotions. When she confesses to her husband of having received a love letter:

My husband was irked, Amy, I thought you were an intelligent girl. What on earth could have made you encourage such a stupid fellow? I could not tell him of the other's grey eyes where on afternoon I had seen the sun fall like honey or of his pretty smile or of his dimpled cheeks... 20

The attitude is one, which declares that love and sex have nothing in common. If Kamala Das wanted she was free to indulge in adultery but without involvement. The same attitude is described, when the foreigner to whom she is introduced, kisses and pets her “While my husband watched us / Sleepily from his table” 21

It wouldn’t be far fetched to compare her rebellion to Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, who left her husband for Vronsky’s love. Anna’s bold step was induced by her husband’s hypocritic attitude, which did not exactly disapprove of her adulterous behaviour, but expected caution in the indulgence. It also reflects Torvald’s idea of social propriety in Ibsen’s The Doll’s House, where he expects his wife Nora to stay with him for society’s sake even after the tragic revelation of lack of faith and love in marriage. The difference lay in the tragedy, that Kamala Das dared not even think of divorcing her husband for fear of being the cause of disgrace to her people, as she was the repository of her family’s honour. In “Honour” she ironically comments, “Honour, the dearest word of all in the Nayar dictionary.” 22

This attitude of indifference was what made her angry and she indulged in adultery to hurt him. As she accepts in “Freaks”, “I am a freak. It’s only / To save my face, I flaunt, at / Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.” 23

21. Ibid. p. 144.
22. Ibid. p. 10.
This anger is directed towards the taken for granted attitude by her husband and his monstrous ego, which tends to annihilate her identity as she remarks wrathfully in "The Old Playhouse":

... You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I eat the magic loaf and
Become a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. 24

She had hoped to fill the place vacated by her father's love with that of her husband's and grow through marriage. Her father never showed his love, he thought his duties were confined to the providing of luxuries. The Nayar male never knew of love or tenderness. In "My Father's Death," we read,

... You should have hugged me, Father, just once to your breast, you should have used kind words at least once a year, you gave my sons hundred rupee notes, you purchased this devotion but my price was too high for you, your wallet could not hold abstract currency. Talking and talking of family bonds will not grow them, you know... 25

This attitude of her father, where, family bondage is spoken off is not different from that of her husband in his reply to her fear of being too immature for sex, "Even if that is so, we shall be happy living

together." Kamala's anger was directed not only against her husband, her resentment had its origin even before her marriage. The resentment was directed towards the Nayar men who thought of women as mere objects devoid of emotions. The rude shock of the same attitude reflected in her husband's words and the realization that she was but a rag-doll to her husband just as she was to her father shocks her to her true position in the Nayar community. Her desires, fears and emotions as a woman had no value in the Nayar community. The heartless demand of a hypocritical society which forces one to conceal one's real feelings, and project a picture of blissful married life is seen in "Substitute", as she states,

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

It will be all right if I join clubs
And flirt a little over telephone.
It will be all right, it will be all right
I am the type that endures.

It will be all right, it will be all right.
It will be all right between the world and me.

It will be all right if I don't remember
The last of the days together... 
```

This distinction between sex and love in marriage is what creates the conflict in her sensitive mind. Sex meant to bring man and woman together, by holy sanction fails miserably in her case as it is considered purely physical by her husband and emotional by her.

Marriage became a necessary social discomfort, which had to be endured. This hypocritical demand of the society and her husband's indifference led her onto an escapade of adultery, which brought only more emptiness. Her dream of a marriage nurtured on mythological stories was never to be realized, as seen in the beginning of My Story. "In day dreams, I too became a Draupadi who commanded her adoring mate to brave the demons to get flowers for her wavy tresses." 28 The beautiful beloved commanding her lover to do her bidding, Rama's destruction of Ravana for his wife Sita, in the Ramayana, had led to her dream of a beautiful marriage, where the husband was a guardian and protector. Reality shattered her dreams and made her ponder over the hollowness of the norms of the society.

Every Hindu girl brought up traditionally, was moulded by the Manu Smriti, which accorded a comparative existence for women. The Smriti, advocated the concept that a woman was not worthy of freedom. She had to be permanently under the guardianship of a male authority, be it her father, husband or son. The following lines from Manu Smriti highlights social norm:

Pitā Raksati Kaumāre Bhārtā Raksti
Yuaanee
Putro Raksati Vardhakye, Nastri
Svātantryamrhati
Chakrakodi 29

The translation being, the father protects the maiden, the husband during youth and the son during her old age, a woman does not deserve freedom (trans., self)

"An Introduction," narrates the saga of her life until her marriage, and "Composition" from marriage till the acceptance of death as inevitable.

Kamala Das was moulded, to be of a good daughter and dutiful wife and the husband as a protector, guardian and mentor. She was shattered by her husband's brutal desire for sex, infidelity and indifference to her immaturity regarding sexual relationship and innocence, which led to a traumatic experience. The dreams of being a coveted wife, was never to be realized. This realization made her question her needs as a woman. This deep journey into the self flowed in the form of poetry, which was an unburdening of a hurt psyche. Instead of settling down accepting her fate, she tried to fight against it. Rather than be coveted and protected she was given freedom as seen in "Composition":

When I got married
my husband said,
you may have freedom,
as much as you want.
My soul balked at this diet of ash. 30

In her society marriage was meant to give her a sense of security,
the traditional bindings, although irksome created an illusion of being wanted. In a society, where a woman's status was linked to her husband even in her death freedom in marriage could mean nothing but rejection. In “Of Calcutta”:

And, each dead wife’s feet are painted red before
they carry her to the pyre so that we see, while
Passing by, tiny alta-tinted feet wagging,
Red flags of triumph, bragging of a widowhood,
Cleverly avoided. 31

In “Composition” she asks in a pathetic voice if there was a flaw in her as a woman,

... I began to have doubts.
I asked my husband,
am I hetero
am I lesbian
or am I just plain frigid?
He only laughed.
For such questions
probably there are no answers

or else
the answers must emerge
from within. 32

This long poem of two hundred and sixty-eight lines, illucidates, her life from the time of her marriage. The poem begins with the nostalgic memory, for the sound of the sea and her grand mother. The sea is remembered with fondness, as a symbol of permanence, stability and innocence. The folly of compromising the inherent values is regretted as seen in “Composition,” “Before the skin, / intent on survival, / learnt lessons of self-betrayal.” 33

Kamala Das, decided to search for love outside wedlock, and realized that it meant only bodily satisfaction, and her search for emotional love proved futile. Her desire for a strong emotional bond through physical union in thwarted as reflected in “Substitute”,

Yet, I was thinking, lying beside him
That I loved, and was much loved.
It is physical thing, he said suddenly,
End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free. 34

Yet the reality lies revealed as a sore wound in her acceptance that “... Oh yes, getting / A man to love is easy, but living / Without him afterward may have to be / Faced.”35

32. Ibid. p. 112.
33. Ibid. p. 110.
35. Ibid. p. 42.
The feminine self that thrives on emotion and intuition cannot adopt the masculine way of life where even the most intimate aspect of life i.e., man-woman relationship is analyzed intellectually.

This awareness leads to a desperate cry for the religiously glorified union in "Freaks",

... can’t this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers?

The realization dawned, on Kamala Das that her search had to transcend the desire of her own body as she says in “The Doubt”,

And, what am I in sex who shuttles
Obsessively from his
Stabs to recovery
In her small silent room?

The body too aged with time, the mind matured and with clarity it could see that love and hate were both bondages. She had gone out in search of love and returned with a guilt-laden mind. In her escapades she had forgotten to take into consideration that the mortal body was aging. Her beauty was fading, and the hunger within was decreasing. The sea, which had moved far away, was appearing closer. She had misused the freedom given by her husband. The universal truth, that she finds is the one, which is stated in “Composition” as she says,

What I am able to give
is only what your wife is qualified
to give.
