

KAMALA DAS'S POETRY— A TRANSCENDENTAL VISION

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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1986

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February 27, 1986.

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled, Kamala Das's Poetry- a transcendental vision, submitted by Laila Jayachandran in partial fulfillment of six credits out of total requirements of twenty-four credits for the Degree of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) of the University, is her original work according to the best of my knowledge and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.



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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dr. Kapil Kapoor for the valuable guidance and encouragement.

I also take this opportunity to thank the poetess Kamala Das, who promptly replied my letter and sent me her book 'Collected Poems : Volume I'.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Indo-English poetry began to be written and until rather recently continued to be written under the influence of the English Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron and even Walter Scott. The poetry of the period is marked by a highly subjective tone and uninhibited expression of personal feeling. Also, nature and its variegated scenes form a background, especially nature in its natural untamed manifestations. Witness for example these lines from Toru Dutt's (1856-1877) poem "Sindhu", where she presents a beautiful description of the sunset on an Indian lake:

Upon the glassy surface fell
The last beams of the day,
Like fiery darts, that lengthening swell,
As breezes wake and play
Osiers and willows on the edge
And purple buds and red,
Leant down, - and, mid the pale greens edge
The lotus raised its head
And softly, softly hour by hour
Light faded and a veil
Fell over tree, and wave, and flower
On came the twilight pale.¹

1. Toru Dutt, Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, ed. A.N. Dwivedi (Bareilly, 1984), p.94

These romantic poets value spontaneity in thought and expression. Words and images were chosen to turn the familiar into a thing of beauty and tenderness. This early poetry is generally sentimental and sad.

The first Indo-English poet of this period Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) was a pre-Macaulay poet. He showed the distinct influence of the Romantics. His noted poem 'The Fakir of Jungheera' (1828) is a narrative verse with many Byronic echoes.² Another poet of this period was Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-1873). His 'The Shair and Other Poems' (1830) shares the influence of Walter Scott while 'The Captive Ladie' (1849) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1827-1873) is considered to be a long metrical romance written under the influence of Byron.³

The Dutt-Family also established itself in the last half of the 19th century. 'The Dutt-Family Album' published in 1870 contained sixty-six poems by Omesh Chander Dutt (1836-1912), forty-seven by Greece Chander Dutt (1833-1891) and eleven by Hur Chunder Dutt (1831-1901).⁴ The quality of its verse, its themes and command

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2. K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger, Indian Writing in English (Bombay, 1973), p.36.
 3. A.N. Dwivedi, Indian Poetry in English, A Literary History and Anthology (New Delhi, 1980), pp 16-18.
 4. Ibid., p. 19

of metrical forms and style are highly acclaimed of. The influence of Keats is said to be especially evident in Greece Chander Dutt's 'Cherry Blossoms' (1887).⁵ Following close on their elders' heels, Aru (1854-1874) and Toru Dutt brought out several publications, most significant of them being 'A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields' (1875).⁶ The most poignant of Toru Dutt's poem is 'The Tree of Life' which describes how an Angel, his face lit up with pity and divine love, once stood by the side of a "tree with spreading branches" and crowned her with "a few small sprigs".⁷ Toru's 'Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan', published posthumously in 1882 is another work in the romantic vein, which gave a poetic edge to the stories and legends of Hindustan and at the same time continued the trend of ballad-writing established by Derozio and Kashiprasad Ghose. Toru's cousin Romesh Chunder Dutt (1837-1909) was another notable writer of this period, whose English verse renderings of the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata' are considered "creditable".⁸ Otherwise, with the 'Dutt-Family Album', and with Toru Dutt's work in particular, the personal lyric became the dominant expressive mode in Indo-English poetry.

5. H.M. Williams, Indo-Anglian Literature 1800-1970, A. Survey (Bombay, 1976), p. 17

6. Ibid, p. 21.

7. Iyenger, p. 70.

8. Ibid, p. 75.

After the passing of the 'Dutt Era', Nobe Kissen Gosse (1837-1918) and Marmohan Ghose (1869-1924) continued the twin streams of ballad and lyric poetry. Nobe Kissen showed his craftsmanship in the handling of the ballad measure as in 'Daksha Yagna'. In this ballad the story of Daksha's defeat at the hands of Siva is recounted effectively.⁹ Marmohan was mainly a lyrical poet. His 'Immortal Eve' is a series of lyrics, which he calls "Songs of the triumph and mystery of beauty".¹⁰

A new element now enters Indo-English poetry with the entry of Marmohan's brother Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), viz. the mystic element. Educated in England and proficient in English, Latin, Greek, French, Italian and German, Aurobindo came back to India and chose to live the life of a 'Mahayogi' and pursue his life-long ambition to study 'reality'.¹¹ His long narrative epic 'Savitri', published posthumously in one edition in 1954, closely follows the Miltonic Epic, while the blankverse is reminiscent of Tennyson.¹² Symbolically interpreted, 'Savitri' stands for man's highest hope - the conquest

9. Dwivedi, p. 22.

10. Williams, p. 23.

11. Rameshwar Gupta, Eternity in Words - Sri Aurobindo's Savitri (Bombay, 1969), pp 36-37.

12. Williams, p. 33.

of death and attainment of divinity. Although Aurobindo lived strictly confined to his Ashram, "The World's thought-streams travelled into his ken",¹³ and he acquired a masterly hold on the character and meaning of modern contemporary life. His 'Songs to Myrtilla' is regarded as a fine lyric conveying beauty and tenderness.

A near contemporary, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is another mystic poet who also has a prominent place among Indo-English poets. He began by translating his own Bengali poems into English. The one hundred and three poems¹⁴ translated by him under the title 'Gitanjali' (1913) won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Though 'Gitanjali' (Song offering) is set in a religious tone, it is intensely lyrical and personal. The imagery is taken from nature. Clothed in the Radha-Krishna mythology, the poems are unified in the search for the spirit that lies within Nature and Man.¹⁵

Another reflective poet who rose into prominence in this period was Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), a woman poet. She was essentially a poet of passion and personal emotion. Her first book of poems 'The

13. Aurobindo, 'Savitri', 1-3, 32. quoted in Gupta, p. 36.

14. Williams, p. 26.

15. Ibid., p. 27.

'Golden Threshold' (1905) received high praise in England, and in India she was hailed as the 'Bharat Kokila' - the Nightingale of India.¹⁶ Her second volume 'The Bird of Time' (1912), has poems that are "songs of life and death", where life is painted brightly, while shadows of death linger all the while.¹⁷ In her third volume 'The Broken Wing' (1917), the passion and beauty of her "flawless lyrics" and "jewelled phrases" get further intensified.¹⁸ The poem 'The Flute Player of Brindavan' (1917) is a typical example. In her fourth volume 'The Feather of Dawn' published posthumously in 1961, the bird like quality of her song is still there.

The Romantic trend continued to echo for some more time in the poetry of poets such as Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898-), younger brother of Sarojini Naidu, Surendranath Dasgupta, Nirodbaran, D.K. Roy and others.¹⁹

However by the time of Manjeri S. Iswaran (1910-) P.R. Kaikini (1912-) and Krishnan Shungloo (1914-) poetry had changed.²⁰ The earlier poetry of beauty and

16. Iyengar, p. 215. cf: Dwivedi, p. 95.

17. Ibid., p. 218

18. Dwivedi, p. 28

19. Iyengar, pp 645-648.

20. Ibid., pp 647-648.

tenderness is displaced by a kind of poetry that talked of life's bruises and blemishes. The poets get out of their selves and begin to dwell on the lot of the common man and on the need to present life in all its hues—harsh as well as soft. Along with this new social realism also came psychological realism — a high degree of fidelity in depicting the inner workings of the human mind, close analysis of thought and feeling, to represent the nature of the personality and character.²¹

By 1947 the Indo-English poetry had acquired a new currency and even respectability. There was a further strengthening of the modernistic trend in the years that followed independence. The main figures associated with this period are Nissim Ezekiel (1924-), P. Lal (1930-), K. Raghavendra Rao (1928-), A.K. Ramanujan (1928-), Pritish Nandy (1947-) and Kamala Das (1934-). Their poetry is considered relatively modern in the manner of expression and sometimes also in content. The imagery, syntax and rhythm of their poetry respond now to the modern man's restlessness, weariness and sense of boredom. The poetry continues to be lyrical and by and large personal, but is now written in precise, concrete and even harsh lexis. No longer does the poet indulge in "Sprawling accumulation

21. J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (Great Britain, 1979), p. 557.

of lines".²² They are "at once attracted and repelled" by the things of this world and feel the "need to go beyond to something higher and larger".²³ There is a note of perplexity, a struggle to find some meaning in the devious, conflicting life patterns.

Kamala Das belongs to the above group. Born in Malabar in Kerala in 1934, Kamala Das happens to be one of the few successful bilingual writers. She writes in her mother tongue Malayalam under the pseudonym Madhavi Kutty. To this day she has published 14 books of fiction in Malayalam. Two of her outstanding volumes are 'Madhaviguttyute Munnu Novelukal' containing 3 outstanding novels and 'Madhaviguttyute Kathakal' containing 36 stories. She won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel 'Thanuppu' in 1967. She has also published many poems in the Malayalam weekly 'Mathrubhumi' and continues to do so even today. Her autobiography 'Ente Katha' originally published in Malayalam became a bestseller. By the time Kamala Das started writing actively in English, she had already established her position as a successful creative writer in Malayalam.²⁴

22. Dwivedi, p. 31.

23. V.S. Seturam, "Imagery in T.S. Eliot and Sri Aurobindo", Indian Response to Poetry in English (Bombay, 1983), p. 76.

24. As a full-length biography of Kamala Das is
(continued..p.9)

Kamala Das's poetical volumes in English are :
 'Summer in Calcutta' published in 1965, which is a collection of fifty poems; 'The Descendants' published in 1967 contains twentythree poems; 'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' published in 1973 is a collection of thirty three poems; and 'Collected Poems: Vol. I' published in 1984 contains eightyeight poems in all. Her prose work includes her autobiography 'My Story' published in 1976, and a collection of short stories titled, 'A Doll for the Child Prostitute' published in 1977. Some of her miscellaneous essays are: "I studied All Men" (Love and Friendship; edited by Kushwant Singh, 1973), "What Women Expect out of Marriage- And What They Get" (Femina , July 5, 1974); "Why Not More Than One Husband" (Eve's Weekly, May 6, 1972); and "I Have Lived Beautifully" (Debonair, May 15, 1974).

Kamala Das, won the 'Asian Poetry Award', sponsored by the Phillipine Centre of the P.E.N. in 1963. She is also the 1971 recipient of the 'Chimanlal Award for Fearless Journalism'. Nominated unsuccessfully for the 1984 Nobel Prize for Literature; she however, won the 1985 Aasan Memorial World Prize for Literature, as also the prestigious 1985 Sahitya Akademi Award for

24. contd. from p. 8: not available, information about her life has to be pieced together from biographical references in articles, essays, and introductions to her works.

poetry in English. She occupies a prominent place in the 'Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English', edited by Harry Blamires and published by Methuen in 1983 from London. The guide gives details about individual writers of Africa, Australia, Canada, The Caribbean, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom. It exemplifies what is most representative and distinctive in the output of the writers mentioned. Writing about the works of Kamala Das, the Guide says, "despite occasional metrical slackness, 'Summer in Calcutta' achieves uncommon frankness, vigour, and intensity" and that "the frequent erotic themes in her poetry are probably a form of psychological compensation for lack of affection in her childhood home".

