Chapter III

Kamala Das: The Many Faces of Desire

Kamala Das is one of the best known contemporary Indian women writers, effectively writing in both the languages i.e. English and Malayalam (under the name Madhavi Kutty). She was born on March 31, 1934, in Punnayurkulum, in South Malabar, Kerala. She had an early inclination towards the literary life, inspired by her uncle Nalapat Narayan Menon, a prominent writer. Influenced by the poems of her mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma and the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nayars, she began to write at the age of six and after that she gave a number of remarkable works. Educated mainly at home, she had been writing verses and prose since early youth that has given her a permanent place in modern Malayalam literature. Kamala Das is the post Independent India’s most controversial, much loved admired poetess and writer. She is also addressed popularly as Akka Madhavikutty in her mother tongue- Malayalam.

Her collection of poems entitled, *The Sirens* appeared in 1964 and won her the Asian poetry prize. In 1976, her confessional memoir and an autobiographical work *My Story* brought her celebrity status. *My Story* as an autobiography forcefully recounts Mrs. Das’s life story spanning from her early childhood, through adulthood and youth, to the age of sickness and disease. In her first collection of short stories in English brought out in 1977 titled *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, she weaves a web of human experience in all the sensitivity and poignancy. These short stories were first published in well known magazines and periodicals such as *Opinion, Quest, Debonair*
and Beautiful. Put together these stories combine to produce the picture of Kamala Das as a peaceful writer of gripping tales of innocence and eroticism.

At the age of thirty one, the publication of her first collection of poetry, Summer in Calcutta (1965) Das has been considered an important voice of her generation. Her second collection of poems, The Descendants was published in 1967 which consists the themes of love, lust and disillusionment. The Old Play House and Other poems were published in 1973 which explores the nature of love, lust and frustration. They are the poems about marital discord, sexual ecstasy, loneliness and longing. The third collection entitled Tonight, This savage Rite (1979) was published in which two major poets Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy – interacted on the common theme of love. Her fourth collection The Anamalai Poems (1985) deal with her own personal experience in relation to time and space. In 1992 another collection of English short stories, Padmavati, The Harlot and Other Stories were published. Her other works Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (1996) and Yaa Allah (2001) followed. Her vastly applauded short stories in Malayalam include Pakshiyade Munam (1964) Nuncheerukal parakkumbol (1966) Thanuppu (1968) Balyakala Smuranakui (1987) Varshangalkka Mumbu (1988) and finally, Palayan (1990).

The story “A Doll for the Child Prostitute” is much more than a documentary. It is a very good story with a number of interesting and well drawn characters. This beautiful, profound and captivating work narrates the pitiable tale of a minor girl who should have been given a doll to play is raped by her step father in the house, when her mother was away and her real father whom she remembers has already left her. The worst part is when she
is brought to a brothel by her own mother for sale. Instead of protesting against the heinous act of her second husband who has raped her thirteen year old daughter, the mother further pushes the daughter into the “abyss of dirt and filth” and she goes back to her “youthful husband” to live a life of lust.

The story begins with Rukmani’s selling by her mother Anusuya to a brothel runner Lachmi bai alias Ayee. Anusuya’s illicit relationship with a man younger than her age leads him to enter in her house to molest her daughter. Frequent harassment, molesting and rape on her daughter makes Anusuya to sell her daughter in brothel. Ayee was a fat woman whose son had deserted her ten years ago and she always waited for his return. The brothel she run had seven inmates (girls and women of diverse ages) in it, and she earned the support of Inspector Saheb (of Police Department) in managing her house.

The Inspector was a man of loose moral character and demanded Rukmani to satisfy his lust. But she resisted his move by telling him “I am not a whore” (p.18) when the Inspector Saheb visited her again, she started crying and rushed towards him calling “Papa Papa” (p.50). He later assured her to protect as his own grand-daughter who was then living with her parents at Nagpur. Mira, the most beautiful girl develops emotional tie with a college student who visits frequently. As the boy does not have source of income, he used to sell either his commodities like pen etc or saves his lunch allowances to meet her. As the boy has great fascination for Mira, he does not look toward other girls of brothel. He used to sit and talk about revolution
for hours to which Ayee used to object and made him aware about his business there. He used to sing Gita Govinda to Mira.

He was later on arrested by the Inspector Saheb and his constables, who gave him good thrashing. Mira appeals to Ayee and she goes to the police Chowk and the boy was freed. Mira still loved the boy and wanted to go with him in order to live as wife and husband but the boy kept mum. Being a woman she wanted to have a family but this desire remains unfulfilled. Mira’s faith is shattered when the boy refuses to marry her because she is a prostitute. A society which has created the institution of prostitute has no place for the prostitute to lead a normal family life. Ayee allowed the boy to go home, and Mira was retained in the brothel as a junior inmate. Generally the kind of man-woman relationship one come across in brothel are temporary and purely physical. Most of the time they are developed unwillingly but hardly has a relationship like Mira and her lover takes place which runs for a long time on spiritual level. In case of Mira and her lover, relationship is developed willingly from both sides. But it lasts in vain due to unwillingness of her lover to accept her as his wife and to take her to his home. One day, the postman brings a letter from Ayee’s son which states his return. Hearing this glad news, Ayee shared it with the Inspector Saheb, who advised her to marry Rukmani to her son. The long story brings atleast two most memorable and human character – Ayee and Inspector Saheb. Rukmani also gets a fair deal nodoubt it comes little late. The story is well within the range of Kamala’s experiences, and it forcefully concentrated on one of the burning social problems of the day – corruption and prostitution rampant in metropolitan cities in India.
Her more recent collection, *Padmavati, The Harlot and Other Stories* (1992) is an extended form of the earlier collection. Many of the stories that had appeared in 1977 are reproduced here. The present collection includes nineteen short stories and each of these stories though not related to one another form a holistic social framework of woman as a victim, as mother, as a goddess, as emotion, as intellect and a host of other images in relation to man and woman relationship.

The title of the story is a parody of the lives of great kings like “Akbar, The Great”. India boost of a long line of great emperors and kings who have guided the destinies of nations. The story “Padmavati, The Harlot” is Padmavati’s Kingdom as her home and her wealth and power are her body. Padmavati is a middle aged prostitute. She has spent her life by serving and slaving for others – a paralysed mother whom she has nursed for seven years, a sister for whose education she has shouldered. All these years she had longed to visit the lord of the shrine on the seven hills but had no time to do so. At last, she became free as her mother died, her sister has forgotten her, brothers have turned their back on her, now that they are well placed. Padmavati climbed the seven hills and finally reached the foot of the shrine to offer worship at the temple. She has reached the stage described by Das in the poem, “lines” addressed to a Devadasi!

_Estimately there comes a time_
_It is then that your desire cease_
_And a homesickness begins_
_And you sit on the temple steps_
_A silent Devadasi, lovelorn_
_And aware of her destiny._

She could only see the outlines of the shrine because she was late. Some young men, recognizing her profession mock at her and make lewd
suggestions. But with only worship in her heart, continuous to trudge uphill, until she reaches the shrine door and finding it locked, implores the lord to accept her humble prayers. Even the fruit she had brought with her as offering has been snatched away by the loafers at the foot at the hill. As she stands petitioning, there, pouring out her remorse at her inability to bring any gifts, the lord opens the door, embraces in embrace and takes her in. He takes the only offering the poor prostitute can give her aging and stale body and behaves with her ever so gently as if she were his bride. It was already morning when she leaves him to return home, her hair disheveled, her blouse torn and there are bruises on her cheeks and throat. Once again she meets the young men who give her one look and now recognise her to be God’s bride. Shamed at their earlier behavior, they move out of her path reverently and murmur “Mother, go in safety, give us your blessings and go your way” (p.25).

