Chapter Five

Filling in the Silences: Kamala Das’s Short Stories

Kamala Das has published several short stories in Malayalam, under the pen name Madhavikutty. Some of these are now available in translation. *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, 1977 and *Padmavati, the Harlot*, 1992 are two collections of short stories published in English. Though Kamala Das is a well-known poet in English her short stories deserve equal attention as her poetry because they are poignant tales of feminine suffering, dilemma, resistance and rectitude. In the blurb of one of her short story collections it is mentioned, “Kamala Das’s stories are a re-affirmation of woman, woman reclaimed of body and spirit. But it is woman, above all, always on the side of life, never betraying it by antagonising man through mean acts of getting even, or scoring points.”

Women are the protagonists of all the stories which offer a myriad of different female characters. The stories present all variations on the feminine stereotypes in radically subverted form. Like in her poems and her autobiography in most of the stories there is a serious questioning of the existing basis of male-female relations and a more or less sustained refusal to the values of a male-dominated society get expressed.

In this chapter, we have analysed some of her short stories from the women-centred perspective. In “The Princess of Avanti,” Kamala Das focuses on the theme of sexual perversion in men. This is a pathetic story of an old woman
being raped by three young men. The old woman was under the delusion that she was the princess of Avanti, so when in the park she encountered three young men who flattered her, she lost her sensibility and fell a victim to their sexual perversion. The three megalomaniac men declared themselves as king of Vangarajya, Kalinga and Kerala. Together they lured the old woman with false promises of her nuptial celebration in the park by saying, “We have come to ask of you a favour. This evening you must not go home.

Remain hidden behind a bush. After the park is locked we shall celebrate your wedding quietly inside this beautiful park.” Being a myopic person she disregarded her age, physical frailty and the time factor and failed to comprehend the unctuousness in the proposal of the pseudo rajas. They are self-proclaimed monarchs and their cowardice is revealed in their intention to act surreptitiously in the dark. Yet, the old lady waited for them without any fear, hesitation and suspicion. When darkness engulfed the place her hope of celebrating her marriage was shattered with the three bully men physically overpowering her making her gasp and pant for her last breaths. “The young men removed her dress. She had no undergarments. One took a long look at the sagging breasts and guffawed.”

The story may appear contrived when we think of the reference to historical names, but such references help to hint at self-asserted male superiority, the inherent megalomaniac attitude of most men and the perpetual
physical enslavement of women throughout history and across diverse cultures. Here through the age difference between the victim and the victimizers and the clever juxtaposition of contrastive qualities like ignorance as against deceit, self-deception against gregarious masquerade/complicity and feminine frailty against masculine virility, the crudities of such female exploitation like rape and molestation are poignantly delineated. Certain aspects of the old woman's idiosyncratic demeanour appear to be highly dramatized and exaggerated, for instance, her desire for revelry in the company of young men, her readiness in accepting the strangers' request/proposal, her willingness to place her faith on them, their false claims and promises and her obvert joy at the strangers' flattering words and compliments. All these give a hyperbolic twist to the tale, but then can we assert that old age desires no juvenile companies, cherishes no fond dreams and is all sterile and void of pleasure? Perhaps through the graphic description of the old woman the writer wants to depict the state of psychological dependency and vulnerability of old age when people in spite of physical frailty dream of appearing young, vibrant and juvenile and struggle to rejuvenate life with renewed interests, vigour, love and energy. There is certainly no harm in cherishing such dreams, but the prize a woman has to pay to fulfil such desires and longings is too enormous and it involves the perils of being stripped off one's dignity, shame, emotions and life itself in the process. The woman in this story symbolically stands for senility, dependency, and vulnerability. Though her ignorance and error of judgement are pardonable, the
three men’s gregarious attempt at physically assaulting and humiliating a woman of their mother’s age is as heinous as unforgivable an act in any legal ambit.

To a reader who disbelieves the tale—a toothless old hag with sagging breasts being lured and raped by young men—my suggestion would be that the story can very well be interpreted as an implicit reference to the victimization of women by the all-pervasive male gaze. It would not be a far-sighted conjecture to guess that, perhaps, Kamala Das in this story metaphorically suggests the victimization of women by the “male” gaze, which follows no age restriction in the gazer nor the gazed in any society, and undeniably in the stifling patriarchal social set-up of the Kerala society with all its intellectual sophistry and proclivity towards Marxian idealism that has left the least trace/mark in the men-women relationship and prevalent gender biases. But then can we ever claim that old women are never physically molested and raped by young men and that the writer has never heard such a tale?

