CHAPTER 4

THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

Kamala Das is one of the most powerful poetic voices of the twentieth century literary realm. She has been described as "a unique literary phenomenon." Das is unique in the sense that her life and literature raise controversies that surprise and shock our social consciousness to an unprecedented level. Her literature is surprising for she opts for new subjects and writes in a way only she can do. It is shocking because she attacks age-old beliefs, customs, and conventions and goes on to make disclosures of the mysteries of the female body and its convulsions, that cause embarrassment to the pilots of our society. Furthermore, she is also unique for the choice of a mode for her poetic utterances that are beset with psychological and social perils of the greatest magnitude. However, it is this very uniqueness which makes her a multi-faceted poet par excellence.

The multi-faceted character of Das’s personality makes her poetry a pattern of variegated threads of feminine mystique, romantic longing, expressionism, loneliness, vacant ecstasy, mental landscape, spiritual and religious quest, existential needs, biological convulsions, etc. But the thread which is most conspicuous, and which actually displays the colours all other threads in itself is the confessional thread. It not only determines the character and quality of her work but also secures her place among the modern poets of the world, placing her
“somewhere near Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Judith Wright among women poets and Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, and John Berryman among men poets.”

Since confessional poetry is by and large the autobiography of the poet, it derives its themes as well as its meaning and substance from his or her life. As this observation is applicable to the poetic career of Kamala Das as well, “it is imperative that her life and poetry should be studied together.”

Devendra Kohli believes that her poetry is rooted in her life especially in her failure in love. “The failure of love,” Kohli writes, “and the birth of poetry seem to be significantly related to each other in Kamala Das.” Her poetic career ran parallel to her life. Kohli sums up her life in an eloquent phrase from her poem “The Fear of the Year,” “virgin whiteness.” Interpreted in terms of life, the phrase connotes impulses and reactions to different situations of life. But interpreted in terms of poetry it means the poetic sensibility of lust or to be precise the burning heat of lust. Indeed in her life and literature, Das became a champion of the body consciousness.

Interestingly Das’s life was not much different from the lives of other confessional poets. It was the life of misery and struggle, a life lived on a plane that was conductive to the confessional poetry in which the poet wants to show her humiliations, bruises, and wounds suffered in the struggle. Her experience becomes all the more fascinating, since it is the experience of a woman who has waged a relentless campaign against the male dominance. The story of Kamala’s struggles and suffering is embodied in her poetry as well as in her autobiography.
My Story. Although written in confessional mode, the facts of her personal life can be accepted only with some reservations in view of her liking for contrivances and literary manipulations.

The image of Kamala Das, as unfolded alike in her life and work is the image of a woman of irrepressible personality caught in the whirlpool of irresolution, restlessness, anxiety of insecurity, and racial legacies. Throughout her life Das could not resolve between the twin instincts of love and lust. Besides the complex problem of female ambivalence which she explored in her poetry produced in her, to use Devindra Kohli’s phrase “temperamental restlessness.”

Throughout her life she hankered after an emotional, and domestic security. Moreover, she felt the tensions caused by her Nalapat and Nayar heritage. The Nalapat conception of chastity and the matrilineal tradition of Nayars were always heavy upon her mind. She wrote in one of her articles:

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

A rebel by nature Kamala Das assumed the role of an iconoclast, revolutionary, and innovative confessional poet at one and the same time. She turned rebellious against the social norms for a girl. She began to wear shirts and trousers of her brother, cut her hair and ignored the fetters of her womanliness. She became determined to break the traditional images of man and woman and to demolish the walls of pretensions and hollowness of social institutions. However, there is another view of Das’s life, according to which she “has never flouted the
values of oriental culture.”7 Iqbal Kaur subscribes to this view, as she feels that the works of Das have created a wrong image of the writer in the mind of readers. Kamala Das in her real life is quite different from the poet Kamala Das. In poetry she is a female voice representing her race. Kaur states that “she has actually been voicing not only her own despairs and frustrations but those of every women who is victim of the male governed world and it not allowed to think that any definitions of herself, apart from the ones, men have given her, are possible.”8

Obviously Kamala Das, who raises her voice for her race is an iconoclast. She goes on the rampage against the oriental norms, doing things which sometimes defy reason. She was actually the forerunner of a movement which championed the cause of women. Das came forward to voice her concern for women when feminism was in its infancy. Her revolt was against the power imbalance of the society. “She aimed at dismantling the past ruthlessly, to build up a new world based on justice and equality between the two sexes and not on sexual politics – a world in which it was the individual potential of men and women and not their sex that would determine their possibilities – a world in which the fields possible to men are possible to women too. Hence, the clash between her and her society was inevitable.”9

As Kamala Das aspired for “a new life, an unstained future” for the women of her generation, she became impatient at the complacency and moralizing of the people. “I am tired of my generation,” she says, “I don’t like them one bit, all their moralising all their pretences. I can’t stand any more of the lies they tell, the poses they strike... I don’t understand them. They can never understand me.”10 Das’s
impatience against her generation and the state of women in Indian society produced in her a sense of violent protest. She found in her poetic heart a simmering volcano, which ultimately exploded in form of an innovative poetry. She spearheaded a type of poetic revolution which aimed at justice. “All the pain unexpressed,” she writes, “and the sad tales left untold, made me write recklessly and in protest.”¹¹ “I took up writing,” she goes on to add, “hoping that would help the volcano within to explode in a slow orderly way.”¹² Thus by a slow poetic revolution, she aspired to change the face of Indian society.

Das’s feminist but firm voice, of rebellion, iconoclasm, and poetic revolution, was the product of her heredity and environment, especially of her Nayar Tharavad and fast changing Kerala milieu. According to Usha V.T. even though women in Kerala had a superior position, they were not in a position of authority. “Yet the structure gave her security and a certain measure or freedom – of choice and action – not available to women in patriarchal societies all over the world.”¹³ Kamala Das was all set to take advantage of this freedom and security and frequently indulged in love games hunting for lovers. But she was not always successful. In an article published in Opinion, she wrote:

I thought once that there would be such men in the world whose harshness would turn out to be skin deep, and hunting out one of them would be an exciting game, for I would then unpel his soul and taste the sweetness of love. How tragically I collapsed I collapsed at the end of each revelation! Now I am a reformed and wise woman, a typical Nalapat lady, and spend hours cleaning the undersides of my long finger nails and between my toes.¹⁴