Today, undoubtedly, Kamala Das is one of India's foremost poets writing in English. While there are more than thirty modern women poets with more than one collection each to their credit, the work of few of them possess the individuality and power of Kamala Das's verse. The total impression that her poetry produces is one of a "bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes",²⁵ and that precisely is what

25. M. K. Naik, A History of Indian English Literature (Delhi, 1982), pp 208-210.

makes her individualistic. She speaks a language that is "all mine, mine alone".²⁶ Its "distortions" and its "queerness" are all hers alone. She does not "search for pretty words" that "dilute the truth", but writes in "haste, of/Everything perceived".²⁷ She herself did not have any control over her writing which "emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons".²⁸ She used words "like swords in what was meant to be a purification dance, but blood was unwittingly shed".²⁹ Her characteristic trick is to split phrases and meanings between two lines, which is symbolic of the fissured or fractured sensibility she wishes to communicate.³⁰ For instance in the poem 'The End of Spring', she speaks of spring, cow-smells, telephone and love, all in one breath:

The spring de-hydrating like a grape, meek
Cowsmells on the breath of winds, and your voice
Now on the telephone..... What is the use
of love.....³¹

26. Kamala Das, Summer in Calcutta (New Delhi, 1965), p. 59.

27. Ibid., p. 50.

28. Kamala Das, My Story (New Delhi, 1976), p. 178.

29. Ibid., p. 180.

30. Iyengar, p. 680.

31. Das, Summer, p. 20.

She sometimes mixes high seriousness with a kind of low cynicism. We can find a familiar cynicism in lines such as these from 'Composition':

What I am able to give is only what your
wife is qualified to give.

And from this ensue such universal truths as:

We are all alike
We women
in our wrapping of hairless skin.³²

The fact remains that Kamala Das is not like every other woman. She is an individual articulating her plight in a language and a manner very few other women are bold enough to be able to.³³ And this brings us to the most obvious feature of Kamala Das's poetry - its candidness, the uninhibited frankness with which she talks of love and lust. Most of her critics feel that this has unfortunately obscured an otherwise talented work.³⁴ As for Kamala Das, she finds love crucified in sex. In disgust she asks in the poem 'The Freaks':

Can't this man with nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the skin's lazy hungers.³⁵

32. Kamala Das, The Old Playhouse And other Poems, (Madras, 1973), p. 3.
33. Kirpal Singh, "Kamala Das and the Problem with 'Composition'" Journal of Indian Writing in English, vol. 7 (1979), p. 4.
34. Naik, pp 208-210.
35. Das, Summer, p. 10.

"Love was a beautiful anguish and a thapasya"³⁶ for her. As Mahatma Gandhi wrote in 'Young India' in June 1922, "the test of love is tapasya and tapasya is self-suffering".³⁷ Her purpose in this suffering is very clear. In 'The Old Playhouse' she writes that it was "to grow". Her poetry thus becomes an experiment in self-learning. "One seeks in love the completion of one's own personality".³⁸

From this experiment in self-learning, it followed that Kamala Das was almost completely concerned with her self. However, critics felt that, "why should anyone be interested in her 'self', unless this 'self' evokes sympathetic responses and permits shocks of recognition in other 'selves'".³⁹ The poetic process is both creative and critical. It is fundamentally one of a sudden revelation of the truth which has obtained universal significance through the all-conquering power of imagination. Kamala Das's poetry

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36. Das, My Story, p. 12
37. V.S. Naravone, Modern Indian Thought-Philosophical Survey (Bombay, 1964), p. 189.
38. Devindra Kohli, Kamala Das (New Delhi, 1975), p.117.
39. Ishwar Nath Agrawal, "The Language and Limits of the self in the poetry of Kamala Das", in K.N. Sinha, ed. Indian Writing in English (New Delhi 1979), p. 139.

infact, reveals an untiring search for the 'self' within, and the freedom in having realised it and the ensuing knowledge of its likeness with all other selves. At such moments she realises that the world outside is unreal. "It is the immeasurable world inside that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards will realise that his route has no end".⁴⁰ Professor Thakaran in his book 'The Poetic Act' makes an interesting observation, that poetry "is the expression of the inner-reality of a field of consciousness. The self of the poet encounters the world which consists of the universe and its life. The poet participates in the life of the Universe and yet he is in conflict with it, which gives rise to tensions in his consciousness. The creative act of giving an adequate structure to reality resolves the tensions in a unified field of sensibility".⁴¹ This is true of the poetry of Kamala Das. Hence for another critic "'self' is the poetic nucleus from which her poetry originates".⁴²

Her plight is not that she is first and foremost a woman but that she is a highly individualist and an

40. Das, My Story, p. 98.

41. The Times of India, Sunday Review, December 23, 1984, p. 8, col. 1.

42. Anisur Rahman, Expressive form in the poetry of Kamala Das (New Delhi, 1981), p. 2.

unusual woman. She was born into a tradition where there are given expectations, staid and sedate expectations about how a woman or a girl ought to eat, dress and behave. When she went to her ancestral house, as a child, she had to wear clothes that hid her legs for "the ladies at Nalapat were conservative, puritanical and orthodox".⁴³ It was customary for women of her family to marry at an early age. The women's role was marked by passivity. She was not to exercise her free will, to assert herself or to challenge the male commands. She was a puppet in the hands of man throughout her life. Her individuality eventually got lost in the dreary household routines. This kind of living appeared as a "glut" to Kamala Das. She wanted to be given "an identity that was lovable".⁴⁴ She argues for the removal of the social barriers obstructing the full development of woman's nature. The emancipation of women depended however on the male-female relationship. It is a relationship that has to be based on mutual understanding and respect for each other as two distinct individuals. It is a union between two souls, in which there is no male-female distinction but only

43. Das, My Story, p. 71.

44. Ibid., p. 84.

oneness.⁴⁵ Her arriving at this idea is explicit in her poem, 'The Doubt':

When a man is dead, or a woman
 We call the corpse not he
 Or she but it. Does it
 Not mean that we believe
 That only the souls have sex and that
 Sex is invisible.
 Then the question is, who
 Is the man, who the girl
 All sex-accessories being no
 Indication.....⁴⁶

Her poetry thus is an expression of her search for an identity other than that of just a woman, of a sense of being wanted and loved not just as a woman. In expressing these and other ideas, Kamala Das gives a form to her own experiences - even the most intimate - in a language full of honesty and sincerity. It is

45. cf: Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1845) p. 161. quoted in David M. Robinson. "Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos," Publications of Modern Language Association of America, vol. 97, No. 1, p. 94.
 : "Male and female represent two sides of the greatest radical dualism. But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens into solid, solid rushes into fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman".
46. Kamala Das, The Descendants, (Calcutta, 1967), p. 27.

not that these experiences are in themselves separate and unique. But it is in the bold and direct way of saying them with precision and clarity that makes her "one of the most aggressively individualistic of the new poets".⁴⁷

In spite of this individualism Kamala Das is also intensely traditional, if we understand by tradition, the inherited past. "Every writer begins with some sort of tradition behind him, and every writer in some way modifies or influences that tradition".⁴⁸ Accordingly there is a grand tradition of Indian poetry in which Kamala Das works and revels. We can without doubt say that in her poetry, she has inherited the acute suffering of Toru Dutt, the passion of Sarojini Naidu and the mysticism of Sri Aurobindo. For instance, we find that Toru Dutt was always agonisingly aware of her predicament- when she says, for example, in the poem 'My Vocation':

A waif on this earth
 Sick ugly and small
 Condemned from my birth
 And rejected by all

47. Iyengar, p. 677

48. Cuddon, p. 702

From my lips broke a cry
 Such as anguish may wring⁴⁹

And Kamala Das experiences the same sort of suffering as expressed, for example, in her poem 'My Grandmother's House':

There is a house now far away where once
 I received love
 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 strangers doors to
 Receive love.....⁵⁰

Again something akin to the passionate yearning of Sarojini Naidu, for example, as in these lines from her poem 'Time of Roses':

Hide me in a Shrine of roses:
 Drown me in a wine of roses
 Drawn from every perfumed grove:
 Bind me on a pyre of roses
 Burn me in a fire of roses
 Crown me with the rose of love;⁵¹

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49. Dwivedi, p. 65
 50. Kamala Das, Collected poems Volume I (Trivandrum, 1984) p. 120.
 51. H.M. Prasad, ed, Indian Poetry in English (Aurangabad, 1983), p. 94.

is seen in the image of the April sun by Kamala Das,
as in her poem 'Summer in Calcutta':

.....Wee bubbles ring
my glass, like a bride's
Nervous smile, and meet
My lips, Dear, forgive
This moment's lull in
Wanting you.....⁵²

And while Sri Aurobindo has moments of mystic experience,
as expressed in the following lines from his poem
'Thought the Paraclete':

As some bright archangel in vision flies
Plunged in dream-caught spirit immensities,
Past the long green crests of the seas of life,
Past the orange skies of the mystic mind
Flew my thought self-lost in the vasts of God.⁵³

Kamala Das expresses her mystical experience in her
poem 'Woman without her Shadow':

.....Like
A wild Westerly suddenly set free
She moved with a terrible ease, and in

52. Das, Summer, p. 48.

53. Iyengar, p. 167.

The musty bracken of the sky the witch
 Azaleas bloomed for her
 And the unnamed birds of every heaven
 Burst into song.⁵⁴

Kamala Das is generally seen as a confessional poet writing about her personal experiences in "blunt, bitter and concrete terms".⁵⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'confession' as the "disclosing of something the knowledge of which by others is considered humiliating to the person confessing". As a literary term, The Readers' Encyclopedia defines 'confession' as a "form of autobiography in which the true or manipulated account of the author's life serves some sort of didactic purpose. And finally, above all, 'confession' is a practise considered highly of in the Catholic Religion where a person gets absolution from the priest, who is God's representative on Earth by acknowledging privately the wrongs he has done. Going by these definitions Kamala Das's poetry is infact a record of her frustration, failure and humiliation. Its autobiography overlaps the degrading values of society, the false glamour and the corruption of the "city's fevered

54. Das, Collected, P. 36.

55. Dr. Harish Raizada, "The Confessional Note in the Poetry of Kamala Das", in Prasad, ed. Indian Poetry in English. P. 114.

lanes".⁵⁶ Further the poems reveal the predicament of women in an increasingly male-dominated environment. Most important of all, Kamala Das's poems fall very fittingly into the religious pattern of confession. As she herself admits in her preface to her autobiography 'My Story', she wrote "to empty herself of all the secrets so that (she) could depart when the time came with a scrubbed-out conscience". She also knows that "by confessing, by peeling of my layers, I reach closer to the soul/and to the bones/supreme indifference".⁵⁷ Accordingly the world is her confessional and not just one priest, but humanity is expected to absolve her. A priest by virtue of his position serves and loves humanity. Kamala Das expects the same quality of love, same sympathy and understanding from humanity. That this is not always there for the asking adds poignancy to her confession.