“Padmavati, the Harlot” is written in a similar vein. Here the female protagonist, a middle-aged harlot, herself a victim of sexual prejudices at the end of the story is seen walking away in a coy but triumphant gait with the men who previously abused her and impeded her spiritual quest literally prostrating at her feet, asking for her benison. Padmavati’s fears and foibles, her struggle in life and her unshakable devotion towards God are all portrayed by Kamala Das
from a purely humanist perspective and she emerges as a woman who successfully resists male seduction and flirtatious advances with full determination. In this sense, she is like any other woman who has not entered the white slavery but nevertheless has to struggle against patriarchal nuisances. Kamala Das’s feminine sensibility allows her to sympathise and commiserate with the harlot’s predicament and audaciously portray her as a symbol of resistance, forbearance and spiritual quest. When confronted by a gang of loafers loitering around the temple, Padmavati narrates her doleful tale of having been disowned, abandoned and ditched by her family. She who struggled to financially support her mother, brothers and sister was abandoned by all because of her lowly profession. Having been forsaken by humans she now turns towards the Lord whose holy shrine she had long desired to visit. To the loafers she said, “I have been waiting to come here for the past thirty-three years but something or the other has kept me busy all the time. At first I had to tend my ailing mother who lay paralysed for seven years before she died one day, turning her face away from me in disgust. Then I had the responsibility of educating my brothers who got good jobs in other cities and forgot me. I had also to marry off my sister to a man who was willing to do it for a big dowry. After marriage she has not once written to me.” Thus having enacted all her filial and sisterly duties she now focuses on God, but with some measure of doubt and scepticism for she feels, “Only the Lord, perhaps, has any feeling for me. But, He may have forgotten too.” Eventually, she arrives at her desired
destination, but only to find herself to be too late—the temple door was shut, the priest had left, darkness loomed large all over the place while some hooligans purposefully attempted to hinder her. They began to verbally assault her while deriving sadistic pleasure by tormenting her with obscene words, “You are not young, but you are charming enough for one evening or two. Your breasts are still firm. Your haunches set our loins on fire. Won’t you be kind enough to grant us your favours?” Even at the threshold of the lord there was no respite for Padmavati. The avaricious loafers also robbed her of the fruits she intended to offer at the altar of the Lord. With tears in her eyes and in an utterly perplexed state of mind she could not decide where to proceed and what to do. The loafers then followed her incessantly demanding sexual pleasure, “Keep us company this night, O’ Padmavati… Tomorrow you can worship the Lord.”

But though a harlot Padmavati was not a nymphomaniac craving for physical pleasure so she proved no easy prey to the brutes’ sexual appetite. Turning a deaf ear to their lascivious words and lecherous gestures she hurried up the stone steps leading to the temple yard. At last she did achieve her goal and the poet describes her sublime state of mind, her communion with the lord with a touch of sensuousness. Kamala Das’s poetic imagination colours the merging of the human spirit with the divine in vivid terms as if Padmavati’s spiritual quest ends in an ecstatic rapture with the experiencing of the divine presence within her in all its physicality and sublime touch.
In the ordinary parlance and social discourses a prostitute is regarded as a degraded person, a notorious symbol of promiscuity, carnal desire and indulgence. Here in this story Kamala Das reverses this conventional understanding and attempts to erase the malign image of this marginalised and exploited woman. In other words, she challenges us to suspend some of the assumptions we have culturally derived about prostitutes as an immoral and socially aberrant class. The story is thus subversive at many levels. The prostitute is shown as a sincere, caring, devoted and determined person. Paradoxically enough, the loafers she confronts in the vicinity of the temple though not gigolos by profession are shown as slaves of carnal desire, greed and malevolence. Padmavati has ascended from a lowly state of existence to a higher realm of experiential realization through her pursuits of the divine touch, whereas, the men descended from a normal life to a lower stratum of sensuality and malice. Padmavati’s armour is her sense of shame and resistance to indulgence. Contrariwise, the men’s crudities of thought and action render them naked and shameless. Padmavati’s devotion stretches over time (thirty-three years of waiting for the spiritual retreat) and distance, but the hooligans even while dwelling in the precincts of the temple fail to pursue the right path.