It was precisely during this transitional period, when social values and norms were changing fast, Das was born on March 31, 1934 in Punnayurkulam in Southern
Malabar region of Kerala. Interestingly her parents belonged to different communities. While her father was from a Nayar family, her mother was a Nalapat woman. Even though both of them were poets, they possessed different temperaments. Das was thus caught between the crossfire of Tharavad and Nalapat legacies. While Nayar tharavad stood for security of women, Nalapat inculcated a different set of norms of chastity, which most probably influenced Das’s outlook on sex and chastity. Iqbal Kaur feels that “she [was] actually an integral part of the Nalapat women’s Cult of Chastity.”15 Kamala felt the horror of this arid union which took place, as Devindra Kohli writes, “against the conventions of the time.”16 The husband and wife seldom lived together. While her mother lived in Malabar, her father stayed on at Calcutta. At the age of fifteen Das came to the poignant realization of her divided hertige. It had been clear to her, she wrote in her Story that her home was broken up. With the maiden name of Madhvikutty, Das spent a neglected childhood in a discordant family with her father lost in the business of selling Rolls Royces, Humbers and Bentleys – all imposing cars – to the Indian princes and their relatives and with her mother lying always on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam.

Neither the house in which they lived nor its location was congenial to her. The family had to live on the top floor of the repair-yard of the motor car company, where the father was employed. There was nothing in it to beat the boredom or rather frustration caused by the tension created by the ill-mated parents. The only redeeming feature was the cook, who took care of her and her elder brother Mohandas, serving the meals and carrying them to a European school
a furlong away. However, cook’s care was not capable of mitigating her sense of humiliation suffered at the hands of the white school-mates who insulted, jeered, and tortured them for their nut-brown skin. Deas ruefully remembered that the dark boys and girls were whisked away to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories, whenever a white dignitary visited the school.

The consciousness of the swarthy skin and ordinary feature always tormented her, producing in her a sense of inferiority complex. As a reaction, it most probably made her run after males in order to prove her femaleness. It is also “related to her gestures aimed at discovering, identifying, and consolidating her sense of belonging.”17 To quote her:

   i was born fair but within weeks like the rolled gold bangles on the poor ladies arms my skin grew tarnished i was the first dark girl in the family there was something tainted in me of this i was aware but my mother told my bridegroom be gentle she is the most innocent being you will ever meet.18

Das became so obsessive with her dark complexion that she returned to it time and again in her poetry through the images of darkness.

But Das was not a girl of defeatist mentality. She was quite innovative and could find ways and means to draw happiness out of her uncongenial circumstances. Subsequently, in collaboration with her brother, Kamala started a manuscript magazine for which she was to write verses which made her cry, while he was to illustrate them. Once when they were on a picnic to the Victoria Gardens, she felt very lonely and slipped out to the old cemetery. Speaking of her mental condition at that time, she observes: “I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living.”19
Das attended many schools in Calcutta as well as in her home state. After
attending the European school in Calcutta, she joined the Elementary school at
Punnayurkulum and then a boarding school run by the Roman Catholic nuns. But
in each of them, she got ill and was removed to Calcutta where private tutors were
engaged to teach her fine arts.

Das’s parents could not provide the type of emotional security, which she
needed to sustain her life of intense longing. She was always painfully conscious
of the crushing weight of a broken family. The parents, who had to live separately,
could not appreciate the needs and demands of an independently growing
personality. Their indifference aroused in her an intense desire for independence.
She rebelled against them because they

...considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the
tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we
had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy
shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient
fortresses.20

Kamala Das was perturbed by not only with the indifference of the parents but also
with the feeling that they wanted to get rid of her:

I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my
grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing
of all, our marriage was fixed.

(My Story 82)

Years after, in her interview with Iqbal Kaur, Das gave vent to her
disappointment when she told her that her marriage was a punishment for not
doing well in Mathematics.
He had warned me that if I did not do well in Maths he would marry me off. Unfortunately, I could never do well in Maths and hence I was married off as a punishment.\textsuperscript{21}

Das’s mother too, as she told Kaur, was not able to provide “the love and security” Das expected from her:

My mother has never been able to give me the love and security that I needed. She has always been indifferent. Even now, she invariably sides with my husband whenever there is a problem.\textsuperscript{22}

This indifferent rather callous attitude of the parents was responsible for an ambivalence or duality found in her life and work, a duality rooted in her desire for independence and need for security. According to Devindra Kohli, Das could not help “expressing an ambivalence proceeding from her own duality, proceeding from, that is the combination in herself of a need for domestic security and the desire for an - independence, an independence consistent with a non-domestic mode of living.”\textsuperscript{23}

Das’s marriage at the immature age of fifteen with a brutish man of thirty was simply suffocating. There was not only a generation gap but also difference of attitude and outlook towards life. If she was a love lorn lady lonely in her dreams, while her husband was brutish in his sex-behaviour. Madhava Das, her husband worked in the Reserve Bank of India at Bombay. He was crude in his dealings and made rude lustful advances to her. He shocked the sensitive girl of fifteen with the shameless descriptions of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar. Without the prologue of love-game, i.e. soft touches of tender, caressing, and sweet words, he would simply insist upon her to bare her breasts and would bruise her body. Resentful of her
marriage, solemnized against her wishes, she could manage to remain a virgin for nearly a fortnight. Later she succumbed and sex became a routine. Describing loveless sex as a daily routine with a man immersed in files, Das writes with a feeling of regret:

My husband was immersed in his office-work, and after work there was the dinner, followed by sex. Where was there any time left for him to want to see the sea or the dark buffaloes of the slopes? 24

To her husband’s exploits in extra-marital sex, and interest in other women, Das’s reaction was the typical reaction of a woman nurtured in Nayar Tharavad which allowed freedom to women to have more than one husband. Subsequently she decided “to be unfaithful to him at least physically” (My Story 1932). She began her sex-odyssey. She eventually described the experiences of her sexual adventures in a number of poems. Aware of the charms of love even before her marriage especially in her infatuation with Govind Kurup, an eight-class boy and with the twenty nine year old art tutor as well as through her lesbian affair with her teacher, she began her life of romance with an unsuccessful affair with a bricklayer and with the kisses of one of her cousins. After the frustrating experience of an incomplete rape by a drunken stranger, she fell in love with an extremely handsome young man, while playing tennis at the Khar gymkhana. Thereafter she came close to her pen-friend Carlo and was passionately kissed by a Spanish who phoned her frequently while she was in Bombay. In Calcutta she became Carlo’s Sita. Again in Bombay at church gate she came in contact with a handsome dark man with a tattoo between his eyes. She became involved with an affair with him. It was nothing short of an adultery, as she confessed: “Like the majority of city-
dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while, but I found it distasteful” (My Story 183).