At the most obvious level, the confession reveals a girl married at the age of sixteen to a man much older than herself. It did not take much time for her to discover that, she was tied to a hollow relationship. "It became obvious to me that my husband had wished to

56. Das, Summer, p. 21

57. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 3.

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marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gains".⁵⁸ Her womanliness was humiliated. She shrank in revolt. She dressed herself in her brother's shirt and trousers, cut her hair short and ignored her womanliness.⁵⁹ Her husband shut her up in a room of books with only a streak of sunshine lying near the door, to keep her company. He did not understand why she was restive. He was only capable of unleashing the "skin's lazy hungers", when she asked for love. She wanted compassion and understanding. She was seeking for the love which lay at the core of the human heart. "The word mate with its earthly connexions"⁶⁰ made her uneasy. She wanted emotional contact. Failing in this search for love at the human plane, she finally rests her thoughts in Krishna, the mythical God, who represents her ideal lover. She realises that it was futile to try and reach Krishna, through her earthly mate, her husband. Her life finally lies content, atleast she seems to claim that it does, by mere thoughts about Krishna.

Her poems are thus an appeal to humanity to absolve her of a crime that she did not commit. Her only sin is that she did not stick to a hollow relation-

58. Das, My Story, p. 84

59. Das, Summer, p. 59.

60. Das, My Story, p. 87.

ship against all adversities. For the people around her it is an unpardonable sin, but to her it is equalled only by the injustice and the dishonesty to oneself. Nevertheless she did not leave her husband and children and run away. She put on a brave face and acted the role of a happy wife for the sake of her people. For "a broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy".⁶¹ The accounts of her relations outside her marriage are all conjured up incidents, and they only serve to give authenticity and meaning to her humiliation in life by contrast. For she was a person who "could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I know I was frigid and that love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards".⁶² So when she speaks of love outside marriage, she is not propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security. However, her open statements met with disapproval. Her near relations were shocked and embarrassed by the revelations. For Kamala Das it cost her many things she held dear, but she did not

61. Das, My Story, p. 92.

62. Ibid., p. 92.

for a moment regret having written them.⁶³ It has brought her freedom, a freedom beyond the physical. She has liberated her 'self' from bondage of lies and falsehood-and has attained inner harmony and freedom from self-deception, and blind servitude. She conveys this state of her life of joyful abandonment and uncontrolled freedom through the images of "swimming" and "the sea" in the poems 'Composition' and 'The Suicide'. With a "Scrubbed out conscience" she is now ready to merge with "the sea". And "a poetry of transcendence"⁶⁴ is born, confirming the view that Kamala Das's poems "help her in her quest of self and thus lead to the consciousness of the spiritual realm transcending the physical one".⁶⁵

I propose in this study to analyse this poetry of transcendence, to discover the depth and nature of the concept of transcendentalism in her poetry. As her works are a true and faithful transcript of her own mind, she enables us to enter behind the curtain of her experience and see the modulations of the innermost recesses of her pulsating personality.

63. Das, My Story, Preface.

64. Agrawal, in K.N. Sinha, p. 145.

65. Raizada, p. 135.

CHAPTER II
THE CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines 'transcendentalism' as the investigation of that which is vague and illusive in philosophy. The Dictionary of Literary Terms points out that 'transcendentalism' emphasized the role and importance of the individual conscience, and the value of intuition in matters of moral guidance and aspiration. Both these definitions suggests that we are dealing with something that can not be seen by the ordinary eye, but could be known by looking inside one's conscience by appealing to the moral and ethical values embedded in it.

Man has always suffered from ontological anxiety. Behind flux and destruction, he has always looked for a thread of continuity, a sense of permanence. What changes is the visible, the material - what endures is the spirit, the essence or being. Addressing himself to this problem, C.E.M. Joad, summarizing his conclusions at the end of his book 'God and Evil' (London, 1983) says: "If the religious view of the Universe is true: if that is to say the universe has a meaning and purpose, this life is not all, and something probably survives the break of our bodies. Indeed unless there is a more abundant life before mankind, this world of

material things in space and time is a bad joke beyond our understanding, a vulgar laugh braying across the mysteries".

Thus we find both in the West and East one stream of philosophers arguing that the world we see and experience is infact unreal.¹ The reality is something which is hidden deep inside the physical world and could be reached only by the power of intuition. "You see the concordance of Indian, Grecian and German metaphysics; the world is Maya, is illusion, says Sankara; it is a world of shadows not of realities, says Plato; it is an appearance only, not the thing-in-itself, says Kant."² While the Upanishad seers arrived at this conclusion through 'Anubhava' or deep reflection into the recesses of our own self, Kant arrived at the conclusion through abstract reasoning, that the three essential elements

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1. What is popularly called 'transcendentalism' among the West is 'Idealism'. Kant, who initiated an enquiry into the doctrine, demonstrated that there was a very important class of ideas, or forms which did not come by experience but through which experience was acquired, by the intuition of the mind that provided these ideas or forms. Common to all of them was a spiritual hunger: the need to find themselves one with the world, within a universe vitalized by the immanence of creative spirit: Encyclopaedia Britannica (USA, 1969), vol. 22, p. 160.
 2. Dr. Paul Deussen, Address delivered before Royal Asiatic Society (Bombay, 1893), quoted in V.M. Apte, "Preface", Brahma-Sutra, Shankara-Bhashya (Bombay, 1960), p. xxiv.

of the outside world viz. space, time and causality are not eternal fundamentals of an objective world but the innate intuitive forms of our own intellect.³

The present outlook regarding the reality, is modified by the remarkable advance made in science. Will Durant, in his 'Mansions of Philosophy (New York, 1941) explains that every matter in this world is made up of small minute particles called atoms, and that these atoms are nothing but electrically charged particles called electrons which revolves round the protons. Matter has thus lost its name, weight, length, depth, breadth and impenetrability. It has become in modern physics merely a form of energy. Earlier physicists believed that matter and energy were two different things neither of which could be created or destroyed. Einstein has shown that this was wrong and that all matter was actually energy in different shapes. According to him matter could be transferred into energy and energy into matter. Stated in another way it means that energy in a particular condition appears as matter and that energy is the only reality. Now this is a close approximation of the non-dualist position, that this physical world of matter is an

3. Ibid.

illusion caused by our ignorance or 'avidya' regarding the reality about this world. In our ignorance we consider what we see and experience in this world as the truth, when the real is the 'being' or 'self' beyond it.⁴

This 'being' is never given as an object. In Plato it appears as 'Ideas', in Bacon as the 'form' and in Hegel as the 'Idee' or "that immanent activity or life principle".⁵ The Upanishad seers identified it as 'Brahman'. 'Brahman' is the great explanatory principle regarded as the source of all existent things, the perfect being from which all existent things derive their being and nature; apart from this, existent things neither exist nor persist. "Brahman is non-dual, free from the distinctions of subject and object..... To use Kantian terminology the reality of spirit is that of freedom rather than that of nature..... Subject and object, I and thou, have no place there. We cannot describe it in personal terms, when the non-dual (advaita) aspect is in view".⁶

4. Ibid., p. xxxiv

5. Christian Jan Smuts, Walt Whitman - A Study in the Evolution of Personality (Detroit, 1973), p.36.

6. S. Radhakrishnan, The Brahma Sutra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life (London, 1960), p. 119.

The modern scientific world chooses to call this 'world of being' as 'the world of energy'. Energy is described in Chambers Dictionary as the "power of doing work". Which again is something innate having no shape or body of its own. It cannot be destroyed or created. It is ever-present.

Noam Chomsky, the famous linguist while studying the acquisition of language, noted a native speaker's "innate" knowledge of the rules of a language, which enabled the learner to pick up the language with remarkable speed. This led to the conclusion that "the child is pre-disposed to acquire the language and if he were not pre-disposed the child would have immense difficulty in acquiring his language".⁷ Evidently there exists a reality independently and unconditionally in contrast with what exists temporarily and dependently and conditionally,⁸ somewhere beyond the layers of matter.

In spite of the congruity in the Western and the Eastern conception regarding the reality, there are certain basic differences between them. For one thing, the transcendental world-view has always had a particular strength in the Indian tradition and popular belief.

7. M.S. Thirumalai, Language and Acquisition, Thought and Disorder (mysore, 1977), p. 13.

8. "Ontology", Encyclopaedia Britannica (USA, 1962) Vol. 16, p. 976.

Further, the Indian mind looks upon Man as part and parcel of the mighty whole and never regards him, as Protagoras would put it, "the measure of all things".⁹ For him man, animal, plant, stones all arise from one total whole. "The thing in hand while being clearly observable and distinct, is of a definite value for the Westerner. The 'Other' for him is something vague, while the 'other' is of a positive value for the Indian because of its very vagueness. It opens the view on further unlimited potentialities".¹⁰ As the visible is something transitory and insufficient it lacks in ideal completion and value for the Indian. It is the invisible because of its freedom and indefinability which is of higher value and the final postulate for him.

Therefore, while Western logic is mainly based on reason, definition and separation for understanding the reality, the Indian logic is widened into an empirical and transcendental logic combined. Accordingly first "the Indian reacts receptively to the phenomena. These impressions are then consciously acknowledged as sense perceptions, which are interpreted by the reasoning

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9. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (London, 1972), 384.
 10. Betty Heimann, Facets of Indian Thought (London, 1964), p. 149.

mind. The reasoning called Tarka, the decomposing and selecting analysis is only a passing phase for attaining the final true knowledge, which eventually transcends reason to gain insight."¹¹ For "The reasoning is not all. There is a realm where it has no sway. There are limitations of scientific knowledge. Moral values, wisdom and the life of spirit are beyond it."¹² Einstein in his paper on 'Principle of Research' read to the Physical Society in Berlin says: "The Supreme task of the physicists is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition resting on sympathetic understanding of experience can reach them".¹³

As the truth is something innate it could be reached by looking inside. Aristotle enumerates a simple method for doing this. When one is perceiving the object, one's soul takes the form of the object and when completely 'self-conscious' the soul therefore is conscious of the spirit within.¹⁴ Smuts while studying those people who have seen the being or self within says: "These profound spirits probing their own

11. Ibid., p. 148.

12. Radhakrishnan, The Brahma Sutra, p. 104.

13. Quoted in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western (London 1967), p. 441.

14. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (London, 1972), 3 & 4.

thoughts in order to find some typical truth which might assist them in encompassing and co-ordinating the vast universe of phenomena found in their consciousness the reflection of the one thing of which they and all have the deepest knowledge and experience, namely, the self, And through that reflection of the self, they see the very nature and essence of the personality".¹⁵

These observations throw into relief two aspects, 'consciousness' and 'self'. From the moment man began to reflect on his own nature, the fact of his 'consciousness or the cognitive relation in which he stood to the world'¹⁶ has drawn his persistent attention. He realised that he had in him more than others around him. He differed in an unmistakable way from the stone, the plants and the animals, no matter how similar he was to them in other respects. He alone, in the cosmos, had the privilege of full cognition and could wonder and stare at the mystery of the cosmos, himself included. This fact of his being conscious put him far above his universe. Now "no one is ever empirically conscious without being implicitly conscious also of one's own self".¹⁷

15. Smuts, p. 37.

16. S.K.Seksena, Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy (Delhi, 1971), p. 1.

17. Ibid., p. 3.

'Consciousness', is therefore argued in terms of the 'self'. "Consciousness and self are one. A distinction between the two is, however, allowed for practical convenience, in so far as the term 'consciousness' is used to denote the self in relation to objects".¹⁸ For instance, the statement "I know myself" suggests two selves. 'I' is the empirical self in relation to the physical frame, which when conscious "goes beyond the me"¹⁹ to become aware of the transcendent 'self'. It is the peculiar illumination of consciousness which reveals the subject, the object and itself in an act of knowledge. Just as it is by the presence of heat or light that we become conscious of fire, similarly it is 'consciousness' that reveals the presence of the 'self' and thereby becomes its quality.