Many writers have written on prostitutes but few could portray them in a positive light endowing them with normal feminine attributes. Very often we see prostitutes as victims of social prejudices and discrimination and not as rebels and pilgrims. In her short story, “The Offspring”, the noted Assamese
novelist, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, narrates the tale of a young and beautiful Brahmin prostitute who sells her flesh but hesitates to conceive a child for a low caste 'mahajan.' In Assamese society, as in the rest of India childlessness is an anathema to married couples. It is a strong belief that conjugal life should be blessed with procreation of a new generation-progeny to keep the lineage going. Pitambar, the rich but childless trader was blinded by his craving for a child (son) of his own and so he approached the Brahmin widow (following the initiation and secret advice of the Brahmin priest, Krishnakanta) to bear him a son as his bed-ridden wife lay barren and childless. Damayanti, the harlot, initially agreed to the deal, but when vain pride in caste superiority takes hold of her senses she decides to abort the foetus. Her benefactor was from a lower caste and she abhorred the thought of conceiving and nurturing his child. Though an outcast by profession and leading a life of penury and ostracism, Damayanti took excessive pride in her caste superiority.

Here in this story the prostitute is not a symbol of resistance to patriarchal hierarchies but instead remains a medium for the perpetuation of caste stratification and conventional values. The story ends in climactic pathos with the man grubbing and rummaging the soil to trace and dig up the discarded piece of flesh—a part of his own being—in the darkness of the night, panting, sobbing for a touch of the unborn child. Though the author here aims at critiquing casteism and its sinuous grip on Hindu society, female readers would expect the harlot to stand for a more just cause than acting as a mere medium
for perpetuating caste-related sentiments and prejudices. The story lacks a feminist edge since the harlot is not resisting the idea of being used as a receptacle by the rich man who tries to bargain and buy all her services with the sheer power of money. Had the child been born the ties between the mother and the child would have been abruptly and inevitably snapped off since the possibility of the father's intervention to give a new name, a different identity to the child cannot be ruled out, there being no assurance of the uplift in the mother's life and status once the child was born. Moreover, the man enters the deal without the notice of the outside world, he slips into the ramshackle hut in the dark aiming to fulfil his own appetite. His moral flaw is also evident in his heedlessness and negligence of his bed-ridden wife, his lack of concern for her physical and mental health and his perfidious behaviour as is seen in his intention to keep her in the dark about his new plan to procure a child. Yet, Damayanti, the harlot is not seen to address and resist any of these vital issues, rather she narcissistically clings to her caste. "The Offspring" is a well-written story, there is no doubt about it and it has drawn the critical attention of native as well as non-Assamese writers and critics alike. Yet when placed side by side with "Padmavati, the Harlot" it appears to be fragile since the feminine resisting voice is pathetically missing in it.

Kamala Das's "A Doll for the Child Prostitute" is a poignant story of brothel life in an urban city like Mumbai. Life in the red-light street is infested
with death, decay and endless suffering especially if the victims happen to be young girls in their pre-pubertal stage. In this story Kamala Das narrates the untold misery of two teenage girls, Sita and Rukmini. Young Rukmini was bartered away by her own mother to Ayee, the head of the brothel in exchange for a meagre amount of money. At home there is not only poverty and acute hunger but also the sexual harassment from the stepfather who had raped the little girl. The child Rukmini was not unhappy about leaving her home for she realized, “The man who had moved into her home some months ago, after her father had disappeared, was a monster. He not only beat up her mother every night but squeezed her own little breasts, hurting her dreadfully when she was alone in the house. And, last week he had pierced her body until she bled all over the floor.” To the helpless mother the brothel seemed the only safe haven for her daughter where she could procure two square meals a day and some shelter. It was in a dilemma, perhaps, when the need to protect her daughter from the clutches of her second husband arose the mother with a guilty-conscience changes her daughter into an object of mass consumption. It was not that she as a woman was unaware of the evils of brothel life, but that she had to decide and choose between two equally vicious situations indicates the existential crisis the mother and daughter had to go through.

Sita, whom Rukmini meets at the brothel, is a victim of hapless circumstances too. The cholera epidemic created havoc in her life; she lost her parents and all her three brothers and was forced to end up in the brothel for
survival's sake. Being victims of similar plight and predicament the two girls felt a feeling of warmth and rapport from their first meeting. Sita being more experienced initiated innocent Rukmini into the mysteries of brothel life, its nocturnal visitors and entertainment-seekers and exhorted her to "Obey them or else Ayee will starve you to death. Do whatever they want you to do. Men are real dogs." In their pre-pubertal days when life seemed all fun—carefree and joyful—they hardly knew the significance of the sexual act. For them it came as an occasional punishment meted out for some obscure reasons, which made them resent the frequent interruptions during their game of hopscotch. While the coarse men, old enough to be their grandfathers, took the pleasure off their young bodies, the two girls' minds were far away, hopping in the large squares of chalked diagram on the floor of the porch. They were suffering for no fault of their own and Kamala Das rightly points out "their only mistake was that they were born as girls in a society that regarded the female as burden, a liability."