However, her experience of adultery and sex-experience with other lovers left her high and dry. She came to realize that all men were of the same nature cruel, sex-hungry, and callous. She looked for a man who would transport her to a world of egolessness:

I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man’s heart. Otherwise why did I not get my peace in the arms of my husband? Subconsciously I had hoped for the death of my ego. I was looking for an executioner whose axe would cleave my head into two. The one who loved me did not understand why I was restive. You are like a civet cat in a cage, said a friend of mine...

(My Story 171)

Das’s extra-marital sexual encounters brought her neither peace nor love but frequent bouts of illness, mental and physical, including manic-depressions, sometimes culminating into attempts to commit suicide. The birth of her first son Monoo left her extremely weak. Anyhow, she continued to endure her husband’s infidelity to her. But after the birth of her second son Priyadarsin, her restlessness increased to an alarming level and she was put under the case of a skilled psychiatrist. Meanwhile she suffered an emotional jolt with the sad demise of her grandmother. She ruefully wrote: “None has loved me as deeply as my grandmother” (My Story 1192). Sometime after the illness of her eldest son, Das again fell seriously ill and bled almost to death. But she was brought back to life by a sweet lady doctor. After returning from Calicut where she gave birth to her third son, Jaisurya, she suffered a sudden and serious breakdown of health.
Though tenderly cared after by her friend Shirley, she was reduced to "moulting bird" (My Story 179). But she soon recovered like the legendary phoenix. Coming to Bombay, she felt lonely and sickly. After her affair with the dark man, she once again became ill and was admitted to the Bombay Hospital. She went to live in her Nalapat House. But when she suffered a sudden heart attack, she came to Bombay for treatment. Subsequently, she became a permanent heart-patient.

The intermittent mental breakdowns produced in Das suicidal tendencies. Time and again she attempted to take her life. These attempts brought a welcome change in her mentality, making her mentally prepared to accept death as a lover, and when it would come: She told Iqbal Kaur:

I have written several stories in Malayalam all revolving round the concept of death. I wanted to escape from life those day because it was too much to bear the loneliness, utter loneliness. I tried several times to kill myself. I wanted to die, but every time the family doctor would revive me, bring me back to life. Now I don't think about death but now it is like a girl who knows that she is betrothed and very soon there would be the marriage. So, I am a betrothed person. I talk about death or write about it or glorify it. I think of the loss that my death would bring to my poor husband and my mother. I don't want to leave them destitute. These two are my responsibilities. But death at least will be an end. Sometime I wish I should bring some hired killers to kill me.25

The experience of abortive love affairs and the bout of illness, though painful, shocking, and upsetting, were blessings in disguise, since they provided grit to her literary mill, rendering her not only poetic themes but wonderful imagery as well to give vent to her rebellious ideas and deeply felt emotions.

There was yet another silver-lining visible during the dark-clouds of illness. Das came closer to her family, especially to her alienated husband. Illness made her
aware of the female nudity, which became central to her poetry. Acknowledging the experience of the naked body she writes:

I have spent a lot of time at hospitals both as an inmate and as a visitor. When I was convalescing, my private nurse used to wheel me past the general wards where the nurses sponged the patients or helped them into the clothes. I have seen corpulent men, pregnant women and the green-hued cancer patients, all naked. I have seen wrinkled bellies and thin backs broken with red bed-sores. Not once have I felt sick looking at any of them. The human body in all conditions fills me with awe and tenderness. I am humble when I look at it.26

The protection and the tenderness shown by the husband, during her illness and nervous breakdown changed Das’s attitude towards him. She developed a sort of physical intimacy with him, as she now surrendered herself totally to him in bed. To quote her:

Whenever he tried to strip me of my clothes, my shyness clung to me like a second skin and made my movements graceless. Each pore of my skin became at the moment a seeing eye, an eye that viewed my body with distaste. But during my illness, I shed my shyness and for the first time in my life learned to surrender totally in bed with my pride intact and blazing.

(My Story 112)

Das, in her later life, not only surrendered to her husband but also felt grateful for “the suffering [he] inflicted” upon her. For it was this suffering which spurred her poetic sensibility. She acknowledged this fact in her interview with Iqbal Kaur:

I can’t but forgive people who caused me to write poetry. If they hadn’t hurt me, I wouldn’t have been a poet at all and probably the only thing that really matters to me is my poetry, my writing and the right to live as a poet. So far as my husband is concerned, I am grateful to him for the suffering inflicted on me in my youth, for without them I would nor have written poetry at all.27

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Even though the life of Kamala Das appears to be an open book, we cannot rule out a habit concealment, keeping something hidden and or deliberately holding back crucial information. Furthermore, one cannot deny the presence of a streak of sentimentalism even sensationalism in her. Many of her actions and reactions were questionable. For instance one can hardly understand or approve of her decision to rebel against her unchartered freedom and seek peace, solace, and security in the orthodoxy and strict control of Islam and too at the age of sixty five. Like Wordsworth she was tired of her limitless freedom. The poet, who fought for the emancipation of women throughout her life, became an orthodox woman, a puritan in her life, virtuous, clean, conservative in thinking, praying daily, and wearing white clothes because she is now a widow. Her rebellion against the religion of her ancestors suggests that her spiritual love to her Ghanshyam was only superfluous and poetic. It questions the truthfulness of her beliefs and sentiments.

The bitter experiences received from her life, whetted Kamala’s poetic sensibility inherited from her family. Her mother and father were poets. Das fondly remembered her mother lying always on her belly on her bed, composing poems in her mother-tongue Malayalam. Her grand uncle Narayana Menon was a famous poet-philosopher. Her grandmother’s younger sister, Ammalu who also lived with them, was a poet devoted to Lord Krishna and who inspired Kamala to write religious poetry. Though she did not have the benefit of higher education in a university, she still managed to read some poets, especially the confessional poets who inspired her to write a poetry seldom written before in any Indian
language. Early in her childhood, Das read Whitman who left an indelible impression upon her mind. As she told Iqbal Kaur, she also liked the tragic poetry of Sylvia Plath:

I enjoyed reading Sylvia Plath’s poetry as well as The Bell Jar. I admire Sylvia Plath for her courage to kill herself.\textsuperscript{28}

Das liked Byron and read number of eminent scholars and was in close touch with modern thinkers including Marx and his followers. Among Indians she liked Sanskrit poets especially Kalidas.