This 'self' revealed by consciousness is distinguished from the physical self which included the mental, emotional and the perishable body. The physical self is a part of nature, while the transcendent 'self' is the divine 'self' that exists at the core of life. "The purpose and meaning of our life

18. Ibid, p. 57

19. Radhakrishnan, The Brahma Sutra, p. 124 - As I am basing my discussion on Radhakrishnan, hence forth whenever I quote from him, I shall mention only the name of the book.

consists in the growth of this self".²⁰ The three fold conception of man as body, mind and spirit implies an important truth, that man is not a mere object, that his spiritual nature is not at the same level as his psychic and corporeal, that his mind and body can participate in a different order of spiritual existence as well. "The essentially linguistic nature of this triple world also points to its potentiality".²¹ Man can therefore pass from the order of physical life to that of spiritual, that is from the region of variety, dualism and discord to that of oneness, by realising the spirit or self within. Man's salvation therefore lies in the depths of this 'self'; "the values of rationality, freedom and equality are inherent"²² in it. Man's "suffering is the result of his alienation" from this self, and "when he gets back to it suffering disappears".²³

It is not easy, however, to become conscious of one's self. M. Hean Cocteau in his Oxford address on 'poetry and Invisibility' warns us that "the hectic

20. Ibid., p. 147

21. Jayant Lele, "Community, Discourse and Critique in Jhaneswar", In Jayant Lele, ed. Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements, (The Netherlands, 1981), p. 105.

22. Lele, "The Bhakti Movement in India: A critical Introduction", Lele, ed. Tradition and Modernity p. 5.

23. The Brahma Sutra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life, p. 148.

hurry of our age contributes to the crime of inattentiveness, a crime against the spirit."²⁴ Porphyry in his 'Life of Plotinus' describes the attitude of the sensitive and receptive 'self' which felt ashamed at being clad in a body.²⁵ The 'self' is made manifest by a slow conquest of the physical self achieved over time. In the initial stages of a man's life, his ideals remain mere conventions because they are not rooted in his spiritual life. As he gradually develops, the gulf between convention and truth becomes intolerable, and tensions arise in him. He ceases to be mechanical and becomes conscious. "It is then that the real appears. When we wake up we realise our nothingness"²⁶ and our utter helplessness.

This feeling of nothingness is only temporary. He must first experience the void, the nothingness, the sunya of the Madhyamika Buddhist,²⁷ not for its own sake, but for transcending it, for getting beyond this world of saṃsara or change. "The experience of dread is the experience of the problem whether man shall attain to being or shall not, whether he shall annihilate

24. Ibid., p. 111 n.

25. Ibid., p. 110.

26. Ibid., p. 146

27. History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western, p. 445.

nothingness and get beyond it or whether nothingness shall annihilate him.²⁸ This sense of nothingness is an inner condition which provokes the sense of dread and is the beginning of the religious quest.

The individual comes forward as the discoverer and "helps to remould the pattern of life in a more vital form".²⁹ The ascent of the psychic being brings transient, fleeting visions of the Infinite. Through this transcendence, he has an abiding sense of the infinite, his nature is enlarged, immortality becomes for him a normal self-awareness. In all sights and forms he sees the infinite that is the reality, in "all sounds one hears it, in all touches one feels it".³⁰ With this transformation there will be a total transmutation of his personality. Pain and suffering will cease to affect him as they affect ordinary people. He will acquire a new tranquility and a power to view with absolute detachment all pleasures and pains. He will joyfully accept the material basis of his existence because it will not conceal his spirituality any longer.

28. Ibid.

29. Aurobindo, "The Human Cycle", quoted in V.S. Naravone, Modern Indian Thought - A Philosophical Survey (Bombay, 1964), p. 223-4.

30. Aurobindo, "The Life Divine", quoted in Naravone, p. 219.

Infact it would be wrong to assume the ascetic ideal, that we must supress our human desires, reject human pleasures, renounce the world and all its ways and freeze the human spirit thus, for the higher life. "We must plunge into the world and learn the secret of work. Do not fly from the wheels of the world machine. Stand inside it and see how it functions. You can find a way to come out of it".³¹

Death, therefore, has no meaning for him except as a process of life. Death is a condition, not a denial of life. In death only the body perishes, while the 'essence' is retained. Matter on destruction is converted into energy. The energy remains bodiless, until it is again converted back to matter. "One span of life (therefore) gives place to another".³²

The end of development is for all phenomena a final 'reflow' and 'inflow' into the receptacle of the 'ocean'. In Indian Mythology 'ocean is a frequent metaphor for 'Brahman' from which all things originated and into which all things go back eventually.³³ "This ocean is not the creation of a miracle worker or a faith healer, not is it a sea of metaphysical nothingness,

31. Vivekananda, quoted in Naravone, p. 102.

32. The Brahma Sutra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life, p. 110.

33. Heimann, p. 69.

It stands for purity, compassion, love and above all, for happiness".³⁴ It is also "the cradle that goes on endlessly rocking".³⁵ All single beings are accidentally thrown out and accidentally sucked back in continuous movements of periodic tides and ebbs.

It follows that the 'self' existed before it began to animate the body of this life and will exist after it ceases to animate it. A single life is not enough for achieving perfection. Life here is only an episode in a larger life involving a succession of alternate births and deaths. Hence man is bound to the law of 'karma'. It is rooted in the idea of the world as an ordered cosmos. What we sow we will reap. "The sum total of man's thought, feelings, desires and actions, thus constitute his 'karma', the consequences of which are only partially worked out in this life, continuously forging the links that make up the chain of existence."³⁶

The belief in re-birth is nearly universal. Pythagoras and Plato suggested this theory as an explanation for the inequalities of life and Sir. William Jones, found the doctrine rational and more likely to determen from vice.³⁷

34. Lele, The Bhakti Movement, p. 9.

35. Walt Whitman, quoted in Norman Foester and Robert Falk, ed. American Prose and Poetry (USA, 1962), p. 616.

36. Benjamin Walker, Hindu World-An Encyclopaedic Survey of Hinduism (London, 1968), p. 530.

37. The Brahma Sutra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life, p. 205-6.

In Hinduism there is the conviction that the transcendental being could be truly understood in terms of devotion or Bhakti: "It is not an accident that the word 'darsan' means intense gazing, or experience of the sight of something with transcendental qualities, and also philosophical explorations of discovery of truth".³⁸ Devotion is no longer described as a meditative technique, the concentrating of the mind on God. "Devotion in these later years is an all-consuming emotion which is described as love for a personal being, usually in the form of Siva, Vishnu (or one of his avataras), or a manifestation of the great Goddess".³⁹ An entreaty for deliverance is also a surrender, or liquification of the self.

Therefore the transcendent being is not alone just outside there, it is there within you. As Emerson, the formulator of the concept of transcendentalism in America, would put it, in his essay 'Self Reliance' that the 'self' becomes "the aboriginal self on which a universal reliance may be grounded".⁴⁰ And therefore, by the development of character, one is able to reach

38. Lele, The Bhakti Movement, p. 9

39. David Kinsley, Devotion as an Alternative to Marriage in the Lives of Some Hindu Women, quoted in Lele, p. 83.

40. Quoted in David M. Robinson, "Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos", Publications of Modern Language Association of America, vol. 97, (1982) p. 85.

the divine core of identity within the individual that transcends the self. It is this basic belief that the roots of our existence lie in the transcendent sphere, that has created the concept of transcendentalism, and the consequent search for it within and without.

It is our contention that Kamala Das's poetry, reveals a gradual unfolding of the transcendental consciousness. Her poetry reveals the passionate return of the individual to his own freedom, through the awakening of his consciousness. And from the unfolding of its processes the significance of 'being' emerges. In the beginning, Kamala Das's life is full of the external world, of the beauty and mystery of nature. At the next stage as she gets deeper into the life of the world, tension and suffering creeps in. She reaches a stage of utter despair, disillusionment and enters the stage of nothingness. Then thought comes with rising consciousness and the spirit of inquiry leads her to the realisation of the oneness of the being. The mystery of the transcendental world deepens. Life still continues in abundant measure, with its sordidness, boredom, and its gross inequality. But along with this there is also a turning away from its outward manifestations and a spirit of detachment grows,

as the eyes are turned towards thing invisible, which cannot be seen, or heard or felt in the ordinary way. Then Bhakti comes in, through which she regains the ethical freedom. This freedom provides her with a fullness of life which is both rich in content and strong in development. Her transformed 'self' actively participates in the "development of the higher life out of the 'self' that (her) experience has already discovered".⁴¹

41. Paul Younger, Introduction to Indian Religious Thought (Great Britain, 1972), p. 92.

CHAPTER III

THE POETRY OF TRANSCENDENCE

As we have already noted at the end of the last chapter that when we speak of the transcendental element in the poetry of Kamala Das, we are talking of the passionate effort she makes to transcend the physical self in order to experience the innerself, and the freedom that she regains through this discovery. Her physical self that encounters and participates in the life of the world, is in conflict with it, and as a result undergoes immense suffering. This suffering gives rise to tensions in her consciousness. "The creative act of giving an adequate structure"¹ to the reality that she has known through suffering resolves her tensions. Her poetry, thus shows a movement, a process towards a greater enchantment that lies in the "inner-reality of a field of consciousness".²

A chronological study of her poetry reveals a continuous quest for the meaning and purpose of life leading her to the transcendental 'being' that lies at the heart of things. 'Summer in Calcutta' published in 1965, is Kamala Das's first collection of poems. The poetical work reveals a mind groping towards a

1. Professor K.M.Thakaran, The Poetic Act, quoted in The Times of India, Sunday Review, December, 23, 1984, p. 8, col. 1.

2. Ibid.

growing consciousness, very sensitive, full of apprehensions and doubt. Sensitivity itself to go by Chambers Dictionary, indicates a readiness of the senses to receive outside influence.

Thus, in the poem 'Punishment if Kindergarten'³ we meet a child, very sensitive and quiet by nature, who did not take pleasure in the ordinary things that the others enjoyed. While other children of her age played together and passed their time in merriment "sipping sugar cane", she felt lonely and lay hidden,

"..... in the sun-warmed hedge

And smelt the flowers' and the pain. (p. 43)

The act of burying her face is in itself symbolic, indicating as it does an eagerness to go deep down into the heart of things to become one with them and be lost in them.

