CHAPTER: 2

THIS WOMAN'S FRAME: GENDER AND MARGINALITY IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

"Women are only children of a larger growth [...]. A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them, as he does a sprightly and forward child."

– Lord Chesterfield

"The word 'man' always includes 'woman' when there is a penalty to be incurred, it never includes 'woman' when there is some privilege to be conferred."

– Charlotte Carmichael Stopes

"My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing
a B plus in bed
My son says I am average,
an average Mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.
My daughter believes
In Pass/Fail, and tells me
I pass. Wait 'till they learn
I'm dropping out."

– Linda Pastan

If Kamala Das' poetics of resistance presupposes the marginalization of individuals and groups on diverse bases, then the most crucial factor behind that marginalization must have been 'gender'. When one half of humanity is constantly held back and imposed on, made aware of their biological difference as well as social inferiority, and typecast either as 'angel' or as 'temptress' by heteropatriarchy, it is bound to irritate a sensitive poet who is compelled to ideate both 'resistance to' and 'rectification of' those ills. According to Ann Oakley, 'gender' refers to the 'socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity', operates in parallel with 'sex' or the 'biological division into male and female', and draws attention to the socially constructed aspects of differences 'between' women and men (Oakley: 1972, 26).

The concept of 'gender' has now extended its 'field of reference' to include not only individual identity and personality but also, at the symbolic level, cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and, at the structural level, the sexual division of labour in the family as well as in the work place. This semantic expansion of gender has led to the development of allied concepts like 'gender roles' and 'gender discrimination'. Based on these conceptual outgrowths, we can perceive differential treatment of baby boys and girls who are turned into adult men and women by the processes of socialization in child-rearing, education, youth-culture, employment practices, and family ideology. Significantly, these 'processes of socialization' continue to differentiate between men and women for the rest of their respective lives. This 'differential treatment' based on gender has, therefore, been a major cause of marginalization, resulting in denial of certain basic rights to women.

This environment of denials and discriminations leads to the development of a 'gendered subjectivity' that at once provides women with a specific outlook on the 'self' and the 'other' and formulates an 'awareness context' whereby, according to Barney Glaser and Anselm Leonard Strauss, 'the total combination of what each interactant [including the female] in a situation knows about the identity of the other [especially the male] and his [or her] own identity in the eyes of the other' can be analyzed so as to arrive at an understanding of the social organization of 'knowledge'

and 'awareness' (Glaser and Strauss: 1965, 40). Julia Kristeva, however, has reminded us that 'a woman cannot "be"' (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron: 1981, 137), since 'woman' (as explained earlier) is a social rather than a natural construct, and the fight to dissolve the bourgeois humanist conception of identities must include sexual identities (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron: 1981, 138).

As Kathryn McPherson has taught us, this has also been the perception of the Second-wave Feminists of Europe and America in the last forty years (McPherson in Code: 2000, 209-210). Women's urge to control their own bodies led to the campaign for greater sexual freedom outside conventional heterosexual and/or marital relationships. The need for economic independence meant that women were clamouring for 'equal pay for equal work', 'equal pay for work of equal value', and 'access to non-traditional areas of employment'.

Second-wave Feminism has, however, been undermined by long-standing and radical dissensus among the various feminist movements. In fact, as McPherson has further pointed out:

> In contrast to the international consensus around questions like suffrage that had shaped the first wave of feminism, late-twentieth-century feminist movements in Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, South America and Asia challenged the priorities and analyses of their western counterparts; questions of imperialism, religion and cultural difference all demanded new answers (McPherson in Code: 2000, 209).

Much in the same vein, Kristeva has suggested, 'the women's struggle cannot be divorced from revolutionary struggle, class struggle, or anti-imperialism' (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron: 1981, 140). Besides, the development of this alternative doxa ensured that 'women's empowerment', rather than 'individual/personal freedom' or 'male/female equality', became the priority for these 'Postcolonial' or 'Third World Feminists'. As Rehana Ghadially has observed:

> India [like other Third World countries] is as yet new to the ideology of personal freedom. Both Indian men and women have hitherto functioned under rigid hierarchies, learned to curb freedom; condition them to suppress their needs, silence their senses, and sublimate their selves in a philosophy of self-denial, self-effacement and services (Ghadially: 1988, 94).