The experiences of life, especially the painful ones, became instrumental in awakening Das’s poetic sensibility. The intensity of the painful feelings and the instinctive compulsions of telling the truth persuaded her to adopt the confessional mode which was capable of voicing her personal pain resulting from the wounds inflicted upon her from the callous world and its savage rites. She wrote a poetry of virgin whiteness, which as we have explained earlier, expressed her impulsive reactions to life in sensuous rather sensual images of the world around. In her poems, like a typical confessional poet, she performed “anatomy” on herself through a “mental striptease,” extruding her autobiography, through peeling off “the layers of her body,” and through studying the “trappings” and “snares” of the male body, and the “hunger” of her own lazy skin, which people call love or lust.

Das is adherent of the confessional cult, which makes a clear breast of everything whether mental or physical. But she does it in an artistic manner i.e. with a mixture of fact and faction. She also uses this confessional license to increase the efficacy of her intimate disclosures. Das, according to Prof. S.D.
Sharma, makes "tall, far-reaching and meaningful confessions," of sublime heights. It is of little consequence whether these confessions are fake or genuine. Confessionalism for her is a literary tool which makes her poetry a vehicle of truth, personal as well as impersonal. Explaining the scope of Das’s confessionalism Prof. Sharma writes:

Yes, Kamala Das confesses a number of things, exclusively related to her own self – self as a woman with her strong feminine sensibilities, self as a person with powerful – proclivities and antipathies, caprices and whim whams. She does not feel shy of exhibiting her frailties and virtues as a woman; her superior self as a mother and her inevitable exploitaiton as a wife; her delicate and precarious position as a daughter and granddaughter; her weakness as an enlightened companion to an enlightened husband and soon and so forth.

Although Kamala Das did not write poetry to purify her being from obsessive elements, she certainly wrote it to voice her pent-up feelings. Furthermore, she wrote it with a devotional attitude, because "poetry for [her] is very personal and private. It is like prayers. I don’t want to share it with the public. I write a lot in my private diary and only a fraction of it has been published."

However, in her prayers incorporated in her private diary, she included even the most private things or taboos i.e. not only her traumatic experiences in love and sex and her attitude towards her husband lovers but also the changes in her female body. Even though her confessions are not made in a clinical fashion, they betray a strong influence of psychoanalysis. She is like all those confessional poets, who "give literary form a new sense of personality, attaching value to the image of man presented by clinical psychology." However, like many other confessional, she
provides universal dimensions to her personal pain, humiliations, sufferings, convulsions of her body, paranoia, psychological breakdowns and even looming suicide.

Since Das’s poetry is an outburst of her personal experience, it can be legitimately interpreted only in terms of her autobiography. Indeed her autobiography provides us with the mental background in which some of the poems were composed. Nevertheless, for most of the poems one has to rely only upon hints, suggestions, and surmises. It is remarkable to note that all the poems incorporated in her three volumes of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) are confessional in the strict sense of the term. Hence under present circumstances, we are concerned only with poems central to Das’s confessional sensibility. Furthermore, in the absence of the dates of composition or a precise chronology we cannot pretend to trace the mental development of a poet who has brought a revolution in Indo-Anglian poetry. Chronological order of composition is relevant for graphing the development of poet’s journey from confession to enlightenment or illumination. Unfortunately in Das no facility of this type is available. We have to remain content with the frequent thematic overlappings which are formidable obstacles in the way of forming a precise idea of poet’s confessional journey.

Kamala Das’s first volume is based on her Calcutta experiences, which included memories of “beautiful sights,” dance of the eunuchs, ox-carts “proud heavy-turbaned men,” and “tattooed wives.” To quote her:
And yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw for the first time the eunuchs’ dance. It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute, gaudily painted like a cheap bazaar toy. It was at Calcutta that I saw the ox-carts moving along the Starand Road early in the morning with proud heavy turbaned men, their tattooed wives with fat babies dozing at their breasts like old drunkards in clubs at lonely hours.

(My Story 157)

But at the same time, Calcutta was also a place, where she had the first feel of frustration in love, humiliations, loneliness, and above all the sense of existential insecurity from which she continued to suffer in her life to come. In Calcutta she had an experience of utter dismay. By a strange coincidence in 1963, when she came to the city, she met the man who hurt her when she was fourteen year old and became desperate to get him at any cost. She plunged “long into an undignified ill-fated love-affair, moving about like a sleep-walker to meet him in the hot afternoons at strange places. Perhaps that rude summer crept into every line of poetry I wrote then.”

The rude summer without the rain of love sets the “tone and temper” of not only of Summer in Calcutta but more or less of entire poetry. This drought of love finds its first expression in “The Dance of the Eunuchs.” It makes the poet, “poignantly conscious of the shadowy borderline between fulfilment and unfulfilment.” Das exemplifies this drought of love through the images “vacant ecstasy,” “sexual drought, rottenness,” and the aridity of Eunuch’s dance or even of their lives:

Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left un-born...

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Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry, like half-burnt longs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures’ convulsions.
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightening
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice.35

“The Freaks” is another poem of sexual humiliation suffered by the poetic persona as a married woman. Even though her man has desire but his desire is nothing more than a puddle. Moreover he has only “skin’s lazy hungers,” without genuine passion of love. Man’s sexual passivity and slackness makes her female persona impatient and frustrated, as the moment of passivity seems to mock her feminine integrity. However, she is not prepared to remain passive. She decides to “flaunt” a grand, flamboyant lust:

He talks, turning a sun-stained cheek to me,
his mouth a dark cavern where stalactites
of uneven teeth gleam, his right hand on
my knee while our minds, willed to race towards
love, only wander, tripping idly over
puddles of desire... Can this man with
nimble fingertips unleash nothing more
alive than the skin’s lazy hungers?
Who can help us who have live so long and
have failed in love? The heart, an empty cistern
waiting through long hours, fills in self
with coiling snakes of silena... I am
a freak. It is only to save my face
I flaunt at times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

(BKD 42)

Like the poetry of the American confessional poets, Das’s poetry is replete with body consciousness. In “A Relationship,” incorporated in The Old Playhouse
and Other Poems, she defines even spiritual things like love in terms of body. For her love is simply “body’s wisdom.” It is this wisdom which provides meaning to life. Everything else is subservient to it. In the form of desire, it invests her male with beauty. Taking the form of “quiet touch,” of the blind kindness, it produces an experience that nobody can betray. Even words cannot destroy it. “The betrayal with words,” writes Devindra Kohli, “does not matter so long as the body whispers wisdom and so long as the poet and her man can ‘communicate’ this wisdom to each other.”