During the years that sped along she was busy growing up, as recounted in the poem 'An Introduction'

I was a child, and later they

Told me I grew.....(p.59)

At this stage of her life when she was only "a youth of sixteen", "not knowing what else to ask for",

3. Kamala Das, Summer in Calcutta (New Delhi, 1965), p. 43 (Further references to the poems in this book shall be given by the page number in the parenthesis following the quotation unless it is otherwise specified in the notes).

she asked for love. Her people then married her to a man much older than her. Though "he did not beat" her, he made her "sad woman, body felt so beaten". She "shrank pitifully". As if in revolt she

..... wore a shirt and my
 Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
 My womanliness.....(p.60)

The "Categorizers" then shouted at her:

,..... Dress in sarees, be girl
 Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
 Be a quarreller with servants, Fit in. Oh,
 Belong..... (p. 60)

As a result of her own personal suffering her search now extended to the world outside. In the poem 'Forest Fire' (p. 51) she describes how "like a forest-fire that consumes", she consumed everything, "the sights, the smells and sounds", around her, which caught, her attention and fired her senses. Her poem 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' (p. 9) conjures up a hot, dusty, sterile world where eunuchs dance with "green tattoo on their cheeks, jasmine in their hair", singing harsh-voiced about "lovers dying and of children left unborn....". Again in the poem 'The Flag' (p. 21) she contrasts the high ideals symbolized by the tri-colour

national flag with the false glamour and corruption that takes place on the "city's fevered lanes" where

Rich men dance with one another's wives and
Eke out a shabby,
Secret ecstasy, and, poor old men lie
On wet pavements and
Cough, cough their lungs out....

.....

As those poor babies who die of hunger
and are not buried, rot (p. 21)

Like the Gautama Buddha who was saddened by the sufferings of other people and leaves his palace life in search of truth, Kamala Das also wishes to say good bye:

It is time to say good bye to your charms
Dear flag, to your old,
Meaningless pride, to your crude postures of
Honour, to the lies..... (p. 22)

Kamala Das understands, as described in her poem 'The Fear of the Year' (p. 13) that, "this is no age for slow desires/Desired on lengths of idle beds/
Besides indifferent faces....." One has to survive this "time" and "move beyond", "for fear has warped us all". Even in the "freedom of our dreams", "fear

thrusts its paws", "to incarnadine/ The virgin
whiteness".

Kamala Das is clearly now in a state of fear
and anguish born out of her watching the physical
world and its helpless living. She is still not able
to understand what the fear is about. But it has
enveloped her. For, she says in the poem, 'The End
of Spring', when night arrives,

..... I journey while alone just
Backwards, taking secret steps inwards and
Choosing roads none has walked before. My fear
Is the fear of change; (p. 20)

Her fear is that she shall not be able to live happily
in this world, when in and all around her there is
only suffering. She cannot live in this world of
illusion, in which we deceive others by pretending to
be happy.

..... What is the use
of love, all this love, if all it gives is
Fear, fear of storms asleep in you
And me the fear of hurting you. (p. 20)

She understands that she is different from the
others around her. While she wants to keep the people

she knows and loves, mainly her husband, happy, she is not able to do so. As she says in the poem 'Loud Posters', she is today "a creature turned inside out" and

..... To spread myself across wide highways
of your thoughts,..... like a loud poster
Was always my desire, but all I
Do is lurk in shadows of cul-de-sacs
Just two eyes showing..... (p. 23)

She realises in her poem 'Sepia' (p. 25) that it is no use trying to argue with this "sad-mouthed human/Race" whose religion is "the bulge/In wallets" and "the week-end's /Tired lust". Kamala Das is angry that this "distinguished/Human race" have not

Learnt to believe
In things they do not see
Or hear. (p. 24)

For the first time we notice the awareness in Kamala Das of the presence of something that we do not see or hear, but in which she wants others also to believe, in, as she evidently does herself.

In the poem 'A Relationship' she called this vague awareness "Love". She knows this 'Love' is

older than "I" by "myriad, saddened centuries". It was once a "prayer" that grew up in her bones, through the years of adolescence "to this favoured height". She is completely confident that this new-found 'being' called "Love" cannot betray her. She is here evidently concerned with love as the innermost reality, the naked as distinct from the mask of social convention and mere physicality. Here Kamala Das, is close to the metaphysical poets of the 17th century who regarded "the aspiration for love of God is equivalent, as an emotional experience, to the aspiration for the love of woman".⁴ The state of the poet is that of a person struggling to find fulfilment in love; failing to find it in life, she sought its dimensions in imagination and in the form of her love poems. Through all her love poems she surveys the sensuous only to give it a spiritual turn. While the poem 'The Freaks'⁵ paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive and the woman burning with desire, but helpless, another poem 'In Love' brings the poet face to face with the question whether she could call her sexual experience as 'love' -

4. Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams, eds., The Major Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1969), p. 23.

5. Das, Summer, p. 10.

This skin - communicated
 Thing that I dare not...
 call our love. (p. 14)

Later in the poem 'A Losing Battle'⁶ she explains that
 the 'love' that she speaks of is the

Love, which in a woman must mean tears
 And a silence in the blood.⁷

Love therefore for the poet is suffering, a 'thapasya'.
 So her body's wisdom tells her again and again that
 she shall

find my rest, my sleep, my peace
 And even death nowhere else, but here in
 My betrayer's arms.⁸

So that as Emily Dickinson would put it,
 Eden ebbs away to diviner Edens.⁹

This is the same 'love' that Vivekananda speaks of,
 when he says, "The whole cosmos is a manifestation of
 Love, from the lowest atom to the highest ideal. Love

6. Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy, Tonight This Savage Rite (New Delhi, 1984), p. 12.
7. Ibid.
8. Das, Summer, p. 18.
9. Quoted in Anand Rao Thota, Emily Dickinson, The Metaphysical Tradition (New Delhi, 1982) p. 115.

is the motive power of the Universe. Under the impetus of love, Christ stands ready to give up his life for humanity, Buddha for an animal. Without it the Universe would fall to pieces in a moment. This Love is God".¹⁰

The dawning of the nature of Love that the poet wishes to cultivate, brings the word "death" ("peace and even death....."). "Consciousness of death is the beginning of transformation in man in his journey to the understanding of oneself".¹¹ In the poem 'The Wild Bougainvillea',¹² the image of "marigolds" blooming beside "the old tombs" assume great significance in this context. "Marigolds signify glory, spirituality, illumination."¹³ "The marigolds and bougainvilleas symbolize permanence and love".¹⁴ The symbol of fragrant growing things besides the old tombs convey, a meaning of fertility, spring, a kind

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10. Quoted in V.S.Naravone, Modern Indian Thought, A Philosophical Survey (Bombay, 1964), p. 100.
11. S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavad Gita (India, 1975)
12. Das, Summer, p. 16.
13. Iqbal Kaur, Illusion and Reality, the Autobiographical confession in Kamala Das's 'My Story' - A Semiotic Study, (unpublished) Dissertation submitted for the degree of M.Phil - Supervisor Prof. H.S. Gill and Prof. S. Vaidyanathan, Dept. of Anthropological Linguistics, Punjabi University, (Patiala, 1981), p. 39.
14. Anisur Rahman, Expressive forms in the Poetry of Kamala Das (New Delhi, 1981), p. 79.

of life-in-death status, to, death. This shows an awareness in the poet that the physical death means transcendence of the being from the ugliness and frozenness of human life into a realm of glory and innocence. The dawning of this realisation induced in the poet, "a silent/Dreamless sleep" that night "and woke up on the morning free".¹⁵

Having identified death, the poet is now more clearly able to distinguish the body with a name, and the 'I' that is packed in it like the "sword in its sheath" in this world, in the poem 'An introduction' (p. 60). This 'I' which is "sinner" and "saint" is the 'empirical self' which transcends through consciousness and becomes the 'transcendent self' which has no "joys" or "aches", that are not similar to others. (p. 60). In the poem 'Loud Posters', the poet clarifies that she had spent long years trying to locate this 'self' "beneath skin", beneath flesh and underneath/The bone". (p. 23).

The individual 'self' now identifies with the cosmic 'self' in the poem, 'Some one Else's Song',

I am a million, million people

15. Das, Summer, p. 17 (References from this book are once again given by the page number in the parenthesis).

Talking all at once, with voices
 Raised in clamour, like maids
 At village-wells. (p. 31)

It is essentially the ultimate realisation of the oneness of the self, with the oneness of the world.

The poet is nevertheless sad and lonely and withdraws into herself more and more. She dreams more often now of the "honey-coloured day of peace" as her "mind has found/An adult peace", in her poem 'Punishment in Kindergarten' (p. 43). One can hear here a note of regret of the kind one had already poignantly heard in Wordsworth and Cobridge.¹⁶ Her life now "lies, content" in the discovery, in her poem 'love'. And then follows the poem 'The Siesta', in which her "dreams glow pearl-white"¹⁷ she says that in all these "unfenced hours" she had felt no fear, but only "an anonymous peace" (p. 54). In the poem 'The Music Party', we find her senses and nerves becalmed and she can hear the angel in "pink" playing harmonium while the calm "stillness" of the other's presence is felt behind her (p. 33).

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16. T.J. Harskamp, "Past and Present in Modernist Thinking", The British Journal of Aesthetics, vol. 24 (1984), p. 35: "The regret is for a period of innocence in which environment, existence and poetic expression formed a single harmony".
17. Das, Summer, p. 30 (References from this book are given by the page numbers in the parenthesis).

But she has reason to be unhappy. She has yet another hurdle to cross. And that is death. Not that she is afraid of death. In the poem 'My Morning Tree' she describes death as

..... just a flower, a red, red
Morning flower. (p. 45).

She is now capable of dismissing death as "just a Temporary phase which/Brings no loss" in the poem 'Death Brings no Loss', for what was

Here before sun-down will
Be here tomorrow when
Light shall reveal it. I
shall lose not a thing. (p. 61)

The lines clearly indicate the understanding of the poet about the nature of the transcendent being. It is everpresent. It is the same that has been in the body, which at old age and death ("sun down"), shall remain the same after death ("When light shall reveal it"). Notice death is for her an illumination of the being.

Kamala Das's second poetical volume 'The Descendants' published in 1967 is by and large bitterly death-conscious. The fact is that she has not been able to reconcile with the sense of nothingness arising from

the thought of death. Here we arrive at a notion somewhat akin to Heidegger's philosophy of the notion of 'nothing'. "We are, as it were, "thrown" in the state of existence and it is of the essence of this our peculiar position that we do not know whence we come and wither we go. Our vision is blocked on both sides, and we strike against the nothing".¹⁸ The poet, similarly, in the poem 'A Cask of Nothing' is overwhelmed by the fact that "I am so alone" and that

If I close my eyes I see nothing
 If I shut my ears I hear nothing
 Nothing but nothing
 Inside or outside
 the nothing that resides
 as an ache within
 the only content
 the human cask can contain.¹⁹

"By facing the bitter meaning of nothingness, we attain illumination of the being in which existence dwells".²⁰

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18. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, History of Philosophy Eastern and Western (London, 1967), p. 429.
19. Kamala Das, Collected Poems, vol. 1 (Trivandrum 1984), p. 82.
20. Radhakrishnan, History of Philosophy, p. 445.