Sita's unexpected pregnancy, forced abortion and painful death left a shocking and debilitating effect on young Rukmini's mind. Loss of her only friend and confidante brought relentless agony to her already distressed and cloistered existence. Her first heinous rendezvous at the brothel with the old police inspector left her nauseated too. This man of her father's age tried to lure her with promises of expensive gifts—a red frock, frilly panties and an imported doll. Being satiated with women this ugly man keeps his lecherous eyes
transfixed on Rukmini and plans to make a deal with Ayee to avail Rukmini’s service solely to himself.

Besides Rukmini and Sita all the other occupants of the brothel are also portrayed in sufficient details. Ayee, the caretaker is shown as caring but also demanding at times. Her repeated assurance of availability of nutritious meals at the brothel for the girls sounds more boastful and exaggerated than her real concerns for their health. Yet, she is not as cruel and wicked as her rival, Koushalya, who whips her girls to make them docile and obeisant. The scandalmonger, Sindhuthai, with her accursed tongue is portrayed as a devilish woman. Her gnarled hands with their dirty talons frightened little Rukmini when she first stepped into the brothel. When the hag stared at her, she had felt that a woodpecker was pecking at her skin. “What an odious creature,” she murmured to Sita who too abhorred her. The brothels used Sindhuthai’s service (unskilled expertise) to abort unwanted pregnancies and to malign each other’s reputation. In exchange she gets some food, money for her liquor, pan and bidi and occasional shelter. Her life is like a stray bitch. Radha and Saraswati are shown as fully preoccupied with their art of alluring and enticing the visitors and to give them optimum satisfaction. They are nonchalant yet professional, having no regrets and distractions like the young and beautiful Marathai who cherishes the dream of having her own sweet home and her family. She did make an unsuccessful attempt to elope with her student lover but soon realized that the outside world is antagonistic towards prostitutes and men’s phantasmal
promises are short-lived mechanisms for their own gratification. She thus realized that the brothel is the only abode for women like her where they can be safe and secure.

None of these women are immaculate and free of guilt and vices, yet all their accumulated evil deeds would not outweigh the old policeman’s insidious actions—his brutality, shrewdness and endless sexual appetite and pedophilic hunger. In him the degeneration of his entire clan is well reflected. With his complicit support the subterranean brothel culture flourishes, unperturbed and unassailed. He uses his power and position to manipulate facts and figures that becomes handy for the brothel-runners and in exchange he extracts his weekly ransom and quenches his sexual thirst free of charge while pre-pubertal girls like Rukmini and Sita are victimized for no fault of theirs. When Sita died he rendered his loyal service to Ayee by calling in a doctor to produce a fake medical certificate that reported the death as caused by appendix rupture and not by forced abortion and excess bleeding.

Yet Kamala Das ends this tragic and crude story of women’s suffering and exploitation with a positive note as she seems to lay open the possibility of change and internal reformation through the power of female strength emanating from innocence, guiltlessness and virtuosity. As the story progresses we witness a gradual transformation in the police inspector’s attitude towards Rukmini. When Rukmini confided the truth that he resembles her own father and later when Sita died she broke down before him hiding her sobbing face on
his chest, realization sparked off with lust and lasciviousness retreating making way for fatherly affection and caring. Ayee, a hedonist too displays great changes in attitude and her overall outlook. She expresses her desire to retire from the worldly life and dreams of going on a pilgrimage to Benaras, the holy city. Her virulent and abominable feeling towards Sindhuthai dissipates and gives way to love and compassion as she wishes to take her to Benaras as her company. Ayee’s partial feeling too gives way to impartial judgement as she decides to marry off innocent Rukmini to her son instead of the ingrate Mirathai whom she earlier desired as her daughter-in-law for her beauty and literacy. As realization dawns on him, Ayee’s son too regrets his mistakes and begins to accept the fact that every profession has its own code of manner and that he ought not to feel ashamed of his own mother. After ten years of silence he decides to return home. Thus there is a gradual change in the individual stance of some of the characters and we witness hatred giving way to love, attachment to detachment, dereliction to homecoming, delusion to rational consideration and self-realization, partial judgement to impartial reflection, indulgence to restraint and self-aggrandizement to self-effacement. Still the writer has not painted a totally idealistic picture by showing the abolition of the sex trade. Since in real life social aberration and uncontrolled promiscuity always exist, there will also be some one like Saraswati to continue the trade with unabashed professionalism. There is no moral conflict, no shamefulness, nor distraction from the chosen path in her and she paddles on. However, the presence of
Saraswati and the deviant ones whose demand she fulfils cannot smudge the positive picture the writer aims at creating of feminine strength. This brings us back to the question of woman, her role whether implicit or explicit, deliberate or inadvertent in bringing changes in society as well as in individual life. Thus though Rukmini is the victim her innocence proved a vital weapon for bringing unprecedented change to a person no less a monster.