To quote from the poem:

This love older than I by myriad
Saddened centuries was one a prayer
In his bones that made them grow in years of
Adolescence to this favoured height. Yes,
I was my desire that made him male
And beautiful, so that when at last, we met
To believe that once I knew not his
From, his quiet touch, or the blind kindness
Of his lips was hard indeed. Betray me?
Yes, he can, but never physically
Only with words that curl their limbs at
Touch of air and die with metallic sights.
Why care I for their quick sterile sting while
My body’s wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my steep, my peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayer’s arms...  

Besides the themes of frustration, humiliation, body consciousness, and sex, other themes like alienation, nostalgia, despair, and mental illness, central to confessional poetry, also find expression in the poems of this volume. The sense of alienation is rooted in existential insecurity. Though Das eulogises body and the pleasures it offers, she soon realizes that loyalty to the body is “no guarantee against the sense of alienation and emotional unfulfilment.” This realization is
exemplified in "The Fear of the Year." Other poems like "My Grandmother's House," "The Wild Bougainvillea," "The End of Spring" etc. bring out poet's gloomy despair. In "My Grandmother's House," the poet is overwhelmed by memories. While in "The End of Spring" she is fearful of decay.

In "My Grandmother's House," Das digs her family skeleton to highlight her personal history. However, for her the grandmother, like Sexton's grandmother, is a source of strength. Her house is a place of enlightenment and each time she visits the house, she returns elevated and wiser. Nevertheless, she remains painfully aware of her aberration and the mental suffering caused by it.

...............you cannot believe, darling, can you, that I lived in such a house and was proud and loved, I who have lost my way and beg now at stranger's doors to receive love, at least in small change?

(BKD 21)

Like Sexton, Das is hard upon her parents, holding them responsible for her miserable life. But she reserves her worst anger for her lovers and husband who were responsible for so many agonizing moments in her life. In "The Sunshine Cat," she tells her about her mental illness in the company of a cruel husband who takes her to the brink of death. The tormenting experiences of life produces in her a sense of emptiness or drought inside her being. No wonder in "Too early the Autumn Sights" she is overtaken by "a mood of premature desiccation within."39

The sense of drought within her finds one of its best expressions in "Visitors to the City" which is based on poet's experience of a picnic at Victoria
Gardens as a student. This drought is symptomatic of “her withdrawal into herself, and her sense of inner void.” 40 “Summer in Calcutta” and “My Morning Tree” also speak of the varying moods of the poet. However, the poem most remarkable for its confessional quality in “The Testing of the Sirens” which portrays loneliness or, to be precise, physical loneliness:

and my limbs
warm from love, were once again so lonely.

(BKD 58)

The poem deals with the experience of the poet with a man of pock-marked face. While she goes through a drive with him, she is overwhelmed by a burning sensation of longing which remains unfulfilled.

Das’s longing, though rootless and detached, is based on an actual experience of the poet just after the settlement of her marriage. A family-friend arrived with her little daughter and eighteen year old son to stay with her family for a month. There grew a kind of intimacy between the poet and the boy who began to take her out to Victoria Memorial, photographing her and entertaining her with Hindi-film songs. The poet was swept off her feet. Catching alive those moments in her autobiography, she writes:

I felt beautiful when he was with me, arranging my limbs shyly with a blush pinking his checks. He was stocky and fair-skinned. He had taken part in revolutionary activities and was a student-leader. What you are planning to be, I asked him. I shall graduate and then get out of the damn country, he said. He was unhappy at home. He found in me a kindred soul. You are getting married, he said one day: I wonder why you are in such a hurry. I want to escape too, I said. He nodded. We sat for hours on the grass chewing the wheat grass and sharing a silence that was as gentle as the winter’s sun.

(My Story 85-86)
In the romantic company of the youthful boy the poet felt, the sirens of love going inside her. When her companion asked about the man she loved, her reaction was peculiarly detached:

I smiled
A smile is such a detached thing. I wear it like a flower.

(BKD 59)

But underneath this detachment there was a fire of passion burning her entire being

I
shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was no more night, no more love, or peace, only the white, white sun burning, burning, burning....
Ah, why does love come to me like pain again and again and again?

(BKD 59)

A number of Das’s poems especially “The Flag,” “Someone Else’s Song,” “Forest Fire,” “An Introduction,” and “The Wild Bougainvillea,” according to Devindra Kohli, “portray a larger panorama of experience transcending her personal moods and feelings.” These poems underscore the transcendental undertones of the confessional element. Of all the poems, “An Introduction” is perhaps, one of the most confessional poems in Das’s poetry. Complete in itself, the poem embodies all characteristic qualities of confessionalism, viz. search for a relevant confessional mode, personal metaphor, personal humiliations, physical and mental wounds and bruises and above all transcendence which transforms a personal and private experience into something genuinely universal. Moved by a strong impulse to confess and communicate, first she aspires to seek a suitable form of confessional expression. Thereafter she goes on to portray a sensibility, which is
widely awakened. With her doors of perception open, and the faculty of knowledge active and enlightened, she relates her history of life, not in the elemental language, but in the personal language of her mind voicing her personal longings and hopes:

The language I speak becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness all mine, mine, alone. It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps but it’s honest, it is as human as I am human, you know... It voices my longings, my hopes and is useful to me as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions, it is human speech and hears and is aware Not the deaf, there, blind speech to trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or, of the incoherent muttering of Of the blazing funeral pyre.

(BKD 12)

The poet now goes on to tell her personal humiliations, physical as well as mental, suffered as a woman and as a wife in the orthodox traditional set up:

I was a child and later they said, I grew, for I become tall, my limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask for, he drew a youth of sixteen into his bedroom and shut the door. He did not beat me but my sad woman-body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.

(BKD 12)

Reacting to the crushing weight of her physicality, she rebels against the restrictions imposed by feminine form:

I shrank pitifully. Then I wore a shirt and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife.

(BKD 12)
But her family did not tolerate her new stance as her parents and relatives vociferously ask her to assume the role of a traditional woman.

Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife.
they cried. Be embroider, cook or a quarreler
with servants. Fit in, belong, said the categorizers
Be Amy or be Kamala, Or, better still, be just
Madhavikutty. It is time to choose a name, a role.

(BKD 12-13)

Das goes on to tell that society does not like “pretending games”:

Don’t play pretending games. Don’t play at schizophrenia
or be a nympho.

(BKD 13)

In a master stroke Das equates her personal and private experience with the human, natural, and cosmic experience. Her confessional poetry becomes the vehicle of the experience of transcendence which is the ultimate goal of confessionalism:

I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man who wants his woman, just as I am every women who seek love.
In him the hungry haste of rivers in me the ocean’s
tireless waiting. Who are you, I ask each and all. The answer is, it’s I
Anywhere and everywhere I see him who calls himself
In this world he is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath.
It is I who drink a lonely drink near midnight at hotels
of strange towns, it is I who make love and then feel shame,
it is I who lie dying with a rattle in my throat,
I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am both the lover
and the beloved. I have no joys which are not yours
no aches which are not yours
we share the same name, the same fate, the same crumbled dreams...