“Padmavati, the Harlot” is the story of a character with a mythic quality. She could be one of those fallen women that recur in Indian metaphysical love – convinced of their utter worthlessness and in despair because they have no hope of salvation and are amazed to discover that God (in disguise) tests them and finds them more pure and innocent than the so-called virtuous one and selects them for Moksha. Padmavati’s role, thus shifts from that of a harlot who is despised, to a mother who is revered. The movement within the story sets up a series of uncertain and undiversified images of womanhood. The sacrifice of her body to satiate the needs of her mother, brothers and sister, to set them comfortably in life underscores her selflessness and capacity of love. The body which she has sold for thirty
three years, that which had been degraded and tarnished by lust of men
suddenly assumes a spirituality and ennoblement in the presence of God. A
chastity and virginity is conferred on the body. A reversal of roles from that
of harlot to mother and back again to a Harlot as she descends that steps,
establishes the ineffectual categorisations into gender roles.

The next story “That Woman” is the shortest, one-page story in the
collection. It shows lack of possessiveness, her indifference to material
possessions, her pure love for the dead man elevate her from the rest of the
family who merely perceive her as the seducer of their father and the
destroyer of “happy home”. The story focuses radical extra-marital
relationship of man-woman where woman lives in the house of her lover.
The master of the house and woman’s lover dies, at which the son, the legal
heir involves in legal activities related to the property. Hardly he thinks about
‘That Woman’. He asks her to leave the house immediately because his
relatives were about to reach. He even wants her to take her belongings.
She walked towards the door and paused as if she had forgotten something.
But she thought that there is nothing of her remaining there. As she walked
along the street in her crumpled cotton sari, the son expected her to look
back atleast once but she did not ‘Ah Sthree’ (p.15) It shows and highlights
the hollowness of the man-woman relationship. Hence the wife-stereotype
cast in the Sati-Savitri-Sita mould is shattered in many of the stories of Das.

If we take up much maligned “Other Woman” involved in a
relationship with a married man which is another stereotype handled by
Kamala Das from a new perspective in the story “That Woman”, here the
narrator is an unreliable witness. Yet despite the unsympathetic narration, a
positive picture of the other woman grows in the reader’s consciousness, due to the creative participation of the reader in the narrative process. There is a quiet, serene dignity about this woman – an “unmistakable inner strength”. The average woman that she betrays her helplessness initially asking faithfully, “Where can I go”? But in within minutes the transformation can be seen as she grasps the reality of the situation – that she is not wanted in a house where she has lived with a man as his mistress. On his death, the son prepares himself to snatch from the woman “any will or testament she might have got his father to sign” (p.114) But the story ends with ‘self aware’ woman who walks away leaving everything behind without as much a second look. She might not have become a self aware woman but for the taunts of the son. The woman’s unalloyed love for the man, her in acquisitive nature, her gentleness her ability to give, become a critique of rule-bound, conventional society with its pretenses, hypocrisy and lovelessness. In a sense there is a decentering of the male point of view in this story. The woman ultimately behaves in a way different that which is expected of her by the male in the story - be it the husband or the son.

In the story “The Princess of Avanti”, Das while parodying the concept of Swayamvaram portrays an old mad woman who believes herself to be a princess, waiting for her wedding day. The story shows how three youths do not spare even a senile, ugly, mentally infirm old woman who sits in the park daily to while away her time. They appear like wild beasts seeking their prey, laughing raucously as she pleads with them. They rape her to stifle her cries, they close her mouth and nostrils with the palm until she is dead.
The story focuses on sex-oriented man-woman relationship Kamala Das with her art of writing brings to notice this very vividly and authentically. The men who molest and rape old women are wild beasts who have become blind enough to be unaware that the old woman is nearly of their mother’s age. Das uses ironic mode to highlight the use and exploitation of woman by man. An old woman’s self delusion of royalty, which is presented comically at first, takes a tragic turn when her harmless madness is exploited by lust crazed unscrupulous young men who rape her and kill her in the process, callously indifferent to whether she is alive or dead at the end. The brutalisation of woman by the bestiality of male lust is brought out merely through description and speech. Duped by three scoundrels she is molested and raped; until she cries “I am not the real princess of Avanti” “I do not like to get married” (p.18). The story could be read as the romantic vision of love that can see woman’s body as nothing other than a sexual object. The parody is heightened by using a mad old woman as a body symbol instead of beautiful girl. The irony and satire that seeps through these tales reflect Kamala Das’s bitterness against a society that is cankered at the core.

The story “The Sea Lounge” consists in presenting a girl who calmly accepts her lover’s rejection and is not heartbroken. The name of the lover Satyavrata is ironic as he decides to break his promise of marriage and is braving himself to do it. He rehearses his lines about a dozen times. He was feeling nervous and told himself that he must not allow liquor to change his mind about the girl. He had to tell her frankly that he did not wish to marry her. But he was grateful for the love she gave him, the kindness in her letters and in her conversations with him, whenever she came to the city for a
holiday. Finally with much hesitation, he confesses “I do not want to marry you” (p.20) After rejecting the girl who loved him and wanted to marry him, he notices her grace, beauty and serenity. When everything is over and she is about to leave, suddenly “with an ache in the pit of his stomach, he realised that all the beauty of his life was going away with her” (p.21). The resolution unnerves him. Contrary to his expectations, the woman takes it in her stride. She proves it false that woman once loves a person, cannot forget him and would stick to him for suffering crying and waiting. To Satyavrata’s surprise she tells: “I shall marry my old beau, the one who has been crazy about me for years. Let us not worry about it now. Tell me about your new job (p.21) She smiled and said that it is time for her to leave and very soon they were out of the Sea Lounge walking together down the steps. She was going away from him with no promise of a letter or meeting. Everything between them was ended. When they part she keeps her calm and declines his offer of lift. “I want to walk, she said laughter floating up in her voice, it is a lovely evening going waste. I want a long walk, thank you all the same (p.22) she turned to the left and walked on fast the new annexe called the intercontinental and then among evening revelers, past the little wooden stands where men sold dolls made of shells, and disappeared from his view.

Hence the predominant theme in this story is human relationship i.e. man-woman which is explored from various angles. Women is shown to be able to stand by herself, neither servile, nor dependent on man. It shows the girl’s dignity and grace in making her own independent choice regarding her future, which no longer includes her lover. It also brings him to a sharp
regret and a vain longing for a second change. It reveals a wasteful longing for genuine caring, authentic relationship and a realisation that this is almost impossible to achieve. This story contains a Joycean epiphany moment of enlightenment or sudden perception which shows emotions very effectively. The story ends in such a realisation for Satyavrata. “Here is a ‘she a brave damsel waiting for her lover’. (p.113) Many short stories of Kamala Das contain symbolic structures. For instance, as Satyavrata watches the girl disappearing from his view, the author concludes the story with the sentence. “Then the dusk set in” (p.22). This is not just a description of the external setting, but a glimpse of Satyavrata’s concept of his darkened future without her.