'Third World feminism', as preached by Rehana Ghadially and as practised by Kamala Das, is fundamentally humanistic and proactive, whereas much of the mainstream western feminism is 'reactive' to a significant extent (Ghadially: 1988, 94). So, in keeping with this view, Das advocates the empowerment of women through awareness and activism though not at the cost of men. Her feminism, as Das herself states, unlike that of the Western Radical Feminists, has never been 'anti-male'. In an interview with P.P. Raveendran, Kamala Das has formulated her feminist stance in the following manner:

> Feminism as the westerns see it is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because I have loved my husband and I still love my children, who are sons. And I think from masculine company I have derived a lot of happiness. So I will never be able to hate them (P.P. Raveendran 1993, 159).

From the above excerpt, one can easily divine that unlike many of the Second Wave western feminists Das glorifies motherhood as one of the unique abilities, and then, therefore, inalienable rights of women (e.g. 'Jaisurya', 'Peripuerperal Insanity').

Thus, the prevalent critical practice of virtually nailing the poet to male-female binarism is questionable in her case. Das' 'egalitarian' position, however, proves largely untenable in the light of some of her poems like 'An Introduction' and 'Spoiling the

Name' in which the poet-speaker critiques the socio-cultural assumptions and arrangements that unmake a female to make a woman, from man's equal and different counterpart to some kind of lesser man (woman). In other poems such as 'A Losing Battle', 'Glass' and 'The Stone Age', her poetic personae lambaste the inconsiderate sexual aggression of the husband-figure or the male. In poems like 'The Old Playhouse', 'Gino', 'The Freaks', etc. the poet-speaker reveals the terrible fate that awaits married women in a male-dominated society like ours. That this callous and selfish attitude of the husband-figure may lead the sensitive and independent minded woman to seek the recognition of her essential femininity outside marriage is seen and shown in such poems as 'Ethics', 'The Looking Glass', etc. In some other poems like the 'Colombo Poems', 'Delhi 1984' and 'Old Cattle' that deal with issues such as ethnicity or the environment, the poet seems to suggest that the violence and violation are offshoots of the male hegemony. She also implies that these or such other ills could be significantly alleviated, if not completely neutralized, provided women were to be sufficiently empowered. Here Kamala Das seems to concur with Rabindranath Tagore who had observed, "Barbarity is the gift of the male" (Tagore, quoted in Sen: 1968, 53).

Revealing the patriarchal bias against women and women-writers, and Kamala Das' awareness of as well as resistance to that 'bias', 'An Introduction' becomes the key poem in any discussion of Das' negotiations with marginality that this 'woman's frame' gives to its owners.

Rama Kundu has called 'An Introduction' a poem about 'identity' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 129). A careful reading of the poem, however, forces us to add 'culture' to its thematic canvas. In fact, 'An Introduction' displays the binary roles played by culture and identity in shaping Das, the person as also Das, the poet. If 'culture' is the constrictive framework, socially imposed on the individual by the various power-centres, that inhabits the mind of an individual, programming it to think and act in a prescribed way as showing marks of 'cultivation', and holding out the promise of 'worship' (social adulation), then 'identity', that roughly translates into 'that'-ness, becomes linked with the idea of Latin 'Quiditas' or 'what'-ness, turning out to be an

alternative construct that helps the individual (in this case the dark-skinned Indian woman-poet) resist, neutralize, alleviate or utilize the cultural norms to further his or her own end. Re-read with this insight, 'An Introduction' becomes a site for the contesting voices – the forbidding, ordering, judging, and punishing breed of 'categorizers' as opposed to and by the defying, suffering, and subverting 'I', representing as they do, the discourse of culture and the counter-discourse of identity respectively.

Kundu makes a controversial statement that the poem 'begins with an "I" who rejects a political identity' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 129). The first few lines of 'An Introduction', however, seem to negate this contention. K. Satchidanandan (Satchidanandan in Panja: 2001, 51) and I. G. Ahmed (Ahmed: 2005, 60) have both called attention to the unmistakably political dimension of the following statement by the female-speaker:

> I don't know politics but I know the names
> Of those in power, and can repeat them like
> Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
> Nehru. [...] (*SC* 59)

Das, here, reveals how patriarchy creates a hegemonic culture that neither expects nor accepts women knowing 'politics'. Women, both individually and collectively, are excluded from the centres of power, and can only 'repeat' the names of 'those in power', whereby this act of repetition becomes contingent on the male act of free will i.e. discussing 'politics'. As Paul Valéry had indicated, "Politics was, at first, the art of preventing people from interfering in matters that concerned them. To this, in later times, was added the art of compelling people to decide matters which they did not understand" (Valéry cited in du Preez: 1980, N. pag.).

The female-speaker's statement 'I don't know politics' and the woman-poet's act of writing the poem are tentative steps towards self-empowerment, and, therefore, entail assertions of their self-identity which can be anything but apolitical. The

speaker's 'repetition' of 'the names / Of those in power' involves a 'mimicry' of the discourse of politics that, in the words of Jeremy Hawthorn, incorporates 'the subversive potential contained in the forced and (often overtly) half-hearted adoption of the style or conventions of a DOMINANT authority – whether national-CULTURAL or GENDER-political' (Hawthorn: 2000, 209).