The poet, thus by facing the bitter meaning of nothingness arrives at the conclusion that "death is not the enemy vanquished, but the mystic friend recognized at last."²¹ So we have the poet say confidently in the poem 'Contacts', that,

When I
 Sleep, the outside
 World crumbles, all contacts
 Broken, So, in that longer sleep
 Only
 The world
 Shall die, and I
 Remain, just being.²²

John Donne's (1572-1631) famous lines from 'Divine Poems, X', on death leading to eternity can be cited as a parallel:

One short sleep past, wee wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt
 die.²³

Kamala Das's third collection of poems called 'The Old Playhouse and other Poems' came out in 1973.

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21. Christian Jan Smuts, Walt Whitman, A Study in the Evolution of Personality (Detroit, 1973), p. 119.
22. Kamala Das, The Descendants (Calcutta, 1967), p. 23.
23. Honig and Williams, p. 281.

The title piece 'The Old Playhouse' tells us the purpose and meaning of the poet's search for the Being. It was perhaps no more than a way of learning about one's self. The poem is addressed presumably to her husband. It lodges a protest against the constraint of married life, the fever of domesticity, the routine of lust, artificial comfort and male domination. The husband wanted to tame "a swallow" and deprive her of her natural freedom. All that the poet learnt from this experience was the futility of love. As she sees it, one has to grow beyond searching for love. Attachment to the worldly needs for people and things causes pain. It is in freedom from such attachment that one finds the true self.

For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge,
 haunted
 By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek
 at last
 And end, a pure, total freedom, it must will
 the mirrors
 To shatter and the kind night to erase the
 water.²⁴

24. Kamala Das, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems
 (Madras, 1973), p. 1-2.

And so free from the "last of the human bondage" as the "pupae like a golden moth breaking the conventional mould to free myself to discover the true *of* core of my being",²⁵ the poet grew in freedom, "a freedom bitter as gall, but as essential to me as the air I breathe in".²⁶ The metaphors used here aptly suggest her search for the freedom that lies beyond the physical.

In 'Advice to Fellow Swimmers' we have one of her most luminous and all-embracing employment of the sea as a symbol to suggest the cherished freedom of living:

When you learn to swim
do not enter a river that has no ocean
to flow into, one ignorant of destinations
and knowing only the flowing as its destiny,
like the weary rivers of the blood
that bear the scum of ancient memories,
but go swim in the sea,
go swim in the great blue sea,

25. Kamala Das, "The Impertinent Non-Conformist", Eve's Weekly, September 6, 1980, p. 59.

26. Ibid.

go where the first tide you meet is your body,
 that familiar pest,
 but if you learn to cross it
 you are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe,
 For, even sinking would make no differences
 then.....²⁷

'Ocean' is the symbol for the world the poet hopes to inhabit after death. She is now the river running towards it. In Hindu mythology 'Ocean' is a frequent metaphor for the 'Ultimate', the source of all beings, in the form of Vishnu.²⁸ Hence the 'Ocean' becomes all the more important as representing the transcendent world. The poet makes it clear that beyond the body is a realm of freedom which is so important that it is all encompassing. Only one has to make sure that the first tide, the body, the familiar pest, is crossed, for beyond it lies safety, and freedom.

In the poem, 'Composition' the poet expresses a great wish to go deep down into the bed of the Sea, signifying the primitive wish to join the original home.

27. Das, Collected, p. 100.

28. S. Radhakrishnan, The Brahma-Sutra. The Philosophy of Spiritual Life (London, 1960) p. 128.
 Cf: John Downson, Hindu Mythology (London, 1957) p. 220: "Vishnu is also called Narayana 'who moves in the waters' - because the waters (nara) were his first ayana, or place of motion".

All I want now
 is to take a long walk
 into the sea
 and lie there, resting
 completely uninvolved.²⁹

The sea lurked into the poet's memory ever since her childhood days when she left the red-tiled home where the Arabian Sea roared quite close to her ears. "It sank into her very consciousness and she has been exceptionally aware of her oneness with the sea".³⁰ This sense of belonging and protection deepened through the years:

In the beginning
 the sea was only the wind's
 Ceaseless whisper in the shell
 But lying beside my grand mother
 quite often I thought
 that I could hear at night
 the surf breaking on the shore
 the sea was only two miles away
 that was long ago.³¹

Her grandmother, the presiding deity of her ancestral

29. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 9.

30. Rahman, p. 54.

31. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 3.

home where she began life as a child, symbolizes for the poet, love, innocence, respectability and traditional values. It is no surprise then, that when the poet wishes to join the 'original home' she remembers her grandmother and the house. In the poem 'A Halfday's Betwitchment' she says,

Ultimately the house and I became one

..... for

I am also the sea that roars behind the house..³²

In the poem 'The Suicide' the poet holds conversation with the sea and gives expression to her desire to disentangle from the material world and submit her 'soul' to the sea, for

Only the souls know how to sing

At the vortex of the sea,³³

as both 'sea' and 'soul' are one and the same.

The sea's inner chambers are

all very warm

.....

O, Sea, I am happy swimming

Happy, happy, happy³⁴

32. Das, Collected, p. 46.

33. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 34.

34. Ibid., p. 36.

Another symbol that the poet uses, to express her desire for communion with the ultimate is the Radha-Krishna theme. As "the spiritual experience" is something "beyond the grasp of empirical thought", "through poetry and paradox the seers suggest something of the nature of that which surpasses bounds of logic".³⁵ The poet therefore makes use of this particular objective correlative³⁶ to make her point. Her mythopoeic imagination makes her describe this yearning of hers to join the ultimate, as the love of Radha to merge in Krishna, the Hindu God. In 'My Story', her autobiography, brought out in 1976, Kamala Das describes how the vision of the ultimate came to her in the form of Krishna:

"Free from the last of human bondage, I turned to Krishna. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up, but making a quite entry... He had come to claim me ultimately. Thereafter he dwelt in my dreams. Often

35. Radha Krishnan, The Brahma Sutra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life, (London, 1960), p. 115.

36. T.S.Eliot, Essay on Hamlet (1919), quoted in J.A.Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (London, 1979), p. 417. The relevant passage is: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'Objective-Correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion....".

I sat crosslegged before a lamp reciting mantras
in His praise.³⁷

"The consciousness which arises in these moments of
completed being leads itself inevitably to transcen-
de tal descriptions."³⁸ Expansion of consciousness which
takes place in the aesthetic experiences, according
to the Indian doctrine, is a lifting towards Brahman,
defined as the "highest awareness" by the Vedanta.³⁹

The Radha-Krishna theme introduced by the poet
is also important from the point of the Bhakti tradi-
tion. Bhakti, as it is commonly understood, is
devotion, for a personal being. When this personal
being fails to represent all the good virtues of Love
and compassion, the devotee then searches for an image
that represents, all these virtues and tries to affect
a contact with that image, thereby combining "the
realistic awareness of the objective..... with an
imaginative consciousness of its potential transcen-
dence, as deliverance."⁴⁰ A sensitive woman, under

37. p. 164.

38. I.A. Richards, Principles of Criticism Ed.2.
(London, 1970), p. 252.

39. Gupta, Eternity, p. 15.

40. Jayant Lele, "The Bhakti Movement in India: A
Critical Introduction" in Jayant Lele, ed.,
Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements
(The Netherlands, 1981), p. 10.

conditions of oppression looks upon God as an alternative to her husband. The worldly husband symbolizes the lure, the bondage, the oppressive reality of family life, while the God as husband or lover signifies, liberation or deliverance. It is not "renunciation". "It is only a rejection of repressive marriage and not marriage, oppressive sex, and not love making".⁴¹ Like Radha, Kamala Das's love for Krishna transcended the prison-gates of legitimized duty, false modesty, enforced honour and oppressive kinship.

Hence in the poem 'Radha' the poet says that "the long waiting, had made their bond so chaste", that in his first "true embrace" she was virgin crying

Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You⁴²

Again in the poem 'Ghanashyam' the intensity of her passion animates her diction,

Ghanashyam

41. Ibid., p. 12.

42. Das, Collected, p. 68.

You have like a Koel built your nest in
the arbour of my heart.

My life until now a sleeping jungle is at
last astir with music.⁴³

and again,

Shyam, O Ghanashyam

You have like a fisherman cast your net
in the narrows

Of my mind

And towards you my thoughts today

Must race like enchanted fish.....⁴⁴

The mood reflected in these lines is one of total surrender. The repetition of the words "melting", "Shyam, O Ghanashyam", heightens the moment of mental exhaltation, as in a Bhajan.

The 'koel' building a nest in the arbour of her heart and her sleeping life being caressed with music are two beautiful images stressing the sense of suffering and redemption. Similarly the imagery of the 'fisherman' and the 'enchanted fish' stand for the same desire to be possessed by love.

In the poem 'Lines Addressed to a Devadasi' the

43. Ibid., p. 93

44. Ibid.

poet sits on the temple steps all spent up and exhausted, in a state of indifference to the worldly objects. It reflects the position that she has reached after a life of search for meaning in persons and things. Distinctions and dichotomies have disappeared.

Ultimately there comes a time
 When all faces look alike
 All voices sound similar
 And trees and lakes and mountains
 Appear to bear a common signature
 It is then that you walk past your friends
 And not recognize
 And hear their questions but pick
 No meaning out of words
 It is then that your desires ceases
 And a homesickness begins
 And you sit on the temple steps
 A silent Devadasi.....⁴⁵

The stage of illumination is reached here which leads her to detachment from the things of the senses. She develops an attitude of compassion, the lusts of the body having been overcome. The poet realises that only

45. Ibid., p. 101

in freedom from lusts of the body and desires of the mind that one achieves freedom of the spirit. And the poet ultimately reaches this position when she says in 'My story' that

"We are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal and perishable. The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in ~~my~~ myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to His desire I shall pass through all the pathways of this world condemning none understanding all and then become part of Him.⁴⁶

Self love comes to an end giving rise to love for others. The one who used to dream of becoming a Noor Jehan, of getting married to a rich man and becoming a snob, now feels sorry for the poor, the hungry and the homeless. In the poem 'The House Builders' she feels sorry for the "men who crawl up the clogged scaffoldings/Building houses for the alien rich".⁴⁷ Yet she realises that inspite of their poverty, the poor are happier than the rich and wonders

46. Das, p. 166

47. Das, Collected, p. 1.

what they had in life to be happy about. These and other related questions create tensions in her consciousness. She becomes aware of the paltry existence that she herself has led:

I had the iddocy to think of myself as Kamala a being separate from all the rest and with a destiny entirely different from those of others.⁴⁸

She discovers a common destiny for all things existent too:

I liken God to a tree which has as its parts, the leaves, bark, the fruits and the flowers each unlike the other in appearance and in texture but in each lying dissolved the essence of the tree, the whatness of it. Quiditus. Each component obey's its own destiny. The flowers, blossom, scatter, pollen and dry up. The fruits ripen and fall. The bark peels. Each of us shall obey that colossal wisdom, the taproot of all wisdom and the source of all consciousness.⁴⁹

The quest for the transcendent is often described in Indian imagery as similar to the growth of a tree.