We are all alike,
we women,
in our wrappings of hairless skin. 38

Finally, she comes to the conclusion that all men and all women
are same. There is nothing special about anyone. Each man or woman
tries to be unique but it only proves to be a fond folly. The lesson is
learnt the hard way. The only way she can be free is by escaping from
the clutches of male-domination, i.e., her desire or hunger as a female
for a male. The desire itself is a cage. It is not the man who builds the
prison but the woman herself in her desire for a perfect union. She
needs to control her emotions and bodily hungers, in order to find peace
and happiness. Kamala realizes the tragic reality that the woman hardly
has any choice in this male dominated world, where she either has to
‘fit-in’ like a zombie or renounce the earthly desires. She has no
freedom to live the way she wants to, even when traditionally
sanctioned, she cannot even dream, leave alone speaking, of sexual
happiness. The society expects her to be a universal donor, the patient
earth and forgiving mother. Kamala Das’s mind refuses this choice
meted out to her. The husband who exhorts his due from her without
her consent looks like a murderer after the sexual act, in “The Doubt”:

This equation of sex with death is an important aspect in Kamala Das. Sex being the very base of life has been scorned when discussed by writers in open expressions, like D.H. Lawrence who has been sometimes called obscene. Yet, with all the discouraging attitude of the society, writers continue to write about it, along with the mysteries connected with it. The main question that arises regarding sex is whether its consummation is destructive or constructive. If poets like EkNath, Kabir, have projected it as an impediment in the path of man’s spiritual progress, Akkamahadevi, Surdas, Mira bai and Jayadev have found it to be a way of sublime union. In Kamala Das, we find both the destructive and constructive aspect of sex, the physical and sublime respectively. On the physical plane she equates the male body with the burning sun, and forces of destruction. They tend to annihilate the poet’s self and feminity. On this grounds, poems can be divided into negative and positive poems. The negative poems are those, which deal with resentment against unfulfilled love, which she feels are destructive, which destroy her self and the positive ones are those where she finds complete fulfillment which of course are very rare as in the poem “Love” where she writes,

Until I found you,
I wrote verse, drew pictures
And went out with friends
For walks.
Now that I love you,
Courted like an old mongrel
My life lies, content,
In you.  

It dawned upon Kamala Das that both the husband and lover succeeded in captivating her due to her need for them. Kamala Das tragically realized that the images of men in her life that of a father, husband and lover shared one common characteristic and it was according to her first a confinement of her personality and later a demand for annihilation of her individuality. The husband thus becomes a: ‘Spider, spinning webs of bewilderment’, and the lover makes her a ‘captive’ of her own bodily desires. There is an indignant acceptance of the fact that her bodily hunger is the weakness, which binds her to the male, thus letting him dominate her. The fault, which was found outside here before is now found to be within herself, as seen in “Captive,” “...for years I have run from one / gossamer lane to another, I am / now my own captive.”  

She continues the same strain of thought in “The Winner”, when she confesses,

He said good-bye I thought it ended there,
But all through this night
I saw him in my dream
I saw him smile. 42

The two poems above show a tendency to absolve men as responsible for her sufferings leading to an attempt to be free of the hunger for male companionship is seen.

One sees the futile struggle of the feminine force to free itself from the suppression of the masculine force. The change from submission and humiliation now is seen to turn into a rebellion, not against ‘male’ as a human entity, but a force personified in social and religious norms.

Kamala Das’s development both as a woman and poet charted thus far in a nutshell is:

1. Her childhood – humiliation in the Kindergarten, lack of fatherly love, puberty and awareness created about her gender.

2. Her marriage – to a man selected by her father, lack of love and understanding from the husband, exhortion of sexual gratification from her irrespective of her emotions. The shock of realization of sex as a purely physical need for men. Escapades into adulterous affairs in search of sex equated with love.

3. Finally, the realization of lack of difference in attitude towards sex in both the husband and lover and the inevitable result of captivity of a woman in search of love.

42. Ibid. p. 173.
As a gradual development, Kamala Das speaks of freeing herself from the clutches of male domination. A battle one could say against the Nayar inheritance, of leading the life of a sex object as seen in “I Shall Some Day”,

I shall someday leave, the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. I shall someday take
Wings, fly around, as often petals
Do when free in air. 43

In “The Descendants” too, she speaks of the undue importance given to a married life when she says, “... We have lain every weather, nailed, no, not / To crosses, but to soft beds. 44 In the “Convicts,” she is seen to observe the barricades, which imprison her,

As the convict studies
His prisons geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must some day find
An escape from its snare. 45

The beginning of awakening is seen in “Conflagration,” where she sarcastically remarks that life has much more to offer. It is not confined merely to connubial duties. “Woman, is this happiness, this

lying buried / Beneath a man?. It's time again to come alive, / The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame.”  

The three poems quoted above show her awakening to the fault of having given extra-ordinary importance to the desire for love from men. Finally, she states in “A Losing Battle,” that in order to survive in a patriarchal culture, she should learn its ways,

... Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which is a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood.  

The horror of distrust in man-woman relationship makes her bitter, firmly rooted in Hindusim which works towards reconciliation of polarities, she accepts the role of men as necessary in her life. The Nayar blood in her is too powerful and although she struggles for freedom from the lust which she calls search for perfect union, she reiterates her Dravidian ancestry, where she was forced to be an object of sexual gratification over whelms her attitude. The influence of the collective unconscious, becomes too powerful in “In Love,” as she says,

... Where
Is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each
Embrace a complete thing, a

The same concept is seen to be reinforced in "A Relationship," where she speaks about the wisdom of the body. Physical love, she says, is older than her poetic self, "by myriad saddened centuries." It is the desire of the male and female for each other that has given them beautiful identities. This bond by the virtue of which they communicate the essential wisdom of continuity of human race, needs no sentimentalisation. The "blind kindness" of physical desire stands beyond the reach of words of betrayal. Words are new but the body is old, ancient. Her blood carries the residues of a rich and royal tradition full of the splendour of her ancestors. Men are but white suns drowning in her Dravidian blood. In "Blood," remembering her grandmother she says,

She told us
That we had the oldest blood,
My brother, and she and I,
The oldest blood in the world,
A blood thin and clear and fine

The slow realization of the sanctity of traditional norms is seen in the "After the Illness" poem where, Kamala Das observes,

... There was
Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger, the blood had

49. Ibid. p. 18.
Weakened too much to lust, and the skin, without health's Anointments, was numb and unyearning, What lusted then For him, was it perhaps the deeply hidden soul? ⁵¹

The truth that the hunger in human beings is never ending, brings her to realize that the hunger is not merely physical it lies deep within the body, perhaps even beneath the flesh and bones as seen in “Doubt.”

When a man is dead, or a woman, We call the corpse not he Or she but it. Does it Not mean that we believe That only the souls have sex and that Sex is invisible? ⁵²

This recognition makes her turn to the traditional values on which she was nourished. The illness and the nearness of death made her return to her roots, in “Blood,” she says,

O Mother’s mother’s mother,

Do not blame my blood So thin, so clear, so fine, The oldest blood in the world That remembers as it flows All the gems and all the gold

⁵². Ibid.
And all the perfumes and the oils
And the stately
Elephant ride . . . 53

The power of the matrilineal tradition draws her back into its folds. She hunts for a myth suiting her needs of the time. Her mother Balamani amma wrote in celebration of motherhood, about Yashoda the foster-mother of Krishna and Krishna, the naughty Child-god. The Hindu religion has always come to the rescue of a Hindu in times of crises with its mythological characters as role models. These characters become more real than friends and relatives.

The first religious myth that comes to the rescue of Kamala Das’s guilt laden mind is the myth of ‘Agni’ (fire). The intimate aspects of live like sex is described as a necessity about which one need not shy. To understand the position given to sex in man’s life one needs to have an indepth knowledge of man-woman relationship in the mythological books. Sex has never been shunned on the whole as evil or undesirable. It has been advocated as a necessity for the release of tension in man and woman and also for the continuity of the human race. The significant aspect highlighted in the mythology is on the controlled indulgence of sex for reaping the best of its results. Sex has always been considered as a powerful energy needed to be channelised in the proper direction. For a man to be strong both mentally and physically he was advised to withhold his semen, or practice ‘tapas’ or celibacy. This power gained

53. Ibid. p. 07.
through seminal retention was then transformed into intellectual or spiritual power. The power of the sages is a well known in the mythological stories. The sages have used this power for the benefit of mankind. Shiva Puranas give a clear picture of the interrelation between the two ways of life which seem contradictory, that of asceticism and sexuality. Although in human terms asceticism is opposed to sexuality and fertility, in mythological terms, 'tapas' itself is a powerful creative force, a generative power of ascetic heat. The creative power of ascetic heat, particularly when placed in water, is the starting point in all the cosmogonic myths. ‘Water’ and ‘Fire’ are the elemental images of Shaiva mythology.