The projection of woman in this story indicates the changing trends of the Indian scene, one can visualise the emergence of self aware women, free from bondages in the years to come. Das attempts to move from margin to centre, from a position of little or no consequences to one which is crucial to her world. Hence, through her writings she shifts her focus from women as the representative of patriarchal power to her woman as a separate self. In a bid to tell the male world that she cares little for them or their authority, she narcissistically turns to herself. In fact it is the story of every woman caught in a hostile socio-cultural environment and in dissatisfying relationships. Das shows a single mindedness in the pursuit of her themes which remains unchanged despite minor variations.

The story “The Young Man with the Pitted Face” is a peculiar tale of strange relationship between a dying woman and healthy young man. The young man visited the ashen, blue woman in a hospital out of mere pity for
her, but as soon as she recovered from her serious sickness, he stopped coming to her despite her long wait and nocturnal vigil. This story reflects and shows the exploration of man-woman relationship from different point of view.

The hospitalised woman is the situation presented in this story waits daily for a youngman though she lost her beauty due to excessive intakes of quinine. Their relationship was only a month old and he was the youngest, the loveliest man she had ever loved. She had two major operations. Her womb had lain fallow, grown fibroids just as a desert may grow cacti and carnivorous plants. Her liver had adhesions and her intestines had developed tuberculosis. All this and the weak heart drained her beauty. When she is brought home everybody was tender to her. But she longed to see the young man. He promised to visit her in the morning but he did not turn up.

This story emphasise the woman’s illness may be compared with the various accounts of ill-health in Das’s My Story with the poem “After this illness”. The young man with the pitted face may be linked with the young man with “pock-marked face” in the poem, “The Testing of the Sirens”. Das shows how an Indian woman lives through the process of married life. Though she does not receive love from her partner still she continues with the whole thing, desiring sincerity and affection to the established norms of married life which may be loveless.

For Kamala Das love between husband and wife meant “a more tranquil relationship with a hand on my hair and a voice in my ear telling me that everything was going to be alright for me” (My story, p.87 1976) Nodoubt lack of conversation, companionship and warmth between husband and wife
leads to the type of extra marital affairs which however is not accepted in the Indian system. The author says that this is the reason the young man does not want to retain “the strange relationship” because the social values will not permit. But at the same time this lack of “emotional rapport” between husband and wife makes them search true love outside marriage because marriage and love are mutually exclusive. She does not call this search for love immoral. Devindra Kohli comments “when Kamala Das speaks for love outside marriage, she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which give both love and security” (p.8)

The story “December” is very thin in matter and execution. It seems to be a sentimental piece recounting the fulfillment in love of a man and a woman on a cold December day. The woman had just recovered from a long illness and was looking thin and her skin had a muddy hue but he looked at her through his sunglasses and said that she looked alright. She asked him to sit and talk because it is cold outside. But he took her to the room and in the car, he turned once to look at her and asked what she is thinking about? she smiled and could not tell him that she had during her illness promised God never to sin again, repeating several times. They went to the cottage “lying down, stretching her legs, she thought happiness is so simple, just walk into his room and lie down and I am happy; but I am happiness – addict, that is my problem” (p.37) They were silent for a long time until alarm time piece ticking and a bee humming from somewhere behind the window. He asked her whether she has any doubts but she kissed his eyes shut with feverish lips, whispering “no, no, not anymore, but though I have become soft and sentimental I shall never be able to write again – I am finished” (p.37).
The story presents a woman who continues an extra-marital affair after an illness and regards it as a fidelity to herself. It also presents another image of an Indian woman. She is caught in the dilemma of the conventionally assigned role to her as a plaything for a man and her desire to emerge as a creative and intellectual being. Though she makes all determinations not to go with the man to become the object of his lust yet when the man, who sees her only through his sunglasses, comes to take her, she feels weak and cannot say ‘no’ to him. After the male ‘sex game’ is over, she thinks that she has become soft and sentimental, never be able to write again. This conflict in a little awakened woman leads her nowhere and she feels herself lost in the dark. Through these kinds of situations, Kamala Das “represents a variety of emotional and intellectual disturbance which forms a necessary component of the process of ‘modernisation that Indian story has been undergoing for a long time” (p.9), says Om Prakash Grewal. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of the Woman* Mary Wollstonecraft remarks, “Woman has always been viewed as man’s property;” his toy, his rattle”, it must jingle in his ears, wherever, dismissing reason – he chooses to be amused”. He looks at her not as she is but in the colour he wants and calls her beautiful. “Not seeing her with eyes but with hands”. But becoming sentimental, emotional, and non-sincere to herself will debar a woman from utilizing her creative powers. The woman needs to stop “cowering beneath” the “monstrous ego of man” she should not “lose” her will and reason to all his emotions. Moreover says woman can identify, explore and utilize their creative potential and their creative activity will help them actualize their real selves and will help them establish themselves as singular, sovereign subjects. (p.120)”

In her poem “An Introduction” Das asserts “herself” and she pleads that woman should have the freedom to be her individual self. The story shows that in a woman’s world a woman is little more than an object that plays a marginalized role. Man-woman relationship depicted by Kamala Das
do not show man and woman as partners in game. These are rather victim positions, though she does not consider women as innocent in the act of their victimization. They are faulty too in so far as they show their complicity in the act of their victimisation.

The story “A Little Kitten” is all too familiar of a newly married couple who after a short period of ecstatic love and happiness seek comfort outside the marital relationship. The story highlights the inescapable predominant of a newly married woman who is settled in a small flat of Dadar. She gets bored throughout the day, as her husband hardly has time to spent with her due to serving in insurance firm. She asks for a little kitten for her company. He used to mumble to her thus “I am your kitten, I am your little kitten” (p.20). The husband does not pay attention to her demand. The husband’s love slowly cools down. The wife comes to understand that the cause of his growing coldness to her is his growing warmth towards his pretty secretary. The wife is so upset that she does not care to adorn herself with a Jasmine to strand or colour her cheeks with a touch of a rogue. The glow in her cheek, disappears and her complexion fades. Some days later the husband notices a great improvement in her health and a long red scratch on her breasts. He asks her whether she has got herself a kitten. There is a subtle irony in the husband’s failure to understand how his wife regained the old glow on her cheek and got the scratch above her breasts. His wife indeed, has become the victim of revenge and jealous towards other woman in her husband’s life and she has succumb to such an affair. Here Das seems to be pointing out the fact that the enemy of women is not man that women are their own enemies. The story shows the wife’s infidelity, which is indirectly
suggested at the end, is seen as a replica of and a revenge for the husband’s prior infidelity with his secretary. It is the wife’s infidelity, as a retaliation for the husband’s adultery. The husband’s ignorance on the other hand, juxtaposed with the reader’s intuitive knowledge gives an edge to this story. The husband interprets the long red scratch above the wife’s breasts as having been caused by a little kitten, in the light of the wife’s earlier wish to have a small kitten as a companion in her loneliness. But the wife’s earlier vexation at the husband’s drinking, infidelity and moodiness and later sudden transformation in her as her complexion glows and eyes sparkle, indicate something more. The full impact of the scratch becomes clear when juxtaposed with certain lines from the poem, “Vrindavan”.

Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind
and the flute, sluring 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 flashed cheeks, it was so dark
outside, I tripped and fell over
the brambles in the woods.

Kamala Das is much obsessed with extra-marital love as with disease and death. The story, while exploring husband-wife relationship, Das uses an open-ended form that leaves much to the imagination of the reader. One is left guessing about the unexpected mysterious change that has come over the hysterical wife. It is this sensitive and emotional co-ordination that give Kamala Das writings the richness of the female consciousness and lifts them beyond categorizations. Nonetheless men are instrumental in making the women what they are. The women do not choose to bare their feminist
inclinations – the woman in this story would have continued to love her husband but for his gradual change.

The woman in this story as a young bride full of innocence and love for her husband is a typical Indian woman whom her husband thinks – what a sweet and innocent creature he had married. (p-38) But inadvertently both fail apart over an imagined intimacy between the husband and his secretary. The strange behaviour of the husband, his mysterious silences, his sitting on the edge of the tub in the bathroom hours all these make her initially suspicious and gradually hysterical. These in turn take the husband away from her and closer to the secretary. It is at this juncture that we see a change in the attitude of the woman. If initially she loses her bridal freshness and stops buying “jasmine strand to hang from her long plait” (p-39) the end is shocking. We do not find a wife quarelling and fussing over her husband’s behaviour but a woman seated before her dressing table brushing her hair.

Here is a wife who has found an outlet for her affection outside matrimony A typical image of an Indian wife is presented in the story who always remains busy pleasing her husband by her good looks, good make up but the man after few years of marriage starts going to another woman who works in his office. The wife pleads to her husband but he asks her to go to her parents for a whole. Both the husband and wife keep on pulling with each other maintaining “an illusion of domestic harmony” and keeping a public posture. The wife ultimately accepts her position and the husband keep on running after the woman, and the wife devises new method of adding to her charms with the hope of enticing her husband. In India this kind of frustration in married life is made prominent. The wife in this story is unlike the heroine
named Savitri of R. K. Narayan’s “The Dark Room” (1938) who is initially sick of the persuasions and pleadings of her husband to leave her relations with Shanta Bai, his colleague in the office decides to leave the house and children and spends one night in a temple but she becomes the target of taunts of the people who call her immoral. Ultimately she returns, but she does not accept her same fate of male domination and rather has a will to act differently. But the wife in “The Little Kitten” is not a rebel. She does not leave the house but remains within the four walls of the house, sulks into her frustrations. Her ultimate aim is to win over her husband with her added make-up throwing a bait, to the male lust.

The image of Indian women is that once married she has to remain under the thumb of her husband. Das exposes the problems that marriage as an institution poses primarily because of the fact that it requires some kind of sacrifice on the part of both men and women. In the married life men and women are not loving partners, rather the woman keeps on occupying the victim position. The male psyche tends to treat woman as a desirable commodity and the institution of marriage gives a man license to keep wife at home and mistress / mistresses outside. But Kamala Das is not only critical of the double standards of man – one towards his wife expecting morality and purity from her, and himself having extra-marital relations, she is also critical of the foolish wives and detests them for letting their beauty to be “a feast” for the starving eyes of men. Kamala Das expresses her restlessness with the cruelty of man against woman as well as against the woman’s unquestioning acceptance of her inferior position vis-à-vis man and her willing submission to the sexual hunger of her man. She was quiet impatient
with her mother’s attitude of total acceptance of her fathers domination. Like Simon de Beauvoir she feels that “woman is a female to the extend that she feels herself as such” (p-10) she protests not only against the power politics in sexual relationship but also feels uneasy when the woman allows herself to be exploited.

“Darjeeling” presents Raghavan, his wife and their four year-old son. The wife is very fond of natural surroundings and snow – capped mountains of Darjeeling, but the husband has no time for such excursions. He is financially hard pressed and cannot afford to buy even a red silk saree for her on her birthday. She suddenly collapses on the floor with a heart attack. The family doctor is sent for, and he arranges her quick shift to the hospital. Her husband takes leave from the office and looks after the son. He is worried about the payment of the hospital bill. As he cannot borrow money from anyone else, he writes an application for an overdraft of five hundred rupees. The young son reminds him at night that his mother “wants to see the snow” (p-72) The irony of the middle class married life is well brought out. Man and woman in such families once married are caught in the problems of money. The limited sources of income causing tension in their lives, and they suffer sometimes of heart attacks and nervous breakdown. They cannot manage the expenses of the hospital. Most of the Indian wives keep on nagging their husbands for the gifts, and husbands fail to understand the sentiments of their wives. The story shows how poverty and helplessness dominates and comes in the way of a happy marital life and paves a way to the strange and strain relationship between man and woman. These problems are handled by Kamala Das.
The story “The Sign of the Lion” highlights the passionate nature of man, who is a Brahmin husband coming in a red palanquin at midnight to lie beside a Nayar wife. The redeeming feature of the story is the expectancy of the wife, who will bear to him “a little lion” or “A beautiful lion-cub”(p-78) though her man remains absent-minded, when she breaks the news to him. The story shows the extraordinary man-woman relationship of a Brahmin family and as far as the marriage is concerned, it is the wife who goes to the maximum extent in safeguarding and upholding the dignity of this institution.

In this story the woman character tells about a sexually starved man who is a weak creature and loves to be fondled by a woman as a mother. A woman performs the role of a mother to a man drenched in sex but he is only after lust and is insecure, he discarded many women earlier but he expects and asks the wife to be faithful to him. The man is not happy at the news of his becoming a father when he learns about the child that is coming. He wants only to play with women and does not wish to own any responsibility.

Thus, in this story we can see the image of woman as only the rich man wants to project it i.e. merely an object of sexual gratification. Das through this story registers her hatred against “a grossly exploitative view of woman as a purely sexual object” as possession of man “a passive creature”. She also presents against the reconciliation of women with the myth of male-sovereignty, with the dogma of woman’s inferiority, and also with the image of woman as a sexual object designed by God for male sexual gratification.

In “Sanatan Choudhuri’s Wife”, the faithlessness of Gopi Menon’s wife is powerfully brought out. His marriage was six years old when Gopi Menon begins to have a suspicion that his wife was deceiving him. Menon is
a poor man, who cannot afford to buy Kanjivaran sarees for his wife. This fact coupled with her mumbling of the name of “Sanatan” in her sleep arouses a strong suspicion in Menon that his wife is playing tricks with him. One day, he returns home early to test her fidelity, but to his utter amazement he finds her in the house of Sanatan Choudhuri. He follows her closely watching her going in and sharing a stylish breakfast with Sanatan. Menon gathers courage to question his wife. She simply replies “Somebody has been trying to fool you.” (p.51) Rubbing his hands, Menon walks away to the nearest bus stop. Hence, doubts, suspicion excess love and affection between husband and wife create problems. It disturbs and distracts the peaceful and fruitful conjugal life. The husband’s unjust suspicion of his wife’s fidelity forms the kernel of Sanatan Choudhuri’s wife.

The unexpected or surprise ending popularized by O’ Henry and sometimes known as the O’Henry twist, is a traditional favourite. This story has such an ending built around the stock device of mistaken identity. The suspicious husband who follows his wife into a strange mansion finds at the end that it is not really his wife, but a woman who has a remarkable resemblance to his wife. Kamala Das here introduces an authorial moralizing at the end, through the protagonist “Suspicion is a kind of poison-weed, he told himself as he walked to the nearest bus stop”. (p.52.)