48 Das, My Story, p. 191-

49. Ibid., p. 195.

Deep root is important, as is the life and direction provided by the sun for the branches above. But in the final analysis, a tree is only as strong as its trunk. It is in the developing strength of the trunk that the depth of root and the life of the sun are manifest. Similarly it is in the life of the "self" or "consciousness" that "transcendence" becomes manifest. The individual is transformed out of his earlier individuality, first of all by discovering that the "self" (atman) is not limited to the forms of his own space and time, and eventually by the awareness that he is being reabsorbed into the all-pervading consciousness (Brahman).⁵⁰

The Poet's recognition of the possibility of re-birth is expressed in these lines from her autobiography, 'My Story':

What exists ~~most exist~~. Only the composition will change. Tomorrow my soul might migrate into the womb of a house builder's woman and I might be one of the happy children squatting to see the pink Ganapati.⁵¹

50. See, Paul Younger, Introduction to Indian Religious Thought (Great Britain, 1972), p. 121.

51. Das, My Story, p. 191.

As the minute seed slowly and gradually grows into its full adequate fruit, so human tendencies develop step by step in innumerable incarnations, till their fulfilment is reached. The poet expresses this idea of transitoriness of the soul in these lines:

The idea of our world being round and our life being a cycle has tripped us up. If we were to forget the words past, present and future and were to see life as a collage, a vast assembly of things, people and emotions, we shall stop grieving for the dead stop pining for the living and stop accumulating visible wealth.⁵²

The poet strips herself of all earthly things and becomes poor. She shall "leave all the heavy luggage behind" and "shall carry with (her) only a laugh" when she goes to climb the "merciful and blue" mountains, "the only mountain ranges left for me", as she says in her poem, 'A Holiday for Me'.⁵³

Until then she shall keep writing and through writing study the higher problems of existence.

52. Ibid.

53. Das, Collected, p.27.

You know you gather strength as you go on writing. You study situations, you study people, and if you managed to pick up strength for yourself, why don't you give it to the country. That's poetry too.⁵⁴

This liberation does not mean that she has found happiness. For freedom consists in the attainment of a universal freedom. While the individual has attained inner harmony and freedom, the physical life still persists and engages his energies. "Full freedom therefore demands the transfiguration of the world as well".⁵⁵ In other words, the world will persist as long as there are souls subject to bondage. It is now, therefore, the poet's duty to free these bonded souls, by bringing consciousness in them too. Some of the most recent poems included in 'Kamala Das: Collected Poems, Volume 1' (1984) have clear indications in this direction. The poems like 'Sea At Galle Face Green', 'Smoke in Colombo', 'After July' are marked by an absolute faithfulness to the high ideals of

54. Kamala Das, quoted in Ultra, Vol. 1, January 1985. (pages are not numbered in this magazine). The article is "Woman of Substance", by Malavika Sanghvi.

55. Radhakrishnan, The Brahma Sutra, p. 222.

truth and universal brotherhood. She expresses political freedom in terms of spiritual perfection, in these poems and seems to be suggesting that only by becoming great and free in heart can we become politically great and free.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUDING REMARKS : THE LEXIS OF TRANSCENDENCE

I. The Lexis of Transcendence - The Language

It is evident that the ideational content of Kamala Das's poetry is a transcendental vision of reality. The question one may ask then, is, in what ways does this find a reflex in her language. Ultimately it is language that constantly participates in converting the perception and understanding of the external object into self-awareness and self-consciousness.¹

It may be noted right away that the poetry of Kamala Das belongs to the modernist free-verse, and as such has no regular metre or line length. She depends on the natural speech-style, which gives her the freedom to explore the complex moods and feelings without the restraints of any poetical convention or the intellectual rigours of craftsmanship. Therefore we notice in the poetry of Kamala Das a lack of the "stilted mystic incense style".² that is usually associated with mystical poetry. Her poetry reveals an obvious contrast to the poetry of Sri Aurobindo in 'Savitri' and Sarojini Naidu in 'The Sceptred

1. F.T. Mikhailov, The Riddle of the Self (Moscow, 1980), p. 236.

2. Devindra Kohli, Kamala Das (New Delhi, 1975), p. 22.

Flute' where words are "splendid" and "glittering".³ Her imagery, rhythm and syntax present a state of restlessness and when the experience is transcendental the voice becomes imperfect, not complete or structurally satisfying. The difficulty is not hers alone, "poetic endeavour in the 20th century, including those of women poets, is largely conditioned by the modes of expression of the metaphysicals".⁴ As Arlo Bate put it: "It is necessary to lay aside all fondness for technical perfection, to give one's self up to the spirit".⁵

3. Anisur Rahman, Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das (New Delhi, 1981), p. 65.
4. Anand Rao Thota, Emily Dickinson, The Metaphysical Tradition (New Delhi, 1982), p. 21. Also see:
 J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (Great Britain, 1979), p. 392, for further details about 'Metaphysical Poetry': The relevant passage is:
 The marks of 17th C. metaphysical poetry were arresting and original images and conceits, wit, ingenuity, dexterous use of colloquial speech, considerable flexibility of rhythm and meter, complex themes (both sacred and profane), a liking for paradox..... a direct manner a caustic humour, a keenly felt awareness of morality... a tersely compact expression.... also capable of refined delicacy, grace-fulness and deep feeling.
5. Quoted in Thota, op.cit., p. 29

What matters ultimately then is the creative power and grasp over human experience, whose roots lie in the personality of the poet. As the poet herself puts it, "one's real world is not what is outside him", but "it is the immeasurable world inside him that is real".⁶ Hence what matters for the poet, is the words that come from within. "In the creation accounts of almost all great cultural religions, the word appears in league with the highest Lord of Creation; either as the tool which he employs or actually as the primary source from which he, like all other Being and order of Being, is derived".⁷ Kamala Das is fully aware of the immense potentialities of words. In the poem 'Words',⁸ she says that, words grow on her "like leaves on a tree". Words are also to Kamala Das a "nuisance", "a chasm where running feet must pause", "a blast of burning air" and "a knife most willing to cut your best friend's throat". But more than all this, words for her, emerge from somewhere in the inner recesses of the mind.

6. Kamala Das, My Story (New Delhi, 1976), p. 98.

7. Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth (New York, 1946), p. 45-6.

8. Kamala Das, Summer in Calcutta (New Delhi, 1965) p. 11.

They never seem to stop their coming
 From a silence, somewhere deep within....⁹
 And with the help of these words, the poet tries to
 probe into the heart of things.

In the poem 'An Introduction' the poet reveals that the composition of poetry itself is for the poet an act of 'confession', whereby she tries to "peel off (her) layers" to "reach closer to the soul".¹⁰ The poet is here evidently aware that it is in freedom from all material trappings that inner harmony lies, that reality is something innate. Poetry then becomes the "speech of the mind" that is "here and not there", "a mind that sees, hears and is aware".¹¹ It is a state of inner consciousness in which the mind is aware and can see into the heart of things. It is in this sense of eternity that the poet uses the term "mind" and "soul" here. It can be said therefore that "mind" when seen under the aspect of eternity, is characterised by the poet as "soul" here. Hence a "mind" that is characterised as "here and not there"

9. Ibid.

10. Kamala Das, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (Madras, 1973), p. 9.

11. Das, Summer, p. 59.

has the attributes of the Brahman of Vedanta, described as 'na, iti, na iti', 'not this, not that'.¹² Hence for the poet, poetry itself is the voice of the "soul".

With the discovery of the "self" or the "soul" the individual finds that he is caught up in an experience which lies beyond the world of Samsara. For Kamala Das this transcendent reality that lies "beyond" is equated with "silence", that is, an inexpressible reality. When Kamala Das says that "time survives and moves beyond"¹³ in the poem 'The Fear of the Year', it is eternity that she speaks of, Time, was, is and will be. It is there sitting inside the heart of the tiny atom and inside our soul as well. Even when all this earth has been incarnadined and silenced to death, time survives and moves beyond.

However when the word 'beyond' is mentioned again in the poem 'The Bats',¹⁴ we find the poet in a state of restlessness. Her 'soul' is here compared to that of a 'bat'. The execution of this analogy adds intensity to the situation since the bat cannot

12. Betty Heimann, Facets of Indian Thought (London, 1964), p.99.

13. Das, Summer, p. 13.

14. Ibid., p.46

see in the daylight but only in the darkness of the night. The 'soul' of the poet is now in an "alien zone of light", and like the bat, she is perplexed in this broad light of consciousness that pierces deep into her bones and "beyond", like a pain. The reality that was once a fear has now come to haunt her.

We find next the most engaging use of the word 'beyond' in the poem 'Advice to the Fellow Swimmers'.¹⁵ When the poet discovers the zone of freedom, she recognized it as that which lies "beyond" the body. This idea is again central to the concept of transcendence. The poet cognizes the idea, that the world of reality, where one is free and safe, is the one that lies "beyond" the physical world, beyond the body.

"Silence", and not words are the strength of mystic experience, and that perhaps is the reason why the mystic gifted with a remarkable degree of consciousness wrestles not with words but with the problems of life and chooses to be silent. Initially "silence" resembles for the poet the 'stillness of the dead'.¹⁶ Later we find the poet in a total mood

15. Das, Collected, p. 100

16. Das, Summer, p. 13

of freedom, after having a "silent, dreamless sleep".¹⁷ The image of the "silent Devadasi" acquires a sharp focus in the light of her gesture of withdrawal from the world of material things. Having known the reality, the poet now chooses to be silent like the mystic, aware of her destiny. It is in these hours of withdrawal and inner harmony that she experiences the "silence of noon-day ponds",¹⁸ and remembers "the honey-coloured day of peace" of childhood days. And "an anonymous"¹⁹ "adult peace" comes over her, for "wisdom must come in silence".²⁰

The fact that her consciousness is directed towards nothing more explicit than an "anonymous" but "all enveloping thing" suggests an intentionality that has moved beyond the possibility of discovering a precise name for its object. It is not that the poet feels any doubt about the reality of her intended object. Infact, the fact that the poet chooses to express herself as encountering simply an "all enveloping thing"²¹ instead of refining her awareness of the 'thing'

17. Ibid., p. 16

18. Ibid., p. 41

19. Ibid., p. 54

20. Das, Collected, p. 95.

21. Das, Summer, p. 40.

into a specific 'x' or 'y' intimates that her consciousness is caught up in the act of recognizing the sheer presence of its intended object.

We also find that this "thing" is ubiquitous throughout the cosmos. It is like a universal ether both poured out and between all things since its dwelling is everywhere including "beneath the skin", "underneath the bone",²² "in the fringes of the summer clouds"²³ and "at the basement of the sea".²⁴ We might say then that one of the characteristics of the sublime vision is that its direction is paradoxically to wander, to move always beneath and beyond, to move towards an all encompassing vision of the totality of things. Hence the stylistic techniques employed by the poet give a feeling of restlessness, of a state of flux.

If transcendence means a fusion of 'subject' and 'object', that is a state of non-dualism, that is when consciousness becomes aware of itself as an

22. Das, Summer, p. 23.

23. Ibid., p. 24

24. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 34.

interfusing energy dwelling within the phenomena of nature, we have this state in Kamala Das when she says in the poem 'An Introduction', "anywhere and everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I" and "I too call myself I".²⁵ It is by the peculiar illumination of this consciousness that the subject and object coalesce and become one, in an act of transcendence. This transcendent 'I' which is immanent in all, is the divine self. The meaning and purpose of life is in the growth of this 'self'.