(BKD 13)
These lines exemplify Das’s sense of isolation which, “instead of being internalized, surfaces and becomes part of a woman’s experience in its macrocosmic implication in the concluding lines of the poem.”

Thus viewed as a whole the poems of Summer in Calcutta incorporate all the rudiments of confessional poetry.

In the next volume, Descendants (1965), Das’s confessional tone becomes louder. As her mood of disappointment and frustration deepens her confessionalism assumes greater dimensions. The poems of Descendants capture Das in a precarious state of mind wavering between the death-wish and the wish to live. They remind us Anne Sexton’s poems in Live or Die which poetize her struggle to overcome these equally strong human wishes. Interestingly, Das uses one and the same symbol to portray the intimations of life and foot-falls of death. In this volume Das begins her poetic journey after hearing the foot-falls of death.

The poet, in the initial stages, finds herself in a peculiar state of mind, intending to commit suicide. Mina Surjit Singh gives a graphic description of the poet’s mind, as she writes:

The beginning of the volume finds the poet at the edge of the sea, contemplating suicide in order to free herself from a life of physical emptiness. The volume beginning on a note of despondency takes us through a meandering journey of passionate, lusty interludes and attendant betrayals, and ends on a note of tired resignation in the absence of spiritual resurrection. The mood at the end, however, is not hysterical but a finely controlled movement from the initial restless desire for oblivion to an acceptance of life’s vagaries despite a cribbed and confined spirit.

Most of the poems of the volume deal with Das’s disappointments of her post-marital love and the problems of growing up. Her disappointments are rooted
in her tormenting awareness of the circumstances of her marriage when she was “bundled unceremoniously into wedlock without either being aware, or capable of comprehending the physical and emotional implications of her changed status.”

From the very outset it confronts the theme of death-wish which is most central to confessional poetry. The most eloquent expression of Das’s death-wish comes in “Suicide” which reminds us of Sexton’s mental struggles in Live or Die. According to Bruce King the source of Das’s death-wish is her consciousness of the dualism of the body and the soul, a dualism that can be overcome only through death. “The dualism is rooted in her frustrating experience of innocence through sexuality and through the callousness of an uncaring husband.”

Das’s life after her marriage becomes miserable, for she cannot attune herself to the natural rhythms of sex which establishes, according to D.H. Lawrence, the balance of male and female elements in the universe. “[I]n Das’s poetry these natural rhythms seem to have gone awry.” Now she runs after “an ideal sexual union in which distinctions between male and female ceases to control.” But her love remains unrequited and her desire for an unquestioning love too remains unfulfilled. Her lovers fail to realize her “soul’s lonely hungers.” Subsequently her desire is swallowed by the “vortex of the sea”:

I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.

(BKD 27)

“The ‘Vortex of the sea,’” writes M.S. Singh, “thus, becomes a multivalent symbol defining a situation, a way of life, pursuit that engulfs irresistibly and
remorselessly, enervating and self-consuming. The sea itself, of creation, 
destruction, hope, despair, passion, inertia, comes to symbolise, the poet's desire to 
discover "the bone's supreme indifference."^{48}

Das's death-wish is irresistible like that of Sylvia Plath and Sexton. Twice 
she has attempted to commit suicide but without success. Her wish, though rooted 
in her dualism, is reinforced by her painful consciousness of marriage that has 
failed. She expresses this failure with a considerable amount of pain:

I must pose
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.
I must keep the right distance,
Between me and the low.
And I must keep the right distance.
Between me and the high.

(BKD 28)

Overcoming her death-wish Das now goes "from one substitute to another through 
a tiresome journey of procrastinating relationships in search of true love."^{49} She is 
again lured by love but this course too leads her to a death-trap, a metaphorical 
death. With an unending process of acceptance and rejection, love proves only a 
"swivel-door":

I lost count, for always in my arms
Was substitute for a substitute.^{50}

This love-chase brings no comfort to her. She remains high and dry. With 
every experience her sense of loneliness, betrayal, and guilt increases. She 
becomes the captive of her own world. She is persistently tormented with a sense 
of acute guilt which "like the perennial fish-bone can neither be swallowed nor
thrown up.” All the substitutes contemplated by the poet fail her. She comes to hate even promiscuity. “The substitute,” writes M.S. Singh, “thus assumes the function of a leitmotif, quintessentially reflective of the lost woman’s search for spiritual consummation as well as a longing to recover a lost state of childhood innocence symbolised by life with her grandmother in their ancestral.”

Das’s consciousness of her guilt is reinforced by her awareness of going too far i.e. by stepping beyond “the sacrosanct precincts of matrimony to pursue a compelling drive for fulfilment in forbidden territory.” Besides, it Das’s poetry also possesses the confessional elements of procrastinations and incarcerations but without the urgency and immediacy that we find in the psychological probing of Lowell, Roethke, Plath, and Sexton. “The manic-depressive states, the centrifugal spin towards madness, the increasing propensity towards suicide, the precarious balancing on the razor’s edge, the gritty determination to pull through, the dangerously depressive and uncontrollably euphoric states that lend strength, credibility and intensity to their poetry are conspicuously absent in Das’s poetry.”

However, Das seldom seems to benefit from her experiences. She does not become wiser, since she continues to burn into the hellfire of “vast/sexual hungers” (BKD 79). As we see in “Composition,” its intensity is reinforced by the liberal attitude of her husband who allows maximum freedom to her. But being adolescent and impetuous, she misuses her freedom:

Freedom became my dancing shoe,
how well I danced,
and danced without rest,
until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
and I began to have doubts.

(BKD 78)

A sense of doubt compels her to tell everything to her husband, especially about
the various forms of sex that she has tried to satisfy her carnal desires. These
forms included premarital, extramarital, nymphomaniac, and lesbian kinds of love-
making. She remains busy in her sex-pursuits without any sense of shame or guilt.

I asked my husband,
am I hetero
am I lesbian
or am I just plain frigid?
He only laughed.
For such questions
probably there are no answers
or else
the answers must emerge
from within.