While Kamala Das portrays a harlot in a positive light by highlighting her willingness to perform all her filial and sisterly duties and obligations diligently in spite of her involvement in a lowly profession, the theme of man’s ungratefulness towards their parents and their overall attitude of negligence and filial ingratitude do not slip her creative mind. This gets focussed in "The Tattered Blanket". Here in this story the old mother is seen as painstakingly waiting for her son for too long a time until her memories, longing and present thoughts all collide and transform into an amorphous form percolating as a fragmented residue in some dark recesses of her senile mind. Though bits and pieces of past memories remain intact and fresh, the past hardly coincides with the living present and so she mistakes her son, Gopi for a stranger when one evening he unexpectedly knocks at her door. The mother speaks as if in delirium, unable to recognize her son standing beside her but narrates some accurate details about him—his job, promotion, salary, placement as well as a red blanket, now tattered and frayed, that once he gifted her while he was a student in Madras. To the selfish and ungrateful son who pays this one last visit
(as part of his official itinerary) to claim his share of the ancestral property the mother's failure to recognize him becomes his alibi to overlook his own absence, filial ingratitude and negligence. The widowed sister tries to intervene hoping to revive the mother's memory but amnesia spreads like a thick veil and she simply cannot relate the past with the living present and the son remained for her a total stranger. The sister interrogates the brother in the hope that he might realize his mistakes, but he conceals all his guilt and shame in a shroud of reticence avoiding the obvert display of emotions, attachment and feeling of contrition.

While in this story the selfish and impertinent son tactfully remains silent and laconic, the married daughter in the story "Grandfather" is rendered quiet/silent/voiceless due to overwhelming emotions and her constricted state of existence. This story brings to our attention the psychological trauma most women undergo when they confront situations of inner conflict in which they are incapable of taking any drastic steps to resolve dilemmas, that eat up their morale and that which arise not for any fault of their own, but due to the stranglehold of distorted patriarchal values and conventions. Very often marriage in a patriarchal society thrush upon women such dilemmas and psychological conflicts especially when they are forced to make a choice between loyalty towards the spouses and in-laws, on the one hand, and their parents and siblings, on the other. In India, the two usually do not go hand in hand and a married woman (daughter-in-law) is expected to be extra loyal to her
husband and his family in a manner, which may at times demand complete
deafness/blindness towards the need of her own parents, brothers and sisters.

Love and emotions, which naturally do not tend to remain confined
within any demarcated boundaries if truncated abruptly bring untold miseries to
the bearer. This is exactly what happens to Thankam in the story “Grandfather”,
when the father in his dotage begs her to take him to Bombay and the husband
intervenes in a rude and imperious manner to stop her from doing that.
Thankam feels devastated for not being able to respond positively to her father’s
desperate need and wish to spend the last days of his life in her company. His
emotionally charged questions, “Have you stopped needing me, Thankam?”
“Doesn’t anyone want old people?” “Have I become unwanted?” “Won’t you
allow me to die in your own home?” pierced her heart and mind like poison­
laded arrows and in utter helplessness she replied, “I don’t know what to do,
what I should do.” Seeing her perplexity the husband steps forward to
manipulate the situation. While inner conflict and a sense of enormous guilt
torment the wife, the husband does not hesitate to put forth his arguments and
excuses with an air of insouciance. The way Kamala Das portrays the couple’s
dealing with the old man’s request in a way highlights the inherent differences
between men and women’s approach to emotional matters and their subjective
and objective views. In this story the man is able to distance himself from the
crux of the matter without any hesitation, contrition and obvert display of
emotion, whereas the woman remains submerged in the situation as if she is
drawn towards the vortex of a whirlpool, helpless and speechless. This difference, however, does not prove that men are by nature emotionally stronger and stabler than women—a common assumption that is not only erroneous and baseless but also pernicious. Patriarchal values and conventions have long nurtured the idea that it is man’s birthright to dominate his wife. Notion of self-declared supremacy over one’s spouse has coloured the thoughts of man and has guided all his actions. Woman’s socialization, on the other hand, has taught her to be less self-assertive which is why her vengeance and helplessness at times get expressed through tears and emotional outburst that in the common parlance get interpreted as her inherent weakness and instability.