The story “Iqbal” opens when the protagonist is confined to a hospital for consuming poison. Iqbal’s roommate of his YMCA days and his beautiful wife are in hospital to take care of him. Iqbal who has homosexual relationship with his friend cannot bear this and takes on over dose of sleeping pills to end his life. He is taken to the hospital where he slowly
recovers. His friend’s wife recites Iqbal’s short poem while she combed her long hair and tied it into a bun.

Your flesh was the flesh of the moon, dear love,
But I was an orphan nurtured by the moon,
I drunk the white milk of the moon,
And suckled her day…

(p 57)

She could not understand as to what did he mean by those lines? She could never make out what her husband had found in the young man’s verses to make him rave so over them. She thought once again that it is meaningless. Looking once again into the mirror she saw the bulge of her belly hidden by the shimmering silk and felt proud. She goes to him with a basket of fruits and a bottle of cidar. He shudders on seeing her. The triumphant lady tells him that she knows that he had attempted suicide because he was jealous of her – he could not become pregnant like her. “she stood up revealing for shimmering flash the convexity of her middle and then she turned away to walk towards the door” (p.60) Iqbal shouted at her and instead of growing angry, she only felt her heart growing lighter, and laughter bubbling up inside her throat. She closed the door and the corridor rang with laughter. The image of woman as a mother is much respected in Indian society and Kamala Das has shown the role of woman as a mother much dignified in most of the stories. Devendra Kohli rightly remarks that in this story, Das shows “the woman’s pregnancy as a token of her individuality”.

In ‘Iqbal’ there are two epiphanic moments one of which was in the past. It was the moment of discovery when the woman realized that her husband and his friend Iqbal were homosexual lovers. She had not been aware of this earlier, despite suggestive indications like her husband’s recital of Iqbal’s passionate love poems, his silence when she enquired if Iqbal loved
a girl, Iqbal’s sullenness when he came to receive them at Dadar after their marriage and the husband’s moody behaviour and loaded comments. It was the husband’s panic–stricken reporting of Iqbal’s suicide attempt that opened her eyes. “It was only at that moment that she had first guessed the truth” (p-58) The second epiphanic moment is in the hospital, where the pregnant wife goes to visit Iqbal with a basket of fruits. His eyes widen with fear when he sees her and suddenly she realizes that Iqbal had attempted suicide in a passion of jealousy, a kind of womb envy because she was pregnant with his lover’s child –something he would never be able to do.

Kamala Das’s versatility is revealed not only in her attempting such diverse literary forms as poetry, autobiography, the novel and the short story but also in her mastery of two languages. She began her career by writing short stories in her mother tongue. But of the large number of short stories she wrote in Malayalam only a few have been rendered into English.

Thus, we find that in the stories collected in *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, Kamala Das has focused her attention on the various representative images of Indian woman. She has highlighted the problems faced by woman in her different roles and has shown that woman is in a victim position and is admired the most when she acts as a dumb driven cattle. The overall image of woman that emerges from the analysis of the text of the these short stories is that of a passive creature who has accepted her given role as an object. Through the projection of these images, Kamala Das seems to be protesting against woman’s acceptance of their images established by the male image makers. She wishes women to reject the position of the object. The
patriarchal system of society which is the root cause of oppression of woman needs to be scrapped as it places woman in an inferior position.

The critical analysis of “A Doll for the Child Prostitute” presents an individualised and human picture of prostitutes who are usually dehumanized and reduced to a function by patriarchal structures which aims at male satisfaction at the expense of woman. Lachmi, the “Ayee”, or runner of the brothel is a mixture of kindness and exploitation, she provides young, middle and women to customers to satiate desires. Saraswathi, the cool detached professional, Mira, the sentimental lovely girl, who falls in love with a client, Krishna, considers herself married to him, elopes with him and finally returns in disillusionment, fourteen year old Sita and twelve year old Rukmani who play hopscotch during the intervals when they have no clients, are all portrayed with a rare understanding and realism. There is a vivid evocation of a brothel, its daily routine, its sordid reality of exploitation, sadism, child abuse, illegal abortion and death. The socio-economic background that gives rise to prostitution is explored and exposed poverty and rape of minor girls within the family lead to the sale or abandonment of daughters by mothers. Ayee, in her wisdom born out of experience, warns her girls against falling in love with men. “Falling in love with men is a dangerous thing. It is like tying oneself with a rope. If you do not love any man, you remain free. Please remember that “ (p-97). This may be seen as a plea for female autonomy and a rebellion against male tyranny. Irony is a device used effectively by Kamala Das. For example in this story even the names of characters are either goddesses like Lachmi, Saraswati and Sita, or Krishna’s consorts like Mira, Radha and Rukmani. One of the customers with whom
Mira falls in love, is called Krishna. Even within whore house there is a competition and jealousy together with the innocent love and friendship as that between Mira and Rukmani. The woman as whore, as mother, as companion becomes the theme of her tales.

The very title of the story indicates that it is about the wrongs done on a female child who is forced to become a prostitute. For the sake of doll with which she wants to play, she, who herself is a doll, absolutely, ignorant of the meaning of sex, allows the man of the age of her grand father to play with her body. In this story Kamala Das explores and presents in all its nakedness the psychic geography of the forcing prostitute who feeds the girls well and makes them sleep with new men everyday just to make money, the willing prostitutes, ignorant and innocent child prostitutes, freedom loving prostitutes who want to run away from the quagmire of male assaults on them everyday. This story has much in common with the tale of a Hindi film Mandi where we find the girls / women in a brothel with different psyche make-ups performing the same cut everyday under the rut of the head-prostitute called Ayee.

Kamala Das reveals that in the Indian cultural context the birth of a female child is always unwelcome and a daughter is considered a burden as she says, “perhaps the mistake they committed was that they got born as girls in a society that regarded the female as a burden, a liability” (p-36). She also highlights that a woman who is forced to turn a prostitute is basically a human being and wants to lead a normal married life of pure love, fidelity and sincerity. Mira, the most beautiful girl in the brothel, runs away with a college boy named Krishna in the hope of settling down as a married woman. But the man who claimed to be in love with her, turns out to be a cheat. He
makes use of her physically, emotionally and financially and leaves her after seven days again making her go through the same routine of sleeping throughout the day and waking up the whole night, alluring and satisfying men’s sexual hungers, who are called “dogs” by one of the prostitutes.