(BKD 78)

However, sexual freedom, as Prof. P.K. Pandeya believes is a “mirage that
is never reached.” In other words a nymphomaniac woman always lives
“[a]tormented existence in pursuit of a fleeting oasis of pleasure that is never
reached.” Naturally Das’s love-exploits end in fiasco, as her sexual exploits do
not provide solace to her restless soul. Subsequently, she becomes tired of her
uncharted freedom and begins to feel the weight of guilt upon her mind. In order
to unburden herself, she becomes prepared to lay bare her secret self, peeling off
its layers:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
autobiography.
The only secrets I always
withhold

140
are that I am so alone
and that I miss my grandmother.
Reader,
you may say,
now here is a girl with vast
sexual hungers,
A bitch after my own heart.

(BKD 79)

The poet knows that by opening her mind and making frank confessions, she can know the truth embodied in her self:

I also know that by confessing,
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and
to the bone’s
supreme indifference.

(BKD 81)

Convinced of the destructive quality of love Das now begins to image it as a self-destructive agent. Subsequently, in “Ferns,” she “arrests sexual love in an image of self-devouring and self-mocking intensity which suggests that perhaps there is a sense in which her glorification of physical love carries with it an element of disenchantment.” Ultimately in “The Invitation, Das comes to realize that love is another kind of death, of course not a literal death but a metaphorical death. In “The Invitation” the sea offers one kind of death, her lover whom she cannot disobey offers another, metaphorical death.

However, “The Invitation” is not so much an invitation to death, no matter metaphorical, but an invitation to live. The poet rejects the way of the sea and accepts the way of life which love or sex offers. The poem, according to Kholi, “rejects the impulse to die and transforms the destructive sea image into a
metaphor of positive joy.” After her painful experiences of sexual love and its empty promises to provide happiness, she comes to realize that “love’s fulfillment lies in containment and not in emptiness.” the true happiness for a woman lies in motherhood, which displays the glory of creation. Childbirth announces the fulfilment of love. At the time of the birth of his child, a woman forgets her personal pain and becomes ready to receive the rainfall from above. “She feels and becomes the earth, and finds meaning and fulfilment in love which is not an ‘empty container’ but is filled with a child.” In “Jaisurya” she writes:

and then the first tinge
of blood seemed
like another dawn breaking.
For a while I too was earth.
In me the seed was silent,
waiting as baby does,
for the womb’s quiet expulsion.
Love is not important that
makes the blood carouse
nor the man who brands you
with his lust but is
shed as slough at end of
each embrace.

(BKD 63)

She continues to announce her new credo, the credo of creation, life, and light, against the credo of lust and death and destruction:

Only that matters which forms
as toadstools do
under lightning and rain,
the soft stir in womb,
the foetus growing,
for, only the treasures matter
that were washed ashore
not the long, blue tides that washed them in.

(BKD 63)
Visualizing “another dawn breaking,” and feeling “the soft stir in womb,” and seeing her son Jaisurya “separated from a darkness,” of the womb, the poet recovers her faith in life. The dark night of her soul seems to be over. The triumph of life celebrated in “Captive” and “Jaisurya” is extended to other poems like “The White Flowers.” Ultimately the wish to die is replaced by the wish to live, to produce the wisdom of humility. This new philosophy finds its best expression in the title poem “The Descendants.” “The sense of death,” writes Kohli, “which seems to dominate the collection generates in ‘The Descendants’ an authentic humility before the unredeemed fate of man. Life is seen as a slow yielding to the ‘cold loveliness’ of death which is too perfect to be disturbed by the memory of ‘insubstantial love’ or of being hurled in love. The assaults of time, like the slow assaults of love, yield to the slow facility of decay and death.”

We have spent our youth in gentle sinning exchanging some insubstantial love and often thought we were hurt, but no pain in us could remain, no bruise could scar or even slightly mar our cold loveliness.

We were the yielders, yielding ourselves to everything. It is not for us to scrape the walls of wombs for memories, not for us even to question death, but as child to mother’s arms we shall give ourselves to the fire or to the hungry earth to be slowly eaten, devoured. None will step off his cross or show his wounds to us, no God lost in silence shall begin to speak, no lost love claim us, no, we are not going to be ever redeemed or made new.

(BKD 43)
Das’s will to live is also reinforced by her Krishna-Radha consciousness. “The Radha-Krishna syndrome,” writes Dr. A.N. Dwivedi, “is continually associated with the progress of the poet and is witnessed in all her poetical collections.”\textsuperscript{61} In the first book, \textit{Summer in Calcutta}, it appears in the poem titled “Radha-Krishna,” where the poet, fed up with the physical and carnal love, seeks the security of the spiritual love of Radha for Krishna. In “Radha” (\textit{The Descendants}) she has an experience of union, as she finds her virgin being dissolving in Krishna:

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

(BKD 25)

But elsewhere, especially in “Maggots,” she does not feel the bliss of the spiritual union but of death in the arms of Krishna or her husband. In Das’s confessional poems Radha represents the whole female world much as Krishna represents the male world. In the words of Mina Surjeet Singh, Das’s poetry “gives a remarkably controlled account of her secret desire as well as frustrations. She is herself priest and confessor, sinner, and saint beloved and betrayed. The substitute is every man in his lust and the victim is every ‘old wife turned whorish,’ struggling to withdraw from under him.”\textsuperscript{62} In this way in \textit{The Descendants}, Kamala Das achieves an important landmark of the confessional art.
Finally in her third collection *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), Das gives us a quintessence of her confessional creed. In the fourteen poems reprinted from *Summer in Calcutta*, she reminds us her body’s wisdom as well as hungers, her humiliations, emotional unfulfilments, alienation, nostalgia, family skeletons, cruelties of husband and lovers etc. as well as the achievement of momentary transcendence. In the six poems, taken from *The Descendants*, she relives her internal drama of agonizing guilt, her tormenting consciousness of going too far, and her intense struggle to overcome her terrible death instinct and goes onto attain the wisdom of humility. In the poems of *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, she returns to her old wounds and renews her search for security from a new angle i.e. from the existential point of view.