In this story, Kamala Das very sensitively presents the insinuated ways men usually present their arguments. When Thankam’s father desperately requests her to take him along with her to her home in the city, the husband intervenes to show that the old man’s words were not meant to be taken seriously and he asserts, “Father doesn’t mean what he says. He was merely joking. You (Thankam) took him seriously.” When heedlessness did not work and the old man remained stubborn the young man makes an excuse of not having the flight ticket for him. He tried to guise his alibi with a vague promise so as to make it sound real. He said, “When we return from here in June we shall take you with us. This time we have not bought a ticket for you.” Still the old man continued to resist the son-in-law’s dissuasion and placing the entire matter of decision taking at his daughter’s hands he said, “I have told her of my
desire to live with her. Now it is up to her to decide what to do.” At this point when all the arguments did not seem to work the son-in-law directed his anger at his grief-stricken and confused wife, “What kind of madness is this? If you take him to Bombay at his age you will have to face the consequence of your action.” His angry words came as a threat and exhortation, but Thankam made one last attempt by making a moral as well as an emotional statement, “But he is my father.” At this the husband replied with his razor sharp tongue, “Did I not have a father too?” Before the husband’s domineering nature and asperity of manner, Thankam had neither the will nor the strength to take up the cudgels and follow her own course of action. Instead, she hid her face with trembling hands and sobbed. Through the portrayal of Thamkam, Kamala Das has brought to light the life of a typical Indian housewife whose married life is absolutely constricted and whose existence as a whole is ruined by perpetual spousal intervention, threat and domination. Confronted with situational dilemma she takes recourse to silence, sobbing, emotional outbursts and complete inaction.

It is to be noted here that Kamala Das has not painted only one-sided picture of women as sentimental, soppy, introvert and silent victims of patriarchal prejudices. She has painted a multi-dimensional canvas—a mosaic of different hues and shades—wherein women have postured in different moods and attitudes exuding varied feminine qualities. In “A Little Kitten”, the woman is depicted as capable of transgression after initially suffering from ennui, suspicion, and frustration due to her husband’s infidelity. It is the same old story
of the boss falling in love with his secretary and the frustrated wife grows restive, feeling ditched and betrayed. The lonesome wife desires to have a kitten to keep her company while her husband is away busily engaged with his routine office work. As days passed by the newly wedded wife sulked and lost her bridal beauty thinking unkind thoughts incessantly. Life in the city was not a bed of roses for her and she wished to bid adieu to her husband. When she packs up her belongings and decides to depart, the husband dissuades her by one loaded question: “What will your parents say?” This same man’s conscience did not even prick once when he philandered with his secretary and he never stopped to ask himself, “What will my wife think if...?”

In the Indian society conservatism still pervades and it is not customary for married women to disclose bitter truths and events from her conjugal life to her parents. That is because after marriage she is regarded as another’s possession over which the parents have no claim and the doors of the parental home are literally shut on her. She cannot expect her parents to be considerate, reliable and friendly when it comes to disclosing and sharing her painful secrets. Her marriage is symbolic of severing of the umbilical cord that united her with her mother at her birth. When ditched by her husband she has nowhere to go. The woman in the story realized this and so she balked hearing the husband’s words. However, she decides to stay back not as a loyal and subdued person but one who adventures to seek out her own kitty all by herself. The act of transgression is metaphorically referred to as a scratch from the playful kitten.
Kamala Das balances the lopsided picture of conjugal relationship by implicitly showing the woman's capability to deviate from the culturally prescribed role of a wife that demands her to prostrate before her husband with joined palms, closed eyes and blind faith. Here the woman is not indulging in illicit love affairs, she is not carried away by paroxysms of joy arising from consummated love and new found freedom. Yet the fact that she has taken a giant leap by stepping outside of the legal ambit of marriage, its constricted ambience is worth taking note of. Kamala Das has not intended to show her as an adulteress. Rather, she is shown as a woman who is simply capable of finding her own solution to the problem created by her better/worse half though her horizon remains shrouded, engulfed in an amorphous smoky form indicating a blurred vision.