Kamala Das's poetry thus gives us the hope that we could at all times relish life, by watching the running river of life's essence, and rejoicing in it like an exhilarated child "swimming" in it: "O Sea, I am happy swimming".²⁶ "With words" is weaved, a "raiment" and "with songs a sky", and "with such music" "liberate in the oceans their fervid dances".²⁷ "A word is inundation when it comes from the Sea".²⁸ Words now come with the stress of the soul-vision behind it, because it bears the profundity of the deep. Certainly there is transcendence at this point, in the sense that consciousness at a particular pitch

25. Das, Summer, p.59.

26. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 34.

27. Das, Collected, p. 93.

28. Emily Dickinson, quoted in Rameshwar Gupta, Eternity in Words (Bombay, 1969), p. 3, n.

of intensity is freed from the oppression of the given specific conditions in the spatio-temporal and socio-economic environment.

Passions, social manners, romance and ideologies do not seem to bother the poet much today. She has outgrown them. She only awaits, now gazing at the empty stillness, like the "silent Devasi" waiting for her destiny. Her destiny is that she is "immortal",²⁹ the only mortal things are "systems and arrangements".³⁰ Her "immortality" must linger on forever, her freedom is only to pass from one body to another, through decomposition. The rest is "immortality". Here she conveys the idea of transitoriness of the 'soul'. It is a process of evolution. Man, the apex of cosmic evolution on earth, continues to suffer from ignorance and "pains" which he must outgrow, by outgrowing "from cages of involvement".³¹ The poet thus takes a passive stance keeping her mind free and waiting for a complete vision to emerge.

Any discussion of imagery in Kamala Das's poetry, mainly those associated with 'spiritual reality' requires some acquaintance with her metaphysical and religious

29. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 10.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

has inherited from these traditions is not love, but hatred, not wisdom but "lunacy".

This then was our only inheritance, the ancient
Virus that we nurtured in the soul....³⁴

She indulges in a mock pleading to God, "Oh, God Blessed be your fair name", and struggles to find the sources of genuine belief in the "unbelievers' blood". The apparently flippant poem mixing imageries of 'disease' and 'solemnity' is reminiscent of the metaphysical poetry. John Donne, for example in his 'Satyre III' is obviously caught in the conflict, and reviewing the religious controversies of his times, mixing "whores" and sects of religion, ultimately pleads that each individual should find his own light by doubting "wisely" and "inquiring right".³⁵

Though the vocabulary and imagery used by the poet in her love poems are sensuous and fleshy, she does not totally express a disgust for the body. The poem 'The Sensuous Woman, III'³⁶ sketches a beautiful and tender body "inspiring awe and tender sympathy". "A martyr's halo lighting up her pillowcase", she lay under "rugs of cashmere", "limbs flaccid as a baby's

34. Ibid.

35. John Donne, "Satyre III", quoted in Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams, eds. The Major Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1969) p. 148.

36. Das, Collected, p. 52.

skin, cool as a rose", with the smell of "sandal in the air". The description brings to one's mind the picture of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. But Kamala Das ends the poem giving it an air of divinity and everlastingness:

..... as day and night as one tide after
 Another roll away, an ocean's vast
 Languour seizes her blood, the fences between
 The state of life and death fade, and nailed
 To the pleasant cross of Being she straddles
 The handleless clockface of eternity.³⁷

It is clear here that even when the poet is concerned directly with the physical, she is in fact occupied with the frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meaning still exists.

Similarly, regarding her treatment of nature, the poet does not portray nature as it is, but discusses her as viewed and felt at the moment of experiencing the scene. When she was a child lying in a hedge of "henna" she "smelt" the "flowers" and was enveloped by "pain". The "bougainvillea" and "marigolds" are contrasted against the image of "old tombs", while the

37. Ibid.

sight of "lotus" in the poem, 'A Phantom Lotus'³⁸ brought to her mind the image of the "blue face", symbolising the mythic God, Krishna. Thus what apparently looks like nature poem due to the words, "Sea", "Night", "Noon", "Sun", "blue-birds", "anemones" "Spring", "Winter" in effect becomes a poem on death or immortality. All imageries are therefore double in its reference, "a composite of perception and conception."³⁹ In this way the poet considers the objects of nature as a means to understand the eternal. With her maturing vision, she yearns more and more to explore the resonance and validity of nature and seek her home there. In one other essays, the poet regrets that she should never have gone to the city leaving "her home in Malabar, around which the Westerly and the trees weave ~~silken~~ music."⁴⁰

As Coleridge put it, "the instinct brings back the old names".⁴¹ Kamala Das brings back the name of

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38. Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy, Tonight This Savage Rite (New Delhi, 1984), p. 13.
39. J.A. Mezzio, Seventeenth Century English Poetry, p. 69, quoted in Thota, Emily Dickinson, p. 82.
40. Kamala Das, Imprint (October 1973), p. 19, quoted in Anisur Rahman Expressive Forms, p. 57.
41. Quoted in R.S. Varma, Imagery and thought in the Metaphysical Poets (New Delhi, 1972), p. 409.

Krishna and Radha from Hindu-myth. "Mythic personalities in their exaggerated expansion are as it were, steps from the 'here' to the 'beyond'."⁴² Recourse to myth is nourished by the urge to transcend the limited sphere of empirical happenings and conditions. It therefore introduces a new fiction of wider individualities in order to bridge over the distance between the empirical world of limited forms and the unlimited all.

One of the fundamental assumptions contained in the use of the myth is the notion that the name does not merely denote but is actually the 'essence'. That is the potency of 'being' is contained in the utterance of the name it-self.⁴³ Hence, as the poet conceives herself as Radha, the thoughts of Krishna make her cry out in ecstasy, "O, Krishna, I am melting, melting, .. melting,"⁴⁴ and "while another's name (presumably her husband) brings tears, your's/A calm, and a smile."⁴⁵ Therefore in the highest sense, the use of myth, is the power exercised by language on thought in every possible sphere of mental activity. When mental processes fail to grasp reality itself, in order to represent it,

42. Heimann, p. 135.

43. Cassirer, p. 3.

44. Das, Collected, p. 68

45. Das, Summer, p. 19.

poets are driven to the use of symbols or myths.

Whenever a special God is conceived, it is invested with a special name, which is derived from the particular activity that has given rise to the deity. When the poet conceives the name of Krishna, more than the God, it is the aspect of Love that she wishes to conceive. And so the poet says,

Your body is my prison, Krishna,

I cannot see beyond it

Your darkness blinds me

Your love words shut out the wise world's din.⁴⁶

Moreover in Hindu Mythology, "the validity of Krishna's apotheosis does not depend on genealogy, or on the theological assumptions, still less on the accounts of his boyhood adventures among the Gopi's, but on faith (Sraddha), not unlike that of the Christian belief in the divinity of Christ."⁴⁷

The belief in the one and only God makes man aware of his own inner unity. This unity, however, cannot be discovered except as it reveals itself in outward or by virtue of concrete structures of language and myth, in which it is embodied. "The spiritual

46. Das, Collected, p. 75

47. Margaret and James Stutley, A Dictionary of Hinduism, Its Mythology, Folklore and Development 1500 B.C. - A.D. 1500 (Bombay, 1977), p. 151.

depth and power of language is strikingly evinced in the fact that it is speech itself which prepares the way for that last step whereby it is itself transcended."⁴⁸

"Whenever, in the history of religious thought, the demand for the Unity of the Deity arises, it takes its stand on the linguistic expression of Being and finds its surest support in the Word."⁴⁹ Thus the words in the poetry of Kamala Das, act as catalytic agents in creating a sense of vitality and truth, even at the cost of ruthless violation of conventional sanctities, by charging the atmosphere with "a new creative consciousness,"⁵⁰ in which heart and head, instinct and spirituality, ~~and~~ are no longer confused and falsified, but reconciled meaningfully.

II. Concluding remarks:

Transcendence, in the case of Kamala Das, therefore implies no more than a passing into that state of consciousness in which the heavy sameness of the days fails to put her down and the immediate necessities of hour and place do not bother her. In the total being

48. Cassirer, p. 74.

49. Ibid., p. 75

50. Thota, p. 70.

of the mind, it is only a particular plane, different from the normal one. The 'I' becomes more than an 'I'. The veins, nerves and brain cells have undergone reorganization, with the 'self' emerging sea-like. Not alone one's 'self', but the sky, the sea and the mountains, seem to carry the being.

Her poetry truthfully records this change, from the initial stages of emotional poetry, she moves towards a poetry of vision. It is not so much a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions, but more of a controlled expression of a mind, that "sees, hears and is aware". The language has its own individual "distortions" and "queerness" but certainly it is not any "incoherent mutterings". It is also "honest".⁵²

It is a new kind of poetry, with a new feminine sensibility at work. The poetry explodes from a desire to be an individual and the "femaleness that breaks her".⁵³ It is clear that the once keen free girl has now become a lady who no longer represents her original self. She herself comes to realise her imposed position. She has been cheated, her freedom denied and

51. Das, Summer, p. 59.

52. Ibid.

53. Kathleen Blake, Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature (Sussex, 1983), p. 148.

the very fact that she has a mind arouses her husband's ire. The house she finds herself in is the house of darkness. Her life becomes an enforced mask. The embarrassments and disappointments become in fact for her a source of aesthetic exploration of the idea of love itself. As she says in the poem 'Composition' that "it was not to gather knowledge/ of yet another man that I came to you, but to learn what I was."⁵⁴

So poetry, which had come to her rescue, then becomes an epistemology a process of discovery, a self-revelation. With it she "wills the mirrors to shatter," into "a pure, total freedom".⁵⁵ It becomes her desire to express and create the pure, free, self in a visual and tangible form and perpetuate it. She found in the discovery of the self's fluidity the basic condition of the human freedom. She then merges the adoration of God with the adoration of her husband the passion of love with the passion of death, and the hope for a sanctuary in love with the soul's salvation:

Ghanashyam,

The Cell of the eternal Sun,

The blood of the eternal fire,

54. Das, The Old Playhouse, p. 4

55. Ibid., p. 2.

The hue of the summer-air,
 I want a peace that I can tote
 Like an infant in my arms.
 I want a peace that will doze
 In the whites of my eyes when I smile.⁵⁶

And so in the ultimate analysis her poetry becomes the poetry of every one's greatest problem, the problem of pain and suffering, and of man's continuing search for the meaning of life. It becomes an endless struggle to liberate from the dictates of tradition, through the test of personal experience, to re-discover a solution to the basic existential problem of "who am I". Basically, the poet's task then becomes existence-clarification. So the poet penetrates the veils of appearances to seek out the reality beneath. There she touches the inmost essence of her being, which is also the inmost essence of the being of the universe. Here the vibration of her consciousness, usually at clash with the world, is in harmony with all existence.

And so the poet's truth which we presume to be transcendental is after-all physical, since it is ultimately rooted in and grows from the course of real life. Like a tree, it is true to the seed, and yet transcends it.

56. Das, Collected Poems, p. 93.

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