In Brāhmanas, Prajāpati, the Creator, assumes the brahmacārin’s role:

Prajāpati was alone here in the beginning. He wished, ‘May I exist, may I reproduce myself’. He exerted himself and performed tapas, and when he was exhausted and heated the waters were created from him, for waters are born from the heated man, the waters said, ‘What is to become of us?’ He said, ‘You shall be heated.’ They were heated and created foam ....’

Prajāpati is shown as empowered, to two forms of creation as a result of his tapas. The first one is regarding the creation of fire, light, air, sun, moon, dawn etc., related to the creation of the universe. The second is the creation of rain. This theme developed from the Rg Vedic identification of rain with the sweat produced by ritual activity (the waters born from the heated man) and from the simple analogy of the

shedding of seed and the shedding of rain. Indra the leader of the Rudras and a fertility god in his own right is said to derive his cosmic forces from rain, which is stored in the sperm of living beings:

Agni, the Rudras the Asvins, and Indra are all closely connected with heat, as well as with the rain which it is their primary function to produce, because heat is needed to generate rain. This belief is naturally very compelling in a land where the monsoon so dramatically shatters the intolerable heat of summer.55

The motif of seed as rain appears in an incident during the wedding of Siva and Sati. "Brahmā looked at Sati’s face and was filled with lust. As he became excited his seed fell upon the earth and turned into thundering clouds which covered the sky, releasing their water." 56 In the above illustration, it is the shedding of Brahmā’s seed, rather than its retention, of chastity that causes rain. Indra has always been portrayed as a jealous god who becomes responsible for the destruction of the chastity of great sages. He sends his apsaras or heavenly damsels / prostitutes to entice the sages to spoil their tapas or to shed their seeds. This unnatural concept of seminal retention is followed strictly according to the rules of the scriptures, without undermining the significance of fertility and vegetation. The heat, which leads to evaporation and then to rain, is described in terms of sexual passion and its fulfillment, not just for fun but for rejuvenation, the falling of the

56. Ibid.
seed becoming compulsory in the process. The beauty of the Hindu mythology is seen in the fact that while celebrating the most sublime, one is aware of the most mundane trivialities of physical discomforts of everyday life, even the stinks play a dominant role, illustrating the physical nature of sublime desires. 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' the opening poem of her first collection "Summer in Calcutta" beautifully exemplifies the above statement. One can try to explain away the poem as a poet's thwarted search for the self, but to be more closer to her favourite theme sex, one can see that it depicts her dissatisfaction in sexual relationship. The title objectifies her sexual intercourse with her husband and lovers, because both are able to provide only partial satisfaction and partial cooling of her heat. The sexual act fails to serve the purpose of complete union. In "The Dance of the Eunuchs," "It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came." 57 The heat of summer is also the heat within. But rather than leading to ecstasy of sexual satisfaction, the result of the heat is incomplete like the Eunuchs who are incomplete in themselves and can sing only of "Lovers dying and of children left unborn . . . / Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts / And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. "58

The song of the Eunuchs refers to the incapacity of the man spilling his seed for rejuvenation. The hurried love-making, empty pretences of satisfaction, sterility involved in loveless marriages, affairs, the birth of children as biological results of mating, rather than products

58. Ibid.
of holy union seen in the modern world is mourned. The 'vacant ecstacy' can also be referred to two significant aspects of modern life. The primary one being indulgence in love-play for its own sake in marriage avoiding pregnancy and childbirth, and the second one referring to adulterous behaviour of the modern world, where the birth of children is out of question. Kamala Das, herself admits that at the time of writing this poem "she was searching for passionate involvement in the hot river of sex and that's what she meant by' they sang of lovers dying' was all barren passion." 59 The above lines bring to mind the great love-play of Sivâ and Pârvati. "The friction generated by their love-play would fail to produce the son the gods needed, or that the son produced in that way would be a danger to the universe..."60 The significance of this episode lies in the fact that sexual pleasure for its own sake can prove as unnatural and as dangerous as abstinence. As mythology is a form of lesson to mankind, one can take it as a warning that man should indulge in love-play for a fruitful purpose and not for mere indulgence for physical pleasure. If not instead of rejuvenation, one will find the drought symbolized in "The Dance of the Eunuchs":

\[... like half-burnt logs from\]
Funeral pyres, a drought and rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so

Silent on trees, and the children, wide-eyed still, 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 fire or passion of the Eunuchs was not sufficient to bring  
down the rains. They were incomplete, although they were a union of  
masculine and feminine attributes, they were neither perfect nor whole.  
Their's was a rotten, empty, barren union, which promised no new life.  
They cannot bring down the rain or the seminal seed for growth. The  
'silence of the crows' can be taken as a reference to the Gods sending  
'Agni' in the form of a bird to Siva's bedroom to retrieve Siva's seed,  
which was in danger. Here there is no such danger of seed's being  
wasted. The rain that the eunuchs dance invokes is not the fertilizing  
monsoon bringing in coolness and quenching of heat, but "a meager  
rain" incapable of redeeming the burning desert/drought of the  
Eunuchs life. This reference to Siva myth is hardly surprising because  
when she and her brother lived with their great grandmother as she  
says in "Blood":

Our great grandmother said one day,  
You see this house of ours,  
Now three hundred years old;  
........  
........  
The snake-shrine is dark with weeds  
And all the snake-gods in the shrine  
Have lichen or their hoods

She was really simple.  
Fed on God for years,  
All her feasts were monotonous  
For the only dish served was always God  
And the rest mere condiments  
She told us how she rode her elephant  
When she was ten or eleven  
Every Monday without fail  
To the Siva Shrine  
And back to home again

And the sandal for her breasts  
And her marriage to a prince  
Who loved her deeply ... 

The above lines indicate the connection of Kamala Das's family with the worship of Siva for generations together. Her grandmother might have narrated the stories of Siva as an erotic ascetic. They might have left a strong impression on the young mind. The dance of the eunuchs, externalises her wounded feminine self, which has failed in its quest of realization of complete femininity. Although she too like the eunuchs dresses up like a woman she can never realize her womanhood through a complete union with man. Her feminine fire can never be quenched. It becomes an agonizing enlightenment which becomes an unbearable cross for her 'self'. The agonized mind searches for an answer for this incompleteness of her womanhood. One finds the influence of traditional upbringing although the word used are modern.

as she reflects on the failure of her marriage, as “am I hetero / am I lesbian / or am I just plain frigid? in “Composition.”

The self analysis leads to the mythological characters. The Hindu girl is brought up with the mythological Sita, as a model, who personifies patience and wifely conduct. Self negation is in doctrined in the young female minds from a very tender age. The Hindu girl is taught to mould herself into the character of Sita wherein she subordinates her welfare to the welfare of others, especially that of her husband’s and children. Kamala Das being no exception considers herself responsible for the failure of her marriage and is seen analysing herself. These precepts are applicable even to Sita the favourite mythological character, wife of Rama who was rejected after her return from Lanka.

If to preserve your good name among them, I must be sacrificed, I am content to be sacrificed. As you serve your subjects, so I serve you, not less but more. This body of mine is nothing, To me; as to any woman, the husband is everything, he is kindred, he is preceptor, he is God. My duty is to be of use to him and in his service to lay down my life if need be.

Tapas or following of asceticism, maintenance of chastity is not only the privilege of men, women too performed tapas, in order to gain good husbands and illustrious sons. These women were powerful and sometimes more powerful than men ascetics. Their fidelity to their

63. Ibid. p. 112.
husbands 'Pativrata' conduct gave them the power even to burn others, who tried to seduce or molest them. The women who remained unmarried by performing tapas were considered a danger to the world with their extraordinary power. In the Hindu mythology the unmarried goddesses are portrayed as dangerous, violent and aggressive (Kali; Durga) and as docile, obedient and calm if married. (Laxmi; Parvati) This belief, perhaps enforces the social norms by suggesting that it is necessary for women to marry and express their sexuality in 'Safe' ways and under male supervision and authority. In the human realm marriage is assumed not only to complete a woman but to tame her, "Channeling her dangerous sexual energy in acceptable ways. The god, or male is seen as a civilizing, calming, ordering presence." 65

Heat in Kamala Das's poem is another aspect which, bears very strong mythological significance. Almost all her poems have the scorching sun or the fire imagery, be it of a funeral or otherwise. Fire in the Hindu mythology refers to two types of heat, one 'Agni,' the destructive heat and the other 'kama,' the sexual heat/passion which leads to rejuvenation, unification, sublimation etc. This heat gained through tapas is used to destroy enemies in the Rg Veda, and the hymns uttered are in praise of Agni, the god of fire. In many Saiva myths Agni is considered not as the heat of tapas but as the opposite force, heat of sexual desire, sometimes a combination of both.