The main role assigned to woman, whether she is a prostitute, “a mistress” or a stereotyped wife in this male oriented society is to look and remain physically beautiful as it pleases men and aggregates their sexual passions. She is to be an alluring object of sex colour, body, mental attitude, inner feelings etc. does not matter for this profession. Every woman instinctively wants to have a home and become a mother so that she could shower her affection and love over her children. Sita, the girl of fifteen, who has not attained even puberty and still she conceives and is unaware of it, too wants to have a home and kids. But she is perhaps too scared of the male sexual hungers as well as the domination that she says “I would love to have a home of my own and a few children. I want him to smile at me and call me Ma. But I don’t want to have any man ‘in my house’ (p-34) Here, we notice that the little girl who is overpowered by the material instinct, expresses her anxiety and wishes to become a mother. But the woman as an individual being may have the feelings of revolt or realization of the futility of her existence on Earth and she may try to overcome the oppression or find means of escape but the system of society, which oppresses women, continues. Though such an end of the story, Kamala Das suggests that there is a need to shake men and make them realize what they are doing. By placing this powerful story at the beginning of the collection Kamala Das focuses the attention on the sexual and emotional exploitation of women by men. She
views “the male body as an agent of corruption” as a symbol of corrosion, the
destroyer of feminine chastity and even of “the essential human goodness”
remarks Anisur Rahman. (Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das
1981, p.31)

Kamala Das, in fact lashes an attack on the system of society in which
the dejected and abandoned girls are made to live the degraded life in the dirt.
The prostitutes, who are considered to be outcasts, virtually have no fault of
theirs. It is the concept of the patriarchal society about a “degraded” woman
that makes such women fall in the eyes of others, and they are considered
harmful for the happy married life.

This kind of presentation may cause embarrassment to male reader
who view a women just as a body and not as a person in her own right. But
Kamala Das aims a consciousness raising in men. Being a “truth-addict”
Kamala could not help exposing reality. She was uneasy with the entire
social system based on hypocrisy and immorality where the custodian of
morality who should be curbing this flesh trade are the virtual, owners and
supporters of the brothels. She expresses her disgust with the hypocritical
society which pretended to emphasize purity, chastity and morality whereas
the preachers of these virtues were neither pure nor chaste themselves.

The story exposes how a brothel is run. All the problems faced by the
head of the house are dealt with – the competition from other houses in the
neighbourhood, the inconvenient interference by the police, the necessity to
keep the inmates well-fed. It is a good story with a number of interesting and
well drawn characters the gusto with which Das tells the story and the insight
and sympathy with which she portray the characters are admirable. This
delightful master piece reflects the society’s unawareness of leaving women out of place to satisfy their carnal desires. Further, it is a great hindrance in the marital bliss of the society.

This story presents the quest for identity. It is clearly noticeable in the character of Mira-the prostitute, who, through her love and subsequent marriage with her student client, wants to achieve the fulfillment of her personality by freeing herself from the immoral and ignominious shackles of the world of prostitution. He too loves her and visits her saving his lunch allowance and his bus fare. Her secret marriage with him is highly exhilarating to her. “There was a red flush her high cheekbones and a glitter in her eyes. Mira decorated her hair with a string of mogra flowers and bit her lips to make them redder” (p-84) And she wanted to enjoy the bliss of married life. But her search of identity, through her married life, is blessed with only temporary success, as her lover husband who is discovered to be “the ungrateful swine. The quest for identity is also reflected in the character of Rukmani, a child prostitute whose attempts to realize her true self, and all her urges and aspirations to grow into a cultured person was strangulated. When Rukmani addresses the Inspector as “Papa” he does bring the doll and declares in the end that “I do not feel like playing with a woman today. Something has died in me today” (p-57) Thus, with the change of heart in the Inspector – his best yielding place to parental love and affection – and with the announcement of Ayee’s proposal to marry Rukmani to her son, it is hoped that she will be able to seek her true identity, and grow into a decent and self respecting woman.
Though “A Doll for the Child Prostitute” is marked by stark realism in its portrayal of a brothel and its daily routine, its ending is sentimental and even approaches a fairy finale. The elderly inspector’s attitude towards Rukmani, the child prostitute, changes dramatically when she calls him “Papa”. He relinquishes her as his “Keep” and decides to adopt her as his daughter and buy an expensive doll for her. The brothel keeper Ayee decides to give up her profession and go to Banaras after marrying her on to Rukmani. The child prostitute, Rukmani who has been treated as a doll or toy by the clients in the brothel, plays delightedly with a doll, her robbed childhood being restored to her. It is a new birth for everyone. Kamala Das’s short stories are based on the theme of quest for identity of a woman and a healthy man-woman relationship. For the achievement of a fully-satisfying mature, intelligent, happy and progressive personality, this quest is to be met with success, otherwise there is emotionally and intellectually imbalance lacking all conjugal joy and peace and in all real interest in the varied charms and beauties that life offers.

The short stories of Kamala Das as collected in Padmavati, The Harlot and Other Stories have been written in a distinct mode from her poems and autobiography. Her short stories reveal a humanistic case while retaining their essentially feminist stance. The stories tell of women, men and children; protagonists who transcend class, region religion, gender. Unlike most Indian English writers whose themes and characters are confined to their own caste and class, Das places the human derelicts of Indian society at the centre of her stories,—girl children forced into prostitution by the own mother, the woman who becomes a prostitute in order to support her brother.
brother and sister, the mentally retarded only son controlled by a dominating mother, the Sikh family massacred during the 1984 Delhi riots, the senile old woman raped by unknown youths. Her stories draw attention to the cruelty and violence exhibited by human beings not merely on the streets but also, and with even greater vehemence, inside domestic walls. Her stories, most of them not longer than a couple of pages are like poetry – economical, compressed, evocative and extremely thought provoking. (Iqbal Kaur, 1995, p.82)

This chapter also proposes to analyse the stories of Kamala Das collected in a recent volume, *Padmavati, The Harlot and Other Stories*, (1992). The stories are examined with reference to theme and narrative technique. The study of man-woman relationship reveals many points of similarity between the stories and in the poetry as well as the autobiographical writing of Das. The unnamed writer of the introduction to the above volume describes the stories as arising from a “rare and adult feminism” (p.5), capable of seeing man as son, love and god. It is a disposition associated with the majestic women of the epics. In Kamala Das this universalism tradition has astonishingly survived. But is the man of the present time capable of mirroring these visions of totality dreamed by women. In answering this question, Das does not make women an outsider. Her woman abides by man. She lends her mind and consciousness to function as absorbents for man’s presumptuous, sanctioned one-sidedness. Spirituality and search for good become incumbent for such a woman. And the most obvious figure Das can utilize to serve as an embodiment of this condition which it is not one of the dumb resignation, but one that is driven to
fill a moral vacuum, is that of the prostitute. Her stories are a reaffirmation of women, reclaimed of body and spirit.

Her stories are “based mainly on the theme of the oppression of women” and present women only as victim. In her stories we see the “conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe.”

Many of the stories reveal the breaking of traditional held stereotype images of woman, such as the prostitute, the other woman and the wife, the exposure of male exploitation of woman for self-gratification and the portrayal of woman in a non-servile, independent stance. (Iqbal Kaur, 1995, p.25)

“Padmavati, the Harlot” is a strange, unusual tale about a happening almost impossible to imagine as occurring in real life yet, it has a timeless, mythic quality and is moving allegory about the rejection of the world. It suggests that not by the standards evolved by society but by the yardstick of humanness are such people to be found superior to the so-called religious ones. The portrayal of Padmavati is different from the other women in that there is no transition or evolution suggested by the writer. But she towers above all the women characters in this collection and hence has been chosen for the title.