In the title poem *The Old Playhouse*, Das is again obsessed with the sickening state of her mind, with her female self contracting under the weight of the male dominance. She feels that it is gradually choked, blocked, and wounded. With the central metaphor of a dilapidated house, she projects the decay and decomposition of her own self under the stinking company of male companions especially that of her own husband:

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You were pleased
With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.
```

(*The Old Playhouse* 1)
As the summer of life draws near, Das feels that she is reduced to an old and dark playhouse. She becomes aware of the destructive quality of love, she longs for the kind protection of night:

There is
No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all is lights put out. The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal.
For, love is Nareissus at the water's edge haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

(The Old Playhouse 1-2)

In “Gino,” she expresses her disenchantment with another form of destructive love-extramarital love. The lovers also possess the blood-hound quality of the husband, as their love is an instrument of physical decomposition.
The poem opens with an awareness of death lurking in an illicit love affair. She realizes that decay is a greater reality than love. With the passage of time the body grows uncommonly and gross. Under the “cumulative burden of domesticity, routine, sickness and the final conclusion of death.” Love becomes a mere convulsion of the body.

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue
The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must
Roll across the road. I shall be the patient
On the hospital bed, lying in drugged slumber
And dreaming of home. I shall be the grandmother
Willing away her belongings, those scraps and trinkets
More lasting than her bones. Perhaps some womb in that
Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent.

(The Old Playhouse 14)
The strain of the fragility of love experience and sexual neuroticism also runs through "Glass." According to Shyam Asnani, "Glass," "which suggests in mock indifference the poet's ritual manipulation of various lovers, concludes in bare, austere, clinical lines, stunning the reader with her flamboyant fantasies of sexual neuroticism."⁶⁴

I do not bother
To tell: I've misplaced a father
Somewhere, and I look
For him now everywhere

(The Old Playhouse 21-22)

In the poem, according to Devindra Kohli, "the poet's restlessness is voiced through a Freudian search for the misplaced father-figure."⁶⁵ As a search for the lost father, Glass is related to such poems as "Vrindavan," "Radha-Krishna" and "Lines Addressed to a Devadasi." But it is different from them in the sense that it is "a clinical version of an attempt 'to look for him (the 'misplaced' father) now everywhere.'"⁶⁵

After reliving the old experiences of humiliations and agonizing guilt, Das goes on to solve the survival mystery in "After the Illness." After a long struggle Das ultimately achieves a sense of security in love. Throughout her long career, Das has been tormented by an ontological insecurity, which takes two forms "engulfment" and "petrifaction." According to Niranjan Mohanti, Das's ontologically insecure self suffered from "petrifaction" which refers to someone's "fear of being put to use, made object by others."⁶⁷ She also aspires for "engulfment," which refers to the loss of identity in the other. But, as Mohanti
adds, “it occurs to her only in the height of imagination where in she surrenders herself at the altar of Lord Krishna – the ideal, the immortal lover.”

The poet extends this theme in “Ghanashyam” included Tonight This Savage Rite. She thinks that spiritual love cannot be provided by a husband because he would turn his back as soon as his lust is quietened. The total merger, which she seeks, can be possible only with a mythical lover like Krishna. Naturally she becomes enamoured of Krishna:

\[
\text{Ghanashyam} \\
\text{You have like a Koel built your} \\
\text{nest in the arbour of my heart.} \\
\text{My life, until now a sleeping jungle} \\
\text{Is at last astir with music.}\]

However, these moments are rare. A security felt in the reassurance of lover’s love after poet’s illness, in which she has lost her comeliness, is no less efficacious. After her recovery from illness the poet feels happy not only for regaining his physical health but also for her lover’s love in spite of the fact that in her

\[
\text{There was} \\
\text{Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger, the blood had} \\
\text{Weakened too much to lust, and the skin, without health’s} \\
\text{Anointment was numb and unyearning. What lusted then} \\
\text{For him, was it perhaps the deeply hidden soul?} \\
\]

(The Old Playhouse 50)

Kamala Das wants to know the mystery which sustains her lover’s love during her illness. She comes to the conclusion that this survival mystery does not lie in the physical love but in spiritual love or in their combination.
In brief, confessionalism is the defining quality of Kamala Das's poetry. It ensures her place among the best exponents of the confessional mode which produced female poets like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Judith Wright. Confessional themes and confessional mode inform most of the poems of *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), and some of the poems included in *Tonight This Savage Rite* (1979) written in collaboration with Pritish Nandy. Even though her confessionalism finds its best expression in *My Story*, these books also mark different stages of Das's confessional journey.

*Summer in Calcutta* is remarkable for the confessional theme of humiliation, misery, disease, decay, frustration, alienation, agonizing guilt, and transcendence. Poems like "The Dance of the Eunuchs," and "The Freaks" are remarkable for the expression of the sexual humiliations suffered by the poet, whereas poems like "A Relationship" are notable for the theme of sex and love or "body's wisdom." Another important poem "My Grandmother's House" embodies some of the "family-skeletons," "The Fear of the Year" deals with the poet's sense of alienation. There is also a sense of transcendence which is one of the major themes of confessionalism. It finds one of its best expressions in "An Introduction."

In *The Descendants* Das poetizes her struggle to overcome her death-wish. Her struggle reminds us Anne Sexton's struggles embodied in *Live or Die*. This struggle is exemplified by most of the poems included in her collection. However, it appears in its most eloquent form in "Composition," "Suicide," and the title
poem “The Descendants.” In “Composition,” the poet seems overwhelmed with a sense of agonizing guilt, produced by the painful consciousness that she has gone too far. In “Suicide,” she verbalizes her intense see-saw struggle between the instincts of life and death. It is in the title poem “The Descendants” that the two instincts converge to bring out the virtue of humility. There are other poems like “The Invitation,” “Substitute,” “Captive,” which deal with different aspects of death and love, which are central to confessional poetry.

In the third collection The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, Das provides us with the quintessence of her confessional vision. By including fourteen poems from Summer in Calcutta, she reminds us of her personal sexual humiliations, sufferings, illness, alienation, and resolution of her problems through transcendence. She also includes six poems from The Descendants to highlight her struggle to overcome her agonizing wish to die which is ultimately resolved through the attainment of the virtue of humility. With the addition of some new poems, she re-affirms these elements. These poems include “The Old Playhouse,” “Gino,” “After Illness,” “Glass,” etc. In “The Old Playhouse,” using the metaphor of mind, Das opens her old wounds. In “Gino,” she again speaks of physical decomposition and the poison of the extra-marital relations. In “After Illness,” she describes her wounded self and the survival mystery i.e. the survival of the lover’s love during her illness, when the body loses its beauty. In “Glass,” like Sexton and Plath, she engages herself in the quest for her lost father. Thus, with the recovery of love Das finds an existential security.
In the last volume, *Tonight This Savage Rite*, Das finds another kind of security – security by merger in her ideal lover Krishna. This undercurrent of spiritual love or Krishna-consciousness which has its beginning in Radha-Krishna (*Summer in Calcutta*) and its development in “Radha,” “Maggots,” and “prayers to unfamiliar Gods,” finds its culmination in “Ghanashyam,” of *Tonight This Savage Rite*. However, this type of merger is only imaginary. Thus all the collections of Das are eloquent specimens of her confessionalism.