Springing from the natural physiological analogy, the tie between Agni and Kama was supported by the Vedic symbolism of the two fire-sticks, the upper one male and the lower one female, whose friction is described in anthropomorphic terms.66

Kamala Das, a traditionally nurtured person, was not ignorant of the significance of the heat as ‘Agni.’ Fire is an integral part of Hinduism in everyday life. It is the medium through which offerings are made to the Gods. It is used as a holy witness for umpteen purposes. Sita’s ‘Agni Pariksha.’ or test by fire is a very dear topic to Hindu ladies. No ritual without an address to ‘Agni,’ the God of Fire. Rg Veda, describes the significance of fire says that, “the whole life of man is fire, he is born of fire (sexual union) survives because of fire (hunger) rejuvenates because of fire (regeneration) and reaches the Supreme soul through fire (cremation).” (trans., mine).67 Narayana Acharya illucidates about fire, “the divine agency responsible for the individualization of creatures.”68

The body heat is also called ‘fire,’ as it is the heated passionate body that longs for union. When a man and woman become heated they join and birth takes place. ‘Fire,’ even the funeral one has holy significance. The fire here becomes again the door towards union of the soul with the supreme soul, putting an end to the cycle of rebirth. The

68. Ibid. p. 161.
significance of 'fire,' in Hindus cannot be undermined, “the whole Rig Veda is considered as an exposition of the Agni-doctrine.”69 Kamala Das’s conscious use of the ‘Fire’ myth is seen in “A Souvenir of Bone,” she speaks of fire:

The fire was red blood that night, I remember the house Burning down, the slow folding of its limbs, the crackle, And the children carried in sleep, asking dully from 
... Since then the littlest fire Has had for me a very secret incantation, A message that I have heard and held in a haunted Mind. The fugitive flame of the evening lamp on The patio was the seed of the fire tree, the seed Of a gorgeous death.

......
...... and there was always And always the fire answering me,

.............. My desires
Were many, if granted freedom I knew they would burn Down like tongues of flame, the monastic peace of my home.

The ancient lusts are blinded in the mind, they stagger Through the light of the day ...

In no way ‘fire’ here can be understood other than that of the ‘lust’ of the body. The “ancient lusts,” refers to “ancient men and

---

women, perhaps mythological characters who did not have to hide their desires.” Again in the last few lines,

... His nature was then
Water, mine was fire. He had no doubt at all, and
I had many. I told you my nature was fire; it was
Greed and ingratitude.

Rob me of my sustenance, but do not, I beg
of you, do not take away my thirst... 71

The reference to their natures seemingly contradictory are exactly what are needed to produce the seed. Only here she is the fire instead of him. She prays to be allowed to be what she stands for, the eternal feminine hunger lusting for the masculine.

Kamala Das describes the external heat, which can be taken as an externalization of her internal heat or sexual passion which seeks satiation. The modern world lacking both in depth, of emotion and passion hardly has time for its fulfillment. The most significant and primary of man-woman relationship is treated as trivial, ignoring the in-depth significance of the same. Nurtured on mythological stories, of sexual exploits and brought up in a house where people had time to adorn themselves and indulge in the sexual game, her city bred husband, and her migration to the cities left her totally frustrated. The dirth of time and privacy of their city life, her husband’s mechanical attitude towards sex, increased her passion for sex as a form of love and

71. Ibid. p. 33.
union. There is a nostalgic longing for the tradition in “Blood,” as she says:

The oldest blood in the world
That remembers as it flows
All the gems and all the gold
And all the perfumes and the oils
And the stately
Elephant ride...  72

In “The Suicide,” she reinforces this concept of feminine need for love and the sea becomes the masculine element into which she wants to swim. The sea also becomes the symbol of eternity into which she wants to dissolve. The desire to death through drawing as she says, is seen in

Between me and the high.
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  73

She had grown in the warmth of the sun - i.e., heat, naturally, a child of nature with strong basic urges, and city life of adultery becomes insipid to her. She needs a strong Dravidian, and through the imagery of the sea, she returns mental to her rich heritage and says,

72. Ibid. p. 7.
73. Ibid. p. 72.
O Sea, I am happy swimming
Happy, happy, happy... 
The only movement I know well
Is certainly the swim.

It comes naturally to me
The white man who offers
Himself as a stiff drink,
Is for me,
To tell the truth,
only water.
Only a pale green pond
Glimmering in the sun.
In him I swim
All broken with longing.
In his robust blood I float
Drying off my tears.

Holding you is easy
Clutching at moving water,
I tell you, Sea,
This is easy,
But to hold him for half a day
Was a difficult task - 74

The holding on to transient love in the modern world is much more difficult than holding on to moving water. The man has no time or has lost his basic urge of uniting with the woman to be a complete whole. So, when he makes love finally she weeps, as it disappoints her.

“In Love,” she uses the image of the burning Sun again accepting the inherent hunger in her and enquires,

74. Ibid. pp. 72, 73, 74.
Of what does the burning mouth
Of Sun, burning in today’s
Sky remind me... oh, yes, his
Mouth, and his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust. 75

To quench the basic fire of passion one needs no excuse of love, as it is an elemental union, which needs neither emotion nor justification. The tone here is sarcastically painful, for it leads to death throes, "... isn’t each / Embrace a complete thing, a / Finished jigsaw, when
mouth on / Mouth, I lie ... 76 Yet, the mechanical mating leads to dissatisfaction. The refrain for this type of mating is the corpse-bearers cry of "Bol Hari Bol," instead of the mythological result of creation. Kamala Das shows her resentment against a hypocritical society which is full of lust but hides it in the guise of civilization. In "Ode To A Lynx," she aims her indignation at enforced propriety of the decent society, which conceals its hideous nature behind a veil of hypocrisy, as she says,

If your desires were basics
Why did you pretend at all for three years
That you loved not me but my poetry?
Civilization irks me with its cunning ways.
I connect only with candour.

75. Ibid. p. 76.
76. Ibid.
I have heard that every busy man seeks a womb,
A womb to hibernate in. 77

In the Hindu mythology, sex has never been refuted, it has been
given the maximum significance, just as the hunger of the stomach for
survival. Yet, in the name of decorum and religion people are fooled
into fooling themselves of true urges, which are thwarted, and thus
expressed in warped ways. Kamala Das longs for the fulfillment of the
naked hunger of the body, which is sanctioned by all the holy things she
is made to swear by and believe in. The influence of Shaiva mythology
in her poems can be traced by the concepts it advocates.

Shiva is worshipped through the 'Linga', emblem. This 'Linga,'
signifies a picture of coitus necessary for the continuation of the
universe. The 'Linga,' illustrates that the tension between man and
woman, mythologised as Sivâ and Pârvati is ultimately resolved in
interdependence. It symbolizes a creative interaction between the world
of asceticism in which sexual abstinence is mandatory and life of
household in which sex is necessary. The in-depth beauty of myth lies
in resolving inherent contradictions, thus offering an explanation to
mankind regarding the unity in the apparent polarities. The two
polarities of Yoga (abstinence) and Bhoga (indulgence in bodily
pleasure) seem to complement and complete each other. What one sees
in Kamala Das’s poems is the desire to experience the vision of
reconciliation, interdependence and symbiotic harmony found in Hindu
mythology. Taking for granted that she knew the stories related to Siva,

77. Ibid. p. 88.
one can dare to conjecture that she was familiar with the three images central to the Shaiva mythology is (1) The Theme of Sīvā, Sakti (2) The image of Sīvā as Ardhanarīswara (the lord who is half man and half woman) and the (3) Image of Linga and Yoni.