According to Austin M.Wright the presence of formal recalcitrance in the short story saves it from triviality, boredom and banality. Wright defines formal recalcitrance as the resistance offered by the shaped materials to the form, as it tries to shape them. The ending of “Padmavati, the Harlot” reveals the fifth type of final recalcitrance categorized by Wright i.e. a model discontinuity, a clash between two conflicting conceptions of causation. At the end of the story the supernatural and spiritual explanation superimposed on
what was till then a realistic mode of narration. There is mystery at the end of the story as the harlot comes out of the female, having experienced the ecstasy of union with God as a lover, in the Indian mystic tradition. But the union is not only mystical, but physical in a tangible way, for it has left her the disheveled hair, bruised cheeks and throat, swollen lips and a bridal blush on her face. The juxtaposition of the realistic and supernatural modes at the end enshrouds the story in mystery.

The chapter focuses on strong conflict between the male desire for suppression and subjugation of women and Kamala Das’s desperate need for freedom, self-assertion, autonomy and establishment of her identity. It is different for a male to accept a woman as her equal, while it is impossible for Das to reconfile with a subordinate position. The one who had always dreamt of commanding others protested against being commanded. Das wanted to draw society’s attention to the dreams and desires of women, to the gap between their dreams and reality. She wanted her society to understand that every woman has a history and that it is possible to narrate this history. Her life began as a quest – a quest for identity, a quest for self-discovery and it was her autobiographical writing entitled. *My Story* brought her face to face with herself and a woman.

Her book *My Story* was written when Das was seriously ill. She was hospitalised and there was not enough money to pay the hospital bills. So she undertook the project of writing her story to meet her financial needs. *My story* does not narrate the story of Kamala Das only but of any and every self determined woman who inspite of all the odds has to fight against in a man’s world, must make attempts at self-actualisation. It projects the struggle
of the New – Woman determined to establish her identity, her self worth. It focuses on how a self-willed women confronts her destiny and shapes the marital life. It also aims at abolishing the imbalance of power, the relations of domination and subjugation. It wishes to erect a new social ethics and aims at altering power relations. A woman with a rather tender heart, she wishes this beautiful universe to be a really happy place to live in – a happy place each one of God’s creations especially man and woman.

Kamala Das’s short stories are the realities of women’s lives and the truths that lie behind their silences. She realised how little women’s stories were heard. Tradition dominates her stories because silence is imposed on woman by the tradition. She says sometimes it seems that this silence is within the Indian woman. Thus tradition plays a crucial role in determining the position of women in the society. The theme of her stories are search for love, meaning and happiness in life and need for strong support are some of the major concerns. The stories have also substantiated the theme of existence of women’s identity in the society. At this point, when we compare the short stories of Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande, we come to believe that both these women writers have the similarities of theme, plot and mood which invite some discussion in this chapter.

Shashi Deshpande in the story “An Antidote to Boredom” refers to the frustration of a married woman and her insipid existence with her husband. This story dramatizes the suffering of woman who makes an unsuccessful attempt to escape from the prison of her fixed role as a wife and live a life of spontaneity. Another story “The Intrusion” refers to the suffering of a sensitive bride who is married to a stranger due to the customary Indian
practice of arranged marriage by parents. *It was the Nightingale and Other Stories*, the third volume of her short stories, deals with the portrayal of man-woman relationship on a different footing. “A Day Like Another” reveals the story of a wife who forgives rather ignores her husband’s extra marital relations for the domestic harmony and security.

Shashi Deshpande’s relentless search for “self” in her short stories is as much the same as Kamala Das’s short stories where both have largely confined themselves to the problems and tortures of the female world. Nowhere does they encourage their female protagonists to rise in rebellion against the males in family matters; instead, they want to build a harmonious relationship between man and woman in spirit of give and take, in a mood of compromise and reconciliation. In the shorter as well as larger stories, both Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande mainly dwell on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness and alienation of sensitive woman pitted against an ill-mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her. Their stories are fictionalization of personal experiences.

In comparison with Shashi Deshpande one could feel that Kamala Das attempts to intimately analyze man-woman relationship within the ambit of family and society. She is primarily concerned with the intriguing problems and the suffocating environs of her female protagonists, who struggle hard in this cruel and callous male-dominated world to discover their true identity. She has thrashed women's problems and situations in a fast-changing social scenario.
And I think by expressing herself through the short stories, Kamala Das has succeeded in creating a room of her own in the great house of patriarchy. Kamala Das is not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of woman, but also tries to suggest solutions. She thinks that woman's miseries can end if she can discover her roots and shadows. Very often Deshpande dwells on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss of face, loneliness and alienation of a sensitive woman pitted against an ill-mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her.

The sexual politics i.e. the relationship of dominance and subordinance between husband and wife nauseated Kamala. So, she protested not only against the power politics in sexual relationships but also against women’s unquestioning acceptance of male superiority. Even as a little girl, Kamala could perceive that the husband-wife relationships were not based on mutuality and reciprocity. These relations rather reflected an imbalance of power with women as victims.

Beyond the northern rice-fields lived Lazar, the oil-seller who drove his white cow and the three women of his house round and round his old mill, to extract oil from the copra and the sesame while he rested, leaning against a tree, abusing them in pornographic language which only amused his victims for he was always a good provider and they were, by nature, masochistic (p.28).

The entire situation was unbearable to the sensitive soul of Kamala. The equation of women with an animal and that too with an animal like “cow” signified by the co-ordinating conjunction “and” refers to the docility expected of women. This expression indicates Lazar’s feeling that women were as much his property as was the cow. One must notice that while he “drove” the women along with his white cow, he himself did not work except “leaning against a tree” and ‘abusing them in pornographic language’. This
attitude of Lazar is perfectly acceptable to the masculine world where men seem to be born for all the pleasures and women for all the pains. The gender-defined roles are treacherous for women. The women being masochistic by nature is also understandable in so far as on one hand they are economically dependent on men and on the other they are reconciled to what has been woman’s destiny since antiquity. Kamala Das’s attack on sexual politics is evident. “In a world which has always been governed and controlled by men, woman is hardly better than barbarian if she is human at all” (Millett p-203 1975). Kamala Das was also critical of the fact that the society, in which she grew up was obsessed with its desire to keep women chaste and pure and completely deprived them of sex-education. Sex was veiled in mystery. That’s why she says, “Until my wedding-night I did not have the slightest knowledge of what went on between men and women in the process of procreation. “ (p-24)

She tries to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that it is lack of sex-education or faulty sex-education which often leads to the problems in married life. While the society expects women to be chaste, it imposes no such limits on the freedom of men. Men have the freedom to flirt around. She is violently critical of society’s double standards in so far as the right to marriage it gives to a widower while deprives a widow of not only the right to get married again but also of the right to live a normal, healthy life everafter. The society is responsible to make the widow’s life totally colourless, dull, drab and without hope. She wished for herself a place of human dignity and cared only for a relationship based on respect and caring. She wanted conversation, companionship and warmth but it was shattered to realize that
her husband could not give her all this. If at all he could be a companion, he would be just a sexual companion and not an emotional companion. She was seeking “a pure, total freedom” she realized that she was not valued by her husband for her own singular being which she had been cherishing since her childhood days. She, who “wanted to be given an identity by her husband except an object of his sexual gratification. He like any other man, was an egoist, a bit too sure of his conjugal rights and believed in ruthless exploitation of woman as an absolute other. In this way Kamala Das draws the reader’s attention to the fact that marriage legalizes violence on women’s bodies. It gives man a license to use the female baby but Kamala Das detested this kind of masculine possessiveness. She seems to be reacting against the fact that marriage becomes for many women legal prostitution, a nightly degradation, a hateful yoke under which they age, mere bearers of children, conceived in a sense of duty not love’ (Egerton 1895:189).