Kundu points out how the speaker 'proffers a national card and a colour brand which she proudly proclaims' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 130), 'I am Indian, very brown' (*SC* 59). According to Sanjukta Das, this statement 'rings with the confidence of this free nation' (S. Das: 2002-2003, 208). She further suggests that it is from this 'location' that the poet goes on to 'unravel the other tapestry woven by politics, history, literature, language, patriarchy and gender' (S. Das: 2002-2003, 208). 'An Introduction', according to K. Satchidanandan, thus becomes 'a polyphonic text with several of the poet's voices seeking articulation in a single verbal construct' (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 10). As regards her position as a poet, these assertions of identity, rather identities, pertaining to her 'nationality' and 'colour', take a heavy toll on the speaker. The cultural categorizers hasten to decry her act of 'write'-ing, and that too 'in English':

> [...] Don't write in English, they said,
> English is not your mother-tongue. [...] (*SC* 59)

The command of course is two-fold, 'Don't write', since the speaker is a woman, and 'Don't write in English', since she is 'Indian' and 'very brown'. Since the poet's choice of English as medium, and its many ramifications have been discussed in the previous chapter, we may safely confine our present discussion to an appraisal of her act of writing with the prior awareness that women's writing is a truly ideological act – a weapon to fight back the many socio-cultural rigours to which patriarchy has subjected them. Needless to say, the speaker refuses to obey these dictates, and instead strongly defends her right to practise and assert her identities:

[...] Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why nor let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions [...] (*SC* 59)

Of course, she will continue writing poetry to express her 'joys', 'longings', and 'hopes', regardless of the consequences. As Jayakrishnan Nair has shown us, the 'self-conscious poet' in Das cannot 'pretend ignorance about her unique position as a feminist mouthpiece' (Nair in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 68). So, her poems deliver 'the speech of the mind that is / Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and / is aware' (*SC* 59). Nair finds in this 'a confident pronouncement of the originality of her [Das'] poetic revolt' 'asserted through suggesting the spatial variations of the mind' to be found 'here' (within the poet) and not 'there' (elsewhere) (Nair in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 69). In fact, Das seems to have resolved to 'override the traditional limits prescribed for the expositions of the feminine psyche' (Nair in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 69). To keep Nair's remark in perspective, it is the acute expression of the woman-poet's 'aware'-ness of 'all' (including the persecutions of women) and not the naïve description of 'trees in storm', 'monsoon clouds' or 'rain', and not even the accurate reproduction of 'the incoherent mutterings of the blazing funeral pyres' that should concern Das, the 'feminist mouthpiece'. Eleven years after the publication of this poem, we find the adoption of the same stance in Hélène Cixous' maxim, 'I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man' (Cixous: 1976, 877).

Putting to rest the quarrel of culture with her poetic identity in the first part of the poem, Das goes on to deal with her female identity in the second. The speaker reminisces, 'I was child'. Significantly, the term 'child' is of common gender. But, the gender-neutrality of 'child' soon gets destabilized when the speaker grows into and becomes a 'woman', a gendered being:

> [...] I was child, and later they
> Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
> Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. [...] (*SC* 59)

Judith Butler, with whom Das seems to agree here, holds:

> If there is no recourse to a "person", a "sex" or a "sexuality" that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity? [...] If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiple contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds put the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing [...]. As an ongoing discursive practice, (becoming a woman) is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most-reified forms, the "congealing" is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means (Butler in Gould: 1997, 86-87).

True to Butler's precept, Das' poetic persona falls a prey to the matrix of patriarchal power – under its gaze, and at its mercy – in her dual role as 'object' and 'patient'. That her 'growth' is physical and not so much mental is evinced by her hesitant act of asking 'for love, not knowing what else to ask / For'. Besides, her growth is always monitored by society, active under the influence of the prevalent cultural assumptions, 'later they /

Told me I grew'. The female-speaker is thus marginalized to the position of an object under the panoptic gaze of society.