The main idea is that all great male gods possess inherent power through which they undertake creative activity, and when this power is personified it invariably takes the form of a Goddess. Pārvati becomes Sakti, she becomes the performer of the function. In this active role she is identified with Prakriti (nature) Sīvā is identified with Purusa (pure Spirit). As Prakriti she represents the inherent tendency of nature to express itself in concrete forms and individual forms. She is not antagonistic to him, she is the medium through which he expresses himself. She not only complements him but completes him, without her he remains inactive. Sīvā is considered the sky and Pārvati the earth, Sīvā the Ocean; Pārvati the earth, Sīvā the Sun and Pārvati the light, Sīvā the Soul and the Pārvati the embodiment of all souls etc. are some of the images and metaphors used to show the different aspects of ultimate reality which is one.

In the Ardhanāriswara form too the concept is similar. The image shows a half-male and half-female figure. The right side is Sīvā and is adorned with his ornaments and, left is Pārvati adorned with her ornaments. In the Shiva Puranā, God Brahma is unable to continue his task of creation because the creatures he has produced do not multiply. He requests Sīvā to come to his aid. Sīvā appears in the Ardhanārisvarā form. At Brahma's request he splits them into two entities. Sīvā and Pārvati. Pārvati pervades the creating, with her female nature which
duly awakens the male aspect of creation into fertile activity. Either is incomplete without the other. This image of Ardhanāriswara emphasizes that only in union they can satisfy and fulfill themselves. The concept of unity of opposite is again the main concept, that God is both male and female, father and mother, etc.

If the above two images are a little abstract in emphasizing the concept of the union of the feminine and masculine urges of creation, the Linga in the Yoni, the common image of deity in Sivă temples illustrates it in its most basic form. If the abstract is for scholars who would shy of physicalities this image exemplifies the resolving of the tension between man and woman. Not only does the image elucidate the necessity of such a union, it also highlights the aspect of temperance between two extremes that of asceticism and attachment. It is the creative release in the ultimate erotic act of power stored through asceticism.

The danger, which lies in the interpretation of this myth, is that the myth can be transformed into a base and vulgar imagery. The caution to be adhered to here is during interpretation regarding the legitimate aspect of the union. It is within the bounds of marriage, and between two individuals of great power of chastity. It is not simply between any man and any woman. Sivă has accumulated power through his asceticism or tapas and Pārvati has performed tapas to achieve Sivă. The myth along with accentuating the necessity of man-woman relationship also becomes a guideline for a preparation before the union. The union needs to be pure and powerful to ensure worthy outcome. The three images described above are necessary to
understand Kamala Das's poetry. One would be wrong in rendering her work as a set of poems influenced by Shaiva motifs, at the same time one cannot totally ignore the influence of Shaiva motifs in her works, working at the sub-conscious level.

The use of the Radha-Krishna myth in her poems is conscious. The former myth might have been seminal in the birth of explicitly lurid images of the physical descriptions in her works. The anatomical descriptions of the man and woman seem quite brazen to the so called refined social ethics. At the same time they reflect the collective unconscious of the Dravidian, Nayar female psyche which is trying to free itself from the burden of the civilized restraints. The real self is found desperately struggling to surface in a new set up quite alien to its original surroundings. The conflict is between being a Dravidian with dark (brown) skin, suffering a sense of alienation amidst the Aryans. In "A Certain Defect in the Blood," she says,

\[
\ldots \text{It was a defect} \\
\quad \text{In our blood that made us the land's inferiors,} \\
\quad \text{A certain muddiness in the usual red,} \\
\quad \text{Revealing our non Aryan descent.} \text{78}
\]

Her 'self,' remembers the raw life of the Dravidian culture, very close to nature, where the so called civilized society did not inhibit basic instincts. The man was real, a warrior bold and virile, and the female a woman full of hunger. The perfect counterparts of nature longing for a union for creation. In "Wood Ash," the futile attempt of ignoring the

call of unconscious is highlighted. The lines vividly describe the Nayar heritage of warriors, created in the Parasurama myth,

In this new world I lack coherence listen differently for what I have to tell let your blood listen and from within you descendants shall hear me

the Dravidian king raised a loud war cry the beasts in their dens cowered in fear

the chieftains bartered their kingdoms away for trinkets I have learnt to listen to the thump of blood in my ear 79

The fall of the Dravidian culture, the phallus worshippers due to Aryan advent is also one of the main tensions underlying her poems. The myth of having been born into a warrior class keeps cropping up often. Yet, as she herself admits, she does not express everything she feels, for fear of being called a dishonour to her family. Although death seemed an extremely attractive solution, being born and brought up in a robust life-loving community, fed on strong myths of the beauty of life, she succeeded in overcoming the desire to succumb to it even when life became intolerable. The words of the enlightened in Sanskrit, “Sharīra mādhyam, Khalu Dharma Sādhanam,” 80 which means that the body is integral to achieve one’s goals is reflected in “The Suicide,” “Bereft of Soul / My body shall be bare. / Bereft of body / My soul shall be

79. Ibid. p. 49.
bare." If Kamala has been considered an exhibitionist, or anything except a mature poet, these four lines are sufficient to show her roots firmly placed in the Hindu culture. Perhaps it was this keen awareness which made her realize that death was for the cowards; the mediocres and not for the brave. The existential streak in her is very powerfully reflected in "Gino," as she imagines old-age and desires death to be a natural one, a natural entry into another womb, another birth,

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must
Roll across the road . . .

. . . Perhaps some womb in that
Darken world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent.

"Death is so mediocre" and "I Shall Not Forget," deal with the theme of death. In "Life's Obscure Parallel," she wonders about living a discontented life, which she feels is death-in-life, and aging towards death as life-in-death:

Life's obscure parallel is death. Quite often
I wonder if what I seem to do is living
Or dying. A little of each is in every
Gesture, both my mind's and my body's.

82. Ibid, pp. 84-85.
83. Ibid. p. 54.
This tone of acceptance of life is seen in "Maturity," which endorses her view that the tragedy of life is not death but growth:

Growth is the stoicism of sewers

The closure of apertures that allow
That river of unhappiness to flow in
Towards the heart's restive ocean, the eyes,
The ears, so that the breath inhaled yields its True meaning. 84

Death would put an end to everything. It would give a person no chance to prove anything. It would only be a coward's choice, and Kamala Das with the rich blood flowing in her was not a coward. Life, growth and aging would lead her to wisdom, promised by Hinduism. A wisdom synonymous with stoicism, which would help her face misery and joy equanimously. Hinduism does not prescribe death as a solution to any problem or suffering. The acceptance of life as it is and the desire to live the life destined, along with the tension of the inherited and acquired traits and education leads her to the myth of 'Radha-Krishna', a much loved myth of the Hindus. The love between a man and woman sublimated, although at times described as adulterous. This cult of devotion or Bhakti is considered a finer form of love, wherein the devotee's love for God is considered as a woman's love for a man. The devotee and God become a pair of lovers longing for union. The beloved character 'Krishna' comes as an Avatāra in the Dwaparayuga, in human form but full of divine potential. Krishna is one of the ten

84. Ibid. p. 48.
incarnations of Vishnu, the Supreme God, in which Vishnu shows his maximum power as divinity incarnate. Krishna figures in the long narrative epic written by Vyasa, the Mahabharata. Krishna, a dark skinned, smooth-faced, lotus eyed person with a flute in his hand, a symbol of his early life, amidst the cowherds, and a peacock feather in his crown, figures either as a charioteer to Arjuna or amidst Gopis, the milkmaids. The two pictures depict the two different dimensions of Krishna and Kamala Das was familiar with both. The first picture depicts Krishna as the Supreme God, preaching the Karma Yoga to Arjuna. The picture comes from the Bhagavad-Gita i.e., Song Divine, commonly known as Gita, a part of ‘Mahabharata’.