In the story "Iqbal" the woman is portrayed as confused by her husband's queer behaviour towards his poet-friend, Iqbal. Being innocent and ignorant she did not suspect the two men's relationship instantly. It was not until much later when Iqbal was lying asleep in the hospital bed and she closely scrutinized the contours of his feature--its feminine grace that the past got revived and in a fast track flashback she seems to recall her honeymoon days and her first meeting with Iqbal at the station. All this while she had been wondering what her husband had found in his friend's poetry that made him rave over it. She now realized why her husband during their honeymoon talked
passionately about his YMCA days spent in the company of his friend and why he was so excited to recite the love poems composed by his friend. At the hospital she also recalled how she felt stabs of jealousy when her query about Iqbal's possible love affair with any girl was unanswered by her husband. She recalled her husband's sullen moods when Iqbal refused to come for Sunday lunches and his panic-stricken face when he returned home one day to inform her about Iqbal's suicidal attempt. She came to realize why from the beginning Iqbal was not friendly with her, never looked at her nor ever smiled. Yet when eventually suspicion took roots in the young woman's heart she neither had the time nor the need to grow jealous, frustrated, sullen and revengeful since she was already heavy with her child. Pregnancy brought pride, joy and confidence to her and rendered her husband's homosexuality redundant and impertinent. She sensed that Iqbal was perhaps jealous of her, her ability to conceive and that might have finally led him to commit suicide. She felt no sympathy towards him and in the hospital she proudly displayed the bulging convexity of her belly and derived great satisfaction and happiness even though Iqbal grew agitated and screamed at her. All his abuses and loud words got drowned in the repercussions of her laughter.

The story is not about the conflict between heterosexuality and homosexuality or about the triumph of the former over the latter. Multiple sexual allegiances are shown here—the husband is bisexual, the conventional wife, confirmed heterosexual and on the periphery of their relationship stood the
homosexual friend. We can assume that the husband’s bisexuality gradually wanes off with the coming of the child and he became passionately attached to his pregnant wife. Under this circumstance, it was natural for Iqbal to grow lonely, jealous and frustrated and his suicidal attempt points at his psychological instability. The wife felt betrayed and appeared a scapegoat. Yet among all the three she is perhaps the strongest for she could face the husband’s infidelity, his swinging moods and remain impervious, resilient and stoic as she learns to look at her own changing body and celebrates its nurturing and procreative powers. Her pregnant state becomes a symbolic gesture of her self-assertive power and individuality and she learns to extract immense joy, bliss and fulfillment from it during moments of personal crisis.

“The Sea Lounge” is a story about two lovers’ final rendezvous, but it is not a conventional love story. Through the portrayal of the lovers Kamala Das once again brings out the differences in man and woman’s outlook, changing attitude towards love and relationship. The boy in this story is grateful to his girlfriend for all the love she had showered upon him, but he still feels that she is not the right person for him to marry. So in their final meeting he decides to disclose the truth that he had no intention to marry her.

Kamala Das has not named the two characters in this very short story. Yet, in their anonymity they project the pervading changes gripping our society and culture today, the radical transformation in modern men and women’s attitude towards love, marriage, relationship and free choice. The man is
portrayed as being unable to free himself fully from certain characteristic conservatism and traits of conventional value orientation. However, one positive aspect of him is that he begins to accept sophistication (like high education) quite unlike his predecessors who preferred conventionality and traditional outlook as positive marks of woman and womanhood. Yet, when it comes to admiring a woman and accepting her as a life partner, he displays predilection for stercotypical feminine qualities. Masculine and feminine qualities are not universally defined concepts, they are culture-specific and bear different and sometimes opposing connotative meanings and values to people from diverse cultural backgrounds and affiliations. In the Indian context feminine characteristics imply an obvert display of grace, humbleness and self-effacement. Boldness and assertion of one’s self and individuality are regarded as deviation from a truly feminine character and are regarded as threats by most men. The matrimonial columns in newspapers clearly bring out the average Indian man’s appreciation, expectation and demand of the qualities in his would-be bride. If on the one hand, sophistication which implies high educational qualifications, economic independence and career orientation are appreciated and adulated, on the other hand, there is a pervading demand for such qualities like fairness of complexion, good height, slenderness, grace, amiability and sobriety. Even highly educated families in order to extract a big dowry throw such demands through the mass media (especially newspaper ads) for their foreign-degreed, high salaried sons.
In this story the man is shown as trapped in such conventionality. His admiration for women who are feminine distanced him from his present lover. The woman on the other hand, is shown as a modern girl who has her own individuality, self-determination and confidence. She is not the sentimental type who drowns herself in tears and remorse when the lover departs and betrays her.