For Kamala Das communication is important in any relationship – one may communicate on one level through the intellect, the mind and the soul. At another level, one communicates on the physical plane, through the body. She believes that the body is the means by which women are exploited the most when sexual relationship is reduced to a mere “Skin-communicated thing” love and tenderness are replaced by lust and authoritarianism. Hence in marriage such a lopsided relationship is like that between the conqueror and the conquered, the colonizer and the colonized always with the woman as victim.

Through the presentation of these different images of woman, Kamala Das expresses her intense desire for sexual revolution and a need for
establishing ideal man-woman relationship in which women is treated as a human being, an equal partner, in all affairs where the two should be treated as complementary. The male view which regards woman just a sexual object is unacceptable to her. In fact, by showing in these stories what man has made of woman, and also what woman has made of other woman and of herself, Das wishes to “Shake women out of their slumber and send men soul-searching” remarks Iqbal Kaur. (p.13) She wants to jolt “the passive, docile, self effacing, feminine women into awakening”. (p.131)

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried.
Beneath a man?”

(“Conflagration”)

In one of her interviews, Kamala Das states:

I wanted to make women of my generation feel if men could do something wrong they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realize than they were equal I wanted to remove the gender difference I wanted to see that something happened to the society which had such strong inhibitions and which only told lies in public: (p.14)

(Interview 19/891, quoted in Feminist Revolution and Kamala Das’s My Story by Iqbal Kaur 1992)

In these short stories, Kamala Das presents various images of Indian women in various situations highlighting the exploitation of women by men, the neglected status of woman in society, her position and role in man-woman relationship, woman as a stereotyped wife, as a prostitute, as a mother, as a childbearer and above all woman given only the role to please and allure men by her physical charms. By creating and placing women in certain situations, Das makes them frankly talk and expose the hypocrisy of males, their obsessive desires for sex, and the ironies present in society.

All the stories in this collection reveal a longing for authentic relationships, either explicitly or by implication. Together with the yearning
there is also the realization that this is very difficult to achieve, given the human predicament of existential alienation. The stories are fictional equivalent of the major theme of poetry as well as autobiography of Kamala Das – love and the failure of love. According to Frank O’Connor, short stories are the cry of the lonely voice and depict lonely people in the fringes of society. The stories of Kamala Das in this collection seem to enact the truth of O’Connor’s hypothesis.

Kamala Das’s short stories reveal a skilful handling of both traditional and modern narrative techniques. Eleven of the stories are from the traditional omniscient point of view, using the narrative elements of description, speech, report and comment. Like most modern short stories, the stories of Kamala Das also have a tentative inconclusive open ending where the reader has to supply what the author omits or indicates obliquely through hints.

Kamala Das has created a niche for herself in modern English writing. There is a unity of theme and purpose in her work, which is in depth rather than broad spectrum analysis of a specified area – an area confined primarily to the subject of love and its many satisfactions. Her writing, she hoped would “help the volcano within to explode it a slow ordinary way and would bring a order into a disorder assembled and built over years”. Her confessional style adds authenticity to her work and the sensational elements are counteracted by the pain of personal experience which colours her words. The theme of human relationships is present in her large number of stories, especially, those between man and woman. The harmonies and discards, the ecstasies and agonies of marital as well as extra-marital love are portrayed
in story after story. The final outcome of all these stories is that “Marriages are made in heaven”.

Thus thematically, the stories of Kamala Das are preoccupied with the exploration of human relationships in general and man-woman relationship from various angles. There is a yearning for authentic caring relationships and acceptance that is almost impossible. There is an attractive range and variety of themes and characters in Das’s short stories. The ability of a good writer as artist to enable ordinary man and woman feel the suffering and pain of others is something that will continue to intrigue us. Das’s stories have the capacity to draw us into the shrunken world of the marginalized and to observe them in their full magnificence and brevity the language of narration is simple but the stories have the complex energy of an epiphany and they subtly reveal multi-layered facts about human nature and existence.

The writings reflect the seamy side of domestic life and the miserable state of women in contemporary society. A woman’s humiliation begins in her childhood, moves to a peak in her youth and ends only in death. The patriarchal society ignores a woman’s inspirations and discourages her in her efforts to advance herself in society, she believes that not only actions but also words and gestures can make or break relationships.

If the 1980s were the years of the Indian English novel, the 1990s seem to be the decade of the Indian short story. There is a plethora of collections of short stories in the different Indian languages. Das’s stories share the quality of quiet power and sparse external detail with the modern Indian story. Although Das won fame with her poetry and her autobiographical writing, it is with her short stories that she exhibits class. Her depiction of the world’s
human depicts is informed with compassion and love. Her ability to perceive and show the harmony of those edged out beyond the recognized margins of society, often makes us doubt our own humanity. She is not only articulate but also critical of the shallowness of the ‘Sacred’ institution of marriage. Her’s is a a pertinent and thought provoking voice. Since no one expressed the pain of women and no one wrote sad tales about them, Das took up the task of writing recklessly and in protest to attack the belief of the society which believed in the suppression and oppression of women.

Kamala Das, in her effort to discover, her own self, unknowingly shook the norms of a male dominated society, which continued its existence through hundred of years contrast between the present and past, happiness with unhappiness, life with decay, childhood with the adulthood and the opening of the hidden vistas forms. The matrix of her entire writings. She is generally seen in the fore-front of such writers also fought for the rights of women. She has expressed her disappointment and tells the world that women are not mere toys, they are also individuals with their own preferences. She has succeeded in going into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of woman’s mind.

Kamala Das writes with a frankness and openness usual in the Indian context. She exploits the confessional mode in order to discover the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood. The confessional mode becomes a device to formalise the process of analysis and adjustment of the problems that crop up from marriage. She may or may not be serious about women’s emancipation from male domination, but as a writer she is seriously and creatively concerned with her own identity as a woman. While
exploring the theme of making the self she also explores the possibility of adapting the language of men writers to voice her own feelings as a woman, wife, mother and citizen.

She does not contrive a fictional world of her own. Instead, she looks to herself and into herself. Her body is her Malgudi. That is her greatest curiosity shop and it is also her most intimate and sensitive instrument of judging the world. She collects evidence through its responses and chronicles them in her own nonconformist, unhackened way. Sometimes she looks back at the responses (body’s wisdom) in anger but rarely with satisfaction. To put it briefly, suffering and humiliation are undoubtedly the dominating themes of Kamala Das writings. She airs her views with a boldness unparalleled and she hopes that the society might change their attitude to those who suffer and are humiliated. She is essentially a writer of modern Indian women’s ambivalence. She is unacknowledged and acclaimed as an outstanding writer. She is one of the most individualist of the writers in India.

Her chief contribution to modern Indian writing is not only the stunning frankness but a vast fund of agonies and information regarding woman’s psychic experience that lay hidden for ages in the private female sector. She throws the ‘unholy’ sanctum sanctorum open and etches out in all caustic details in public view. And on that account, she has become, unwittingly though, a female Pope of the brave now woman who can look to her with difference for inspiration guidance and commitment. Only Kamala Das’s inner world has not remained her personal demesne, it has acquired profound symbolic significance for all bruised and battered woman kind.