The influence of this Epic is seen when Kamala Das says, “I prayed to the Sun God to give me a male child.”85 She was impressed by the way ‘Kunti,’ who conceived her five sons, the ‘Pandavas’. My Story is replete with characters and incidence from this epic. Lord Krishna was related to both the parties, and to be impartial he made an offer to both the parties of selecting between himself and his Yadava army, the Kauravās got the first chance and selected his vast army, and Krishna automatically came to the side of the Pandavas. The Kauravās blinded by materialism, indirectly rejected divine assistance or blessings. They represent the evil in opposition to the Pandavas who represent the good. Lord Krishna thus is symbolically related to both good and evil, but sides with and supports the good. During the war Arjuna the best of archers, one of the Pandava brothers hesitates to fight the Kauravās who are his cousins, and this leads to Krishna appearing

in his gigantic divine form encompassing the whole universe and preaching the Karma Yoga, in the ‘Gita’, which is the most sacred text of the Hindus, “Karmanyevā ‘dhikāras te / mā phalesu kadāchana.” 86

The Quintessence of the whole poem is one should pursue a merciless fight against weakness and for the fulfillment of one’s duty, not for any reward or result, but for the sake of duty itself, without any attachment to the fruit of action.

The Krishna of the Bhagvad Gita is the one worshipped and invoked by the majority of the Hindus. Krishna and his teachings, have been reflected, upon by innumerable scholars and religious leaders, and these reflections have contributed deeply to the formation of moral systems and values of a Hindu’s life. The main concept emphasized in Gita is the immortality of the soul. The Gita says that, the soul, changes bodies just as man casts away his old clothes and puts on new ones. It also highlights the fact that man is but a puppet in the hands of God, and that whoever is born has to die and whoever dies has to be born in the endless cycle of Divine order.

The Krishna of the ‘Gita’ is one form that is worshipped, but it preaches the deep philosophical precepts. This form of worship lays down rules which form the very basis of Hinduism. The ‘Gita’ describes the ‘Vishwarupa’ of the Supreme God head. Hinduism, as discussed in the beginning of the Chapter guides even the common man to raise himself to spiritual level, through very common illustrations. This attitude of Hinduism led to the formation of a second type of Krishna.

This second type of Krishna, deals with Krishna's life, where he lived with Yashoda. Krishna's childhood and adolescence are described in words filled with emotions. Krishna here becomes a Childgod and lover. In order to describe the intensity of longing of the soul for the Supreme Soul, the mother-child and man-woman relationship was adopted as an allegory. Krishna the main God, thus got transformed into a personal God. This personal God with innumerable anecdotes of miracles became the heart-throb of many saints. Lord Krishna here became the most colourful and captivating of the Avatârs. Even Adi Shankaracharya who believes in Nirguna Brahma, advises the world to consider only Krishna as the Supreme object of meditation. He concentrates on the physical beauty of the posture of Krishna who stands cross-footed, with the flute in his hands. Leela Suka a worshipper of Lord Shiva and a staunch Shaivaite also remarks:

We are Shaivaites and there is nothing to be reflected or revised or wondered at in this fact. (There are no two opinions about on 'Shiva-nishta'). Even then my mind meditates only on that Divine Boy of (Yashoda-she) Cowherdess, whose complexion is of the colour of a tasi flowers, and whose lovely smiling face is unique in beauty and charm forms. 87

Along with these two saints, one has the Alwars, the Haridasas, Mirabai, Narsi Mehta, Krishna Chaitanya Prabhu, etc., and Acharya's like Ramanuja, Vallabha, Madhava etc., who sing in praise of Lord Krishna. Each person sings in praise of Krishna on a different angle as his own personal God. It becomes next to impossible to put ones finger

on one variety of devotion and say it to be the authentic one. The word ‘Bhakti’ or ‘devotion’ thus came into being. The easiest way of worship came to be through love and total surrender to a personal God of love. This worship called ‘cult of Krishna’ by Nirad C. Chauduri was not purely spiritual like the first one, and has undergone strange and inexplicable transformations in the process of evolution. Yet, the strong emotionalism has remained as the underlying theme of the cult. This emotionalism has been oscillating between self-contained passion to exhibition bordering on hysteria. The hysterical devotion is found particularly in Bengal:

...Where choral singing has become a form of worship, almost a ritual. Sometimes the devotees dance wildly to the beats of drums and cymbals singing loudly. The singing usually ends on men crying and rolling on the floor. 88

The Bhagavata Purana needs to be read with pure mind, open to accept physical descriptions as figurative. The devotees like Chaitanya, and Jayadev brought it down to purely physical level. One can dare to state that these two had the capacity of divining it in its real essence of spirituality although they used physical expressions, but their followers were definitely not capable of the same vision. Rupa Goswami made sexual love, that too an adulterous one a compulsory element of Krishna Bhakti. The gratification of sexual love, brought about by the passion during intercourse became the focal point. This influence is seen in the poem “In Love”:

The special significance of Krishna Avatār was that he was omnipotent, omniscient, and yet, not an obstruction, he was personally appealing in all stages and all type of relationships, e.g., childhood, adolescent, youth and mature man, mother and child, father and son, lover and beloved God and devotee so on and so forth. Finally, he was perfect God as well as perfect man. His worship was very easy. The heavy burden of performing rites was removed. This demand for love in the Gita meant surrender without compulsion, but later on it took a new turn in the relationship of Krishna with the Gopis. It is about this love that Kamala Das speaks of in her poems. The Vaishnavism originated with the three texts: the Vishnu Purana, the Hari Vamsa and the Bhagavata Purana. The last one is considered the most authoritative and the basic book of the Krishna cult.

Bhramavaivarta Purana was born as the next step towards physicality. It is in this work that Radha the most beloved of Krishna makes an appearance, their love is described in erotic terms and Radha is made worthy of worship. She is the worshipper and sometimes more important than Krishna. She personifies the longing of the devotee for the God, and in her own way illustrates the path towards salvation.

This introduction of Radha heightened eroticism and made it a permanent feature of the cult of Krishna.

The union between Radha and Krishna is different in essence from the Śaiva mythology of Siva and Pārvati. The longing of the feminine and the masculine for union is the basic concept of both these texts. Yet, in Brahmavaivarta Purana sexual fore plays and description of Krishna’s physical relationship that of coitus is made explicit. These books relegated the Krishna of the ‘Gita’ to a back seat. These books, which were read only in temples as intellectual discourses became the favourite of the Bengalis’ through Chaitanya. This physical angle of Hinduism appealed to the Westerner too who became devotees of Krishna and have been maligning the real concepts of Krishna devotion.

Kamala Das might have not been influenced by the main Vishnu Puranas yet, she could not have escaped the influence of Chaitanya during her stay in Calcutta. Chaitanya is considered the beloved of Krishna in the modern times. The influence he had on the religious life of Bengalis is found in the fact that in almost every affluent household shrine one compulsorily finds the image of Radha and Krishna in close embrace.

The other main devotee of Krishna is Mirabai, whose devotion although described as love it is elevated to the spiritual plane. This love can be typified as the love, which a woman feels either for God or husband, when their relationship has its base firmly rooted in the physical and yet, rises to spiritual level. In Hinduism, the reverence for one’s husband as God is mandatory. If Radha’s was a passion for union for creation, Mira’s was a love for salvation. Radha can be considered
Krishna's female counterpart and therefore their longing for each other is intense. Mira's longing is that of any soul desirous of union with the Supreme Soul. To understand Krishna's influence on Kamala Das one needs to see the influence of Hinduism in her other poems leading to Krishna's love. The first that can be quoted would be "A Man is a Season," we find the echoes of Mira's devotional songs. Mira was forced to man, even though she was in love with Krishna, and the she accuses him for this,

A man is a season,
You are eternity,
To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty sārines...90

Kamala Das too moved from man to man like a deaf and blind person groping for Krishna, the real one. In "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.91

90. Ibid. p. 803.
91. Ibid. p. 82.
The ache of nothingness is the vacuum within, which hungers for union with the divine, as all physical unions bring but more emptiness. It is this ache or hunger, which spurs a person onto the path of the search of the self. The body is but a medium through which one has to find the peace within and without. It is this ache, which led her to the Radha-Krishna myth, the myth being multi-dimensional suited her purpose of finding true love. This myth in colourful language symbolizes the urge of the soul for union with the Supreme soul. Only God can fulfill the thirst of love and hunger for Divine Union, which is a Vedic truth. It justified her hunger for the same without scandalizing the so called refined readers. Not that her motive was fulfilled, her poems did create sensation if not scandal, but the myth served her purpose. The other poem dealing with awareness of loneliness is “Lines Addressed to a Devadasi,” in which the immanence of the Divine is picturized,

Ultimately there comes a time
When all faces look alike
All voices sound similar
And trees and lakes and mountains
Appear to bear a common signature.