When the man discloses his intention not to marry her, she accepts the reality with stoicism. Her openness and broadmindedness are expressed when she urged the man to have no guilt-conscience about her. When the lover in order to appear sympathetic asked her about parental pressures on her to tie the nuptial ties soon, she replied with confidence and maturity, “I will 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.” She did not have to wallow in self-pity since she realized her own beauty and her own worth. The man entranced by her presence wanted to woo her again regretting that now she would go away from his life without any promise of letter and future meeting. But she did not show any intention to look back with any anticipation of love and admiration. And when the man asked her, “May I give you lift, I can drop you wherever you want to go…” she boldly refused and expressed her desire to take a long walk alone.

In this story Kamala Das has portrayed the young woman as individualistic in character. She captures the confident mood of the modern
woman who learns to adjust herself to changing time and circumstances and who offers resistance to conventional values.

In another very touching story entitled ‘Neipayam’ (Rice Pudding) Kamala Das brings to light with equal admixture of pathos and sarcasm the stereotypical image of woman as wife and mother. In this story the young woman, mother of three children (sons) dies in the course of her routine household chores. She collapsed while sweeping and the husband was shell-shocked to spot her “lying near the broom with her mouth half-open, her pale limbs flung out in absolute disarray.”

Though the couple had a love marriage (a rare phenomenon in a conventional society like India where arranged marriage is still the norm), and the husband showed enough concern and love, even taking pride in the wife’s physical beauty, the woman’s life is not one of unusual happiness and marital bliss. Drudgery of household work--cooking, cleaning, sweeping, washing--all sapped her energy. Kamala Das graphically describes the kitchen, the utensils hanging in the right place, the cooked food that remain covered, in order to show how the woman diligently fulfilled the stereotypical role as a wife and a mother. The woman had not failed to cook a full supper for her family even before dying. The children not knowing that their mother is dead relished the payasam uttering: “Our Amma cooks the best payasam, this is wonderful...she is the best cook in the world.”
In this story the husband’s internalization of the dominant cultural discourses about womanhood is seen in his failure to express any genuine feeling of despair and loss at the moment when the doctor at the hospital declared that his wife was dead. Though he loved her dearly, her ‘untimely demise’ is not regarded as a matter of great personal loss and bereavement. Instead, an irrational feeling crossed his mind as he wallowed in self-pity thinking that he is now “saddled with the young children...” “How would he bathe the children? How would he cook their lunches and send them to school? How would he be able to nurse them back to health when they fell ill? No, it was not possible for him to bring them up alone.”

A married woman especially in the patriarchal social set up of India is regarded as one on whom the husband and all her children depend for all kinds of help and support. A woman’s socialization teaches her to accept this role and she perceives them as totally dependent on her and needing her in order to survive and flourish. There is thus a gradual and perpetual loss of a woman’s individuality once she is married. She comes to be regarded not as an individual in her own right but as a ‘great’ cook, a ‘great’ caretaker of the entire household and happiness is entwined and inextricably linked with the endless service she renders to her husband and children. If this woman happens to die early the vacuity her demise creates in the life of the dependants who outlive her is consoled not for her physical absence but for the shifting of the onus of the drudgery of domestic work on the dependants’ shoulders. This harsh reality that
arises from gender biases in a patriarchal society is reflected in the story. Here the death of the wife is not mourned as a personal loss by the husband rather it is regarded as an accursed event because in the wife's absence he is overburdened with the household responsibilities that he is diffident to undertake. Perhaps this is why in our society re-marriage of widowers is more common and readily acceptable than that of widows’.

As we have seen women are the protagonists of all the stories that offer a myriad of different female characters. Kamala Das’s stories present all variations on the feminine stereotype in radically subverted form. The cultural image of the feminine ideal is not encapsulated in any of the characters. She does not write the conventional story of woman, with its romantic and domestic plot centred on a man and marriage and motherhood as fulfillment. Instead, she explicitly contests all these. Moreover, Kamala Das aims at problematizing the reproduction of gendered binary of sexual dominance-submission in her stories by questioning the active/passive dichotomy in heterosexuality. Therefore, though men are portrayed as dominant, women do not necessarily appear submissive and docile. Even a harlot becomes a symbol of resistance. Moreover, by depicting women caught up and influenced by society’s double standards for women, Kamala Das as a female writer has been able to subvert even the most stereotypical images of women.