Gradually, the attacks on her female identity increase in frequency and ferocity as the first male pronoun, 'he', representing the father-figure, draws 'a youth of sixteen into the / Bedroom' and closes 'the door', or as the second male pronoun, 'he', representing the husband-figure, has sex with her, makes her pregnant, and makes her a mother – prematurely. In this context, Satchidanandan has pointed out, "Speaking of adolescence her female body inscribes itself on the text and she remembers too her first encounter with masculine violence [...]" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 10). If the father-figure's decision to marry her off is prompted by a perception of physical growth, then the husband-figure's ruthless haste in enjoying her body is also motivated by her swelling limbs. Both these male-figures are agents of the patriarchal culture and they temporarily succeed in deactivating the speaker's female identity, as betrayed by her desperate adoption of a male exterior, by putting on male attires and wearing the hair short. Satchidanandan observes, "The woman cannot change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 10). This act entails an attempt at self-empowerment through deception that had previously been attempted by the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies.

This deception, however, proves ineffective; for the lynx-eyed gaze of culture sees through it. So, the 'categorizers' cry out:

> [...] Dress in sarees, be girl,
> Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
> Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
> Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
> On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
> Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
> Still be Madhavikutty. It is time to
> Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love [...] (*SC* 60)

Sanjukta Dasgupta has rightly indicated how the tirade of the categorizers 'exposes social and cultural construction of femininity' (Dasgupta: 2000, 173). Interestingly, these categorizers say many things about the prescribed attire, occupation, and identity for and of the female-speaker that amount to a constrictive bulwark of patriarchal culture against female assertiveness. Rosemary Marangoly George is of the opinion that the poet's 'listing of the categories available to the middle-class woman (girl, wife, embroiderer, cook, quarreller with servants) all assumes a heterosexual and domestic foundation' (George: 2000, 749). To 'refuse these domestic categories is to refuse the sense of belonging and shelter offered by heteropatriarchal arrangements' (George: 2000, 749).

Choosing 'a name' will determine the role, for 'names' are indicative of 'gender' and prescribe 'fit' roles for each of the genders. Choosing 'roles' is the only way an individual can 'fit in' and 'belong', and 'fitting in' is the only way she can be safe. So, the female-speaker is confined to the inside of the house, destined to perform the household chores, and when she is allowed to assert her superior self-identity, she can do it only by quarrelling with the servants (her inferiors) and not with the husband or the male-figure (her superior) even though he can with impunity 'jilt' her in love. The 'categorizers' condescend to advise her to 'be girl' and to 'be wife'. Both of these terms are umbrella terms, exclusive of individuality and, therefore, unacceptable to any woman of substance. To abide by the cultural fatwa, she can only be 'Amy' (the pet name denoting her private identity) to her husband and very close friends and relatives, 'Kamala' (the name denoting her formal identity) to her grandmother and the readers of her poetry in English, or 'better still' 'Madhavikutty' (the pseudonym denoting an adopted and then therefore an alienated identity) to the readers of her fiction in Malayalam. These socio-cultural impositions force the female individual to fragment

her identity into specific stereotypes, lose the unity of being, and become self-alienated for the time being.

The female-speaker, to be sure, is a resilient individual who can dare to take the assertive step of meeting 'a man' – 'a man' and certainly not 'the man' or her husband. Even after being 'jilted in love' by the husband, who could hurt her womanhood by talking of women sexier than her (*MS* 87) or by flaunting his homosexuality (*MS* 110), the love-lorn woman-speaker hazards loving another man as an assertion of her indomitable femininity. In this connection, S.Z.H Abidi has opined, "For a man, a woman is almost invariably a biological necessity while for a woman the man she woos is a kind of a psychological imperative" (Abidi: 2005, 309). Faced with a constrictive culture of 'categorizers', the cornered individual i.e. the female-speaker tries to come up with different identity-formations. She had once tried to borrow the male identity as a constructive alternative. In other words, this was the intended replacement of her intrinsic femininity with the extrinsic masculinity. This failing, she again tries to cast off her personal femininity for a more inclusive gender identity:

> [...] I am every
> Woman who seeks love. [...] (*SC* 60)

This is the name-weary female-speaker – the 'Amy', the 'Kamala' or the 'Madhavikutty' of pervious lines trying to assume a name-free feminine identity. Interestingly, another shift follows here, bringing in a third male pronoun, 'he', the lover-figure. The 'I', as Kundu explains, does not try anymore to deny her womanhood (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 131); for from this 'he' she gets real companionship and reciprocity in lieu of mere male stewardship and authority. So, they (lover and the speaker) can now 'meet' and 'love' as 'every man' (any man) and 'every woman' (any woman). This uninhibited assertion of female identity gives the speaker freedom. This freedom, in its turn, gives her the capacity to observe and evaluate. Thus, she becomes capable of neutrally assessing her surroundings with both expectancy and trepidation.

The speaker is initially elated at the prospect of choice but eventually saddened to realize the contrastive way in which society holds them.