And you sit on the temple steps
A silent Devadasi, lovelorn
And aware of her destiny...

Although Devadasi has a derogatory connotation that of a temple prostitute, it actually means God’s maidservant. ‘Deva,’ God, ‘dasi,’ maidservant. Only when one surrendered one's ego and is prepared to be God’s servant, and aches for his love does God appear to please the devotee. “A Phantom Lotus,” is another poem, which invokes Lord Krishna indirectly. The all pervasiveness of Lord Krishna is echoed in the following lines, and reference is to his blue face, the colour of sky and water,

. . . Any stone can make
An idol. Loving this one, I
Seek but another way to know
Him who has no more a body
To offer, and whose blue face is
A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams . . . 93

In “Someone Else’s Song,” she is seen to echo the verse from the Bhagavad Gita. She used to listen to its narration in her grandmother house, to which she had returned during her pregnancy. “In the morning I went into the prayer room with my grandmother and sat for an hour listening to her read the Bhagavatam and the Gita.”94

I am a million, million people
Talking all at once, with voices
Raised in clamour, like maids

93. Ibid. p. 92.
At village-wells.

I am a million, million silences
Strung like crystal beads
Onto someone else's
Song.95

This poem continues the idea of the previous one where everything is but the manifestation of the divine. In addition to that it is reminiscent of the Bhagavad-Gita, which states that the Lord holds all forms of the universe as the chord holds the pearls in a necklace. "Silences / Strung like crystal beads."96 This is not her own imagery and she acknowledges her gratitude in the words, "Some else's Songs." This awareness of universality of the divine and man's fear of facing God is seen in "The Music Party":

. . . . Behind
Me, your stillness, nothing
Else. No reason why my
Ears should have ignored the
With wild greed, the whisper
Of your breath. I wish my
Girl's singing, and sucked in
Eyes were similarly
Brave and had looked at you
At least once before the
Singing stopped and you left

Quickly, without goodbye...\textsuperscript{97}

The stillness of divine presence which remains unheard in the din of everyday life full of self-centered pleasures, is noticed by the poet. Yet, she lacks the courage not only to acknowledge the presence of the divine, but to give up her sensual pleasures. This cowardice is due to the fear of losing the material attraction. In “Ghanashyam,” she accepts her love for Krishna as a divine longing, “Ghanashyam, / You have like a Koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart. / My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music.” \textsuperscript{98}

Here the Koel a dark bird becomes an appropriate image for Krishna who is dark in colour. The Koel never builds its own nest, but occupies the nests of other birds in stealth and so does the awareness of divine come to man’s mind, which is aching for it.

She continues to state that although one accepts the divine love, one cannot be completely oblivious to bodily desires. Death is not a solution, one has to live, and inevitably it proves that, “Life is moisture / Life is Water, semen and blood / Death is drought.” \textsuperscript{99}

Here we find the Dravidian, Shaivite elemental inherited images over powering the acquired Vaishnavite images. The two, i.e., the collective sub-conscious finds an unconscious outlet in the long poem

\footnotesize\begin{itemize}
  \item[98.] Ibid. p. 93.
  \item[99.] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
addressed to Lord Krishna a Vaishnava God. There is an interweaving of the two in a magnificent manner:

But if he is you and I am you
Who is loving who
Who is the husk and who the kernel
Where is the body where is the soul.
You came in strange forms
And your names are many. 100

According to Vaishnavites, each individual is a separate part of the divine supreme, and according to the basic Shivā mythology Shivā and Pārvati are two forces, the male and female in nature. The tension between Vaishnavas and Shaiva myths is beautifully combined:

Ghanashyam
The cell of the eternal sun,
The blood of the eternal fire,
The hue of the summer air
I want a peace that I can tote
Like an infant in my arms 101

She longs for peace, which can be found by balancing her two beliefs - the inherited and the acquired ones. The awareness is as fragile as the 'spectral flame,' which vanishes when one thinks one has seen it. It is not possible to behold it for a long time. The union of the Supreme with his beloved also brings to mind the Shaiva mythology to mind. In "The Conflagration":

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101. Ibid. pp. 94-95.
We came together like two suns meeting, and each
Raging to burn the other out. He said you are
A forest conflagration and I, poor forest
Must burn. But lay on me, light and white embers
Over inert fires, Burn on, elemental
Fire, warm the coal streams of his eternal flesh like
At last, they boiling flow, so turbulent with life.  

Although the above lines too can be described as a meeting of the
atman and the Brahman they are contributory to the conflagration. The
dormant nature of the tremendous heat until aroused to activity, is
symbolic of Sivá’s union with Pārvati. The ‘elemental fire’ of this union
must burn until they boil with turbulent life. In the following lines, one
finds the echo of Mira’s songs of love, where she uses the creative talent
to sing in praise of Krishna:

O Shyam, my Ghanashyam
With words I weave a raiment for you
The ones in saffron robes told me of you
And when they left
I thought only of what they left unsaid
Wisdom must come in silence

Not even the sages can bring about the divine awareness in
individuals. They can only be markers and guides showing the paths,
each individual should struggle in one’s own way to attain this
awareness. The concept of Grihastashrama is seen in the lines,

When the guests have gone
The plates are washed
And the lights put out
Wisdom must steal in like a breeze
From beneath the shuttered door. ¹⁰⁴

The precepts of Hinduism divide man s life into four stages and he should cross all the stages. The first is the Brhamacharya, leading a life of celibacy, the second is the Grihastha, the life of a householder, the third is the Vanaprastha, retirement for penance, fourth is Sannyasa, asceticism accepted in search for divine awareness, or union. One cannot hurry through the stages, neither can one surpass them each one has his duty to complete before one reaches the final destination. There is no shortcut to wisdom.

In "Radha-Krishna," a poem of six lines, one finds the echoes of Chaitanya's words when he went in search of his Krishna to Puri, and realized that the Krishna in the procession was not the one whom he was searching for, his search was for, as he says to his disciple Rupa Goswami, that the "Krishna of the Gita could not be loved, the only Krishna who could be loved was in the woods of Brindavan when Radha was his love."¹⁰⁵

This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old Kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return someday

¹⁰⁴. Ibid.
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality...106

The river and the tree symbolize eternal life, and this yearning is fulfilled when the union becomes complete. It can be described in the Vaishnavite belief of the 'atman' merging in the Brahma or Paramatman, or the soul merging into the Supreme Soul. In "Radha":

The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You. 107

The aspect of waiting, which makes the bond chaste also refers to the need of asceticism to increase one's creative energy. On the other hand we have Chaitanya who describes the illicit love of Radha as that of a virgin with Krishna and not only as an adulterous relation. The total surrender of the self and its annihilation is described in this poem, which leads to the union with Krishna. The concept of adulterous love for Krishna is described in "The Maggots." Once the soul merges with the Supreme Soul; what remains behind is merely the body, and a body without a soul is nothing but a corpse:

At sunset, on the riverbank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...
That night in her husband's arms Radha felt
So dead that he asked, what is wrong.
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip? 108

The last poem to be taken for study is "Vrindavan":

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind
and the flute luring her
from home and her husband
who later asks her of the long scratch
on the brown aureola of her breast
and she shyly replies
hiding flushed cheeks, it was so dark
outside, I tripped over the brambles in the woods... 109

This poem sums up her feelings for Krishna as a man and lover expressed in her other poems. It renders a justification for her apparent adulterous behaviour on two grounds, primarily trying to illustrate that every woman longs for a lover who can make her feel a complete woman and also bring about a change in the dissatisfied humdrum of everyday married life, the second is an indirect jibe at the so called people who hide their lusts behind Sham dignity and forget that the culture and religion which they adhere to and pass judgments on the woman are full of frank erotic sexual descriptions. The justifications

though are worthy of acknowledgement, the first definitely is not acceptable, but the second cannot be brushed aside so easily. The only excuse one finds in her using the Radha-Krishna myth to suit her needs is her Dravidian ancestry which shows Radha’s love for Krishna to be the only one devoid of violence referred to in My Story. M. Elias describes her fate as Dravidian – Aryan encounter. Her awareness that in the fate of ethnic polarization her much maligned husband is her only partner, when he becomes a victim of bureaucratic jealously. She says, “For a proud Dravidian humble pie of / Any kind is the unhealthiest diet.”

Thus, one finds in her poems, the connection between sexual eccentricity and ethnic identity as she yearns for,

I plead for the return of a social order that allowed a woman to have more than one husband of she so desired. Things change or end. But the blood is an eternal river, and in my veins flows the robust blood of my ancestresses who married two or more men and were happy. 111

The nostalgia is continued in:

Like the rolled gold bangles on our maid servant’s arms; the colour of our skins grew tarnished. We forget that we were the descendants of those beautiful women, loved more than life itself by their husbands.” 112

Kamala Das justifies her adulterous desires as being her real nature, suppressed beneath the veneer of modernization. Her adultery is different from that of other society women who do it out of boredom or spite:

She alone carried the embers of passion inherited from her Nayar ancestresses, who countered the social sanction against formal marriages for them by cultivating what she imagines to be such an irresistible feminine character that they were able to maintain veritable male harems, and to enjoy the unique distinction of indulging in polyandry.\textsuperscript{113}

This collective unconscious if one might call it so, must have led to her use of the dark skinned Krishna. The tragedy of her creativity is that she has failed to maintain the divinity in her erotic expressions when she refers to sexual encounters. Sexual images in poetry are neither rare nor strange but except in rare cases are usually employed to raise the physical to the sublime. Kamala Das's imagery of the 'urinating man' 'menstrual blood', 'musk between the breasts' etc., make even the physical base, they show her knowledge of mythology to be superficial. The in-depth study of the very same mythology, whichever it be would have made her poems rich and beautiful.

The myths used in the poems have served one main purpose, they prevented her from killing herself due to guilt for adulterous actions. This does not necessarily mean that her poems are purely superficial in the use of myth. Her poems are metaphysical not in the common sense

of being concerned with philosophy of life but by being an exploration
the meaning of existence in this meaningless world. The depth of
Hinduism in her can be seen in the poem “The Anamalai Hills Poems.”
These poems give us a glimpse of a person travelling outside, perhaps
climbing a hill, a return journey, which shows the maturing mind of the
poet. There are ten parts long of the “Anamalai Poems,” the first one is
“The Anamalai Hills,” the poem is so much unlike her other poems,
there is hush over the whole atmosphere, a calm which makes the
readers hold their breath, the breath-taking beauty of stalled time, the
very rare moments of an individual life, when he/she becomes aware of
the oneness with nature. The enlightenment of having lived a life of
illusions, of misty relations both with others and oneself, which brings
about the ‘aloneness’ of one’s being is described. This ‘aloneness’ is not
negative but a positive one, the one which strips the mortal vision of the
veil which covers it, binding it in false traps.

There are no clocks here at Anamalai, no cock crowing
the
morning in, as the muezzin’s call from cold mosques,
only


From somewhere within my heart the mist ascends, the
mountains
awake, perhaps the rains are over and the swamps and dry
again. It had been only the mist rising against the hills,
clinging and unclinging as it must always do, it had
no kinship with the hills, no blood-tie, yes, it was at best
a minor collision, nothing else. I hear the mountain
speak: I was alone, I am alone, I will be alone . . . 114

The II part one describes her ascent of the mountains, and the III part reasserts her will to survive against all disappointments, and fight against the recurrent desire for death as a solution to all problems,

. . . expelling me from warm human love, unaccustomed fare for one such as I, a misfit when awake. If I had not learnt to write how would I have written away my loneliness or grief? Garnering them within my heart would have grown heavy as a vault, one that only death might open, a release then I would not be able to feel or sense. 115

The fear of death as ultimate, is erased in the IV part, where she confirm life after death,

Ultimately we come to know That for there is only one claimant whom by mistake we call death, obsessed as we are by our physicality, restrained by the eyes' inadequate power to perceive beyond the farthest précincts of truth. If only the human eyes could look beyond the chilling flesh, the funeral pyre's

when life is all that there is, that
raging continuity that
often the wise ones recognizing as God?116

In the V part, she speaks of having disturbed the people of sham
manners at the cost of her own reputation. She feels she has succeeded
in shaking people out of their false reveries, by entering unsolicited into
their minds. One cannot deny that her poems succeed in invoking a
passionate reaction from the readers, even those who never knew her
personally. The power of the poetry and the poet as a social alarm is
seen in this poem, "... Yes, often, poets / gatecrash into the precincts
of others' dreams / as Gods and Goddesses do many a time / in
unsolicited magnanimity."117

The VI part deals with the Hindu concept of detachment in
attachment, the image of being a lotus leaf in water:

    I have cut myself adrift from those who professed
to need my love ... 
    ...........
    ...........
    not for me the hollowness of marital
vows and the loneliness of a double bed
where someone lies dreaming of another mate
a woman perhaps lustier than his own.118

117. Ibid. p. 155.
118. Ibid. pp. 155-156.
The realization that one is not indispensable is reflected in the opening lines, and also the truth that the social and religious obligations do not guarantee true companionship because the flesh is different from the soul. Only the flesh makes connections and as it is not the reality the relations too are false and hollow. The complete concept of Gita, that one is just a puppet in the hands of the Supreme God is echoed in these lines. The significant aspect of this poem is that although it has a reference to the marital bed, the reference is not about physicality, but about the mental aspect of the partner, a complete deviation from her hungry and angry outbursts of previous poems.

The VII part deals with a desire of continuing her life in the darkness of night where she is alone and undisturbed by the daily distractions. Night brings peace, and solitude and day its demands.

The VIII part one perhaps is the most typical of the Hindu concept of self-realization, the acceptance of one’s true self the immortal one, the twin of the false-mortal self:

The longest route home is perhaps the most tortuous, the inward path you take that carries you step by step beyond the blood’s illogical arrogance, that deathless creation tethered to your self, and constantly struggling to wrest itself free, tethered to your soul as your shadow is to you form, yours Siamese twin no surgeon can cut away from you. Other journeys are all so easy but
not the inward one, the longest
route home and the steepest
descent . . . 119

The souls journey back into the Supreme source having
eexperienced the physical trap, and suffered from it, is beautifully
described.

The IX part one deals with the concept already discussed once,
that there is no short-cut to wisdom and truth, "Life yields its true
meaning only / in early youth or in weary / age ..." 120

The X part one, and the last of its series deals with a love which
can be nothing but divine. The long journey being completed the union
with the beginning is achieved. The circle comes full, the soul reaches
its starting point.

There is a love greater than all you know
that awaits you where the real road finally ends

...............
the random caress or the lust
that ends in langour.
Its embrace is truth and it erases
even the soul's ancient indentations so that
some unknown womb shall begin to convulse
to welcome your restructured perfection. 121
"The Anamalai," poems show the influence of the myths used by her in her poems, which might have been used only as metaphor of her personal state. In "Krishna":

Your body is my prison, Krishna,
I cannot see beyond it.
Your darkness blinds me,
Your love words shut out the wise world's din. 122

This poem reflects a desire of complete surrender to Lord Krishna leading an unaware reader to a conclusion that she has grown both as a woman and as a poet, which is far from truth. The tragedy being that she did not heed to the words of the wise "Yajnavalkya says in Bhrihadanyaka, for instance, that the Supreme Bliss or Brahmanubhava is rather like an Embrace, with one's Beloved, where one does not feel the 'in' or 'out' of that Experience but feels One with it. Hence the Divine must be meditated on as "the Beloved." 123

The influence of Buddhism is seen in "An Apology to Goutam," where the conflict between the two selves is depicted. "Words and Birds," and "Words" also reflect the influence of Buddhism. Perhaps, this influence was initiated by the Sanyasi, who said that he had walked out like Buddha. "I le told my mother that he had been tired of all earthly pleasure while still in comfortable middle age and had walked

out like Buddha."⁴⁰⁴ Although, its essence is not heeded to, regarding
the futility of accepting symbols as real.

Considering her conversion to Islam it would be blatant hypocrisy
or blind fanaticism to state that she used the myths after analyzing them
for their merit and power of bringing her the much longed for peace.
Kamala Das has proved herself to be a good writer capable on drawing
upon the treasures of the Indian culture to suit her needs whenever
necessary.

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