In love, as in life, the woman-speaker has to be passive and dwindle into a secondary role. She cannot 'run' or 'flow' like 'a river'. As a matter of fact, she has to 'wait' like the 'ocean'. Unlike the woman, the man can proudly proclaim his identity:

> [...] Who are you [...]
> [...] it is I. [...]

According to N.V. Raveendran, 'the male tendency to view himself as unique and to subordinate the female as a mere medium for pleasure is thwarted in this part of the poem' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 43). By revealing this self-seeking 'male tendency' and the consequent marginalization of the female, Das strategically points up the injustice thereof. In real life, however, this male 'I' gets fitted into the world like a 'sword' in its 'sheath'. As Rama Kundu points up, 'sheath also protects the sword, and the sword easily cuts through things' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 131). Here the sexual implications of 'sword in its sheath' can hardly be overlooked. When contrasted with this male 'I', the other 'I', which is female, gets inevitably marginalized:

> [...] It is I who drink lonely
> Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
> It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
> And then feel shame, it is I who lie dying
> With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
> I am saint. I am the beloved and the
> Betrayed. [...] (*SC* 60)

The speaker feels the need to speak representatively, for all her attempts at reaching out have been thwarted and she has always had to retreat with shame and chagrin. This 'shame' is a cultural construct imposed on the individual to proscribe

individual identity and promote a 'cultural identity', which in John A. Loughney's formulation, stipulates that 'a person achieves the fullest humanity within an accepted context of traditional symbols, judgments, values, behaviour, and relationships with specific others who self-consciously think of themselves as a community' (Loughney in *CREP*: 185). Hence, non-conformist and assertive acts on the part of the female-speaker such as drinking 'lonely / Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns', laughing, and making love – all result in her eventual feeling of shame and 'dying / With a rattle in my throat'. The moral is that non-conformity to cultural norms may lead to self-reproach and social strangulation of the individual implied by both the feeling of shame and the 'rattle' in the throat. In the words of Satchidanandan, "The many ontological dimensions of her being – lover's darling, drinker of citynights, one who makes love, feels shame, sinner, saint, beloved, betrayed – are tied together at the end of the poem [...]" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 11). The female 'I' is fated to remain passive – an object for cultural inspection and judgement. So, she can only be a 'saint' or a 'sinner', 'beloved' or 'betrayed', as the case may be, and never an individual, free to assert her own identity. In fact, the condition of the female 'I' closely tallies with what Hélène Cixous has later diagnosed as 'antinarcissism':

> They [the patriarchal society] have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove (Cixous: 1976, 878).

In a final frantic attempt to subvert cultural constrictions, the female 'I' tries to reach out to the male 'I' pointing to the fact that they are both emotionally alike:

> [...] I have no joys which are not yours, no
> Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (*SC* 60)

She further tries to point up their indistinguishable human identity, 'I too call myself I'. This final assertion by the female 'I' is a throw back to an earlier assertion by the male 'I':

> [...] Who are you, [...]
> [...] it is I. [...]

S.C Harrex in this connection has highlighted Das' 'dual vocalism' that can fuse both the 'autobiographical I' (gendered identity) and the 'archetypal I' (human identity) 'with its stress on the connecting principle "too"' (Harrex in Das, 1986: 165).

The binaries of the poem comprise of paired pronouns ('I'/'they', 'I'/'he', 'I'/'you', and 'I'/'I'). 'They' stand for the voice of culture whereas 'I' for that of identity. Similarly, 'he' and 'you' stand for the perpetrators of cultural hegemony and 'I' for its prey. Their dialogic relationship is clearly manifested in the truth and tension of their co-existence.

The poem 'Spoiling the Name' exemplifies the poet's proactive position with regard to her identity as a woman. In fact, this 'identity', as I. G. Ahmed asserts, can never be tethered to her 'name' that, like her roles, was given to her by 'somebody else', and that too, for mere 'convenience' (Ahmed: 2005, 59-60):

> I have a name, had it for thirty
> Years, chosen by someone else
> For convenience, but when you say
> Don't spoil your name, I feel I
> Must laugh, for I know I have a life
> To be lived, and each nameless
> Corpuscle in me, has its life to
> Be lived [...] (*SC* 28)

Whereas in 'An Introduction' the issue was to 'choose a name', here it is even more arbitrary, since the 'name', which was chosen by 'someone else', is pinned to the reluctant 'I'. When 'you', standing for the authoritative culture, says 'Don't spoil your name', the dictate assumes a more serious proportion; for as we have seen in 'An Introduction', choosing 'a name' implies confirming the gender and conceding the authority of culture by being confined in a constrictive social space. Here, in 'Spoiling the Name', 'spoiling' the 'name' implies daring to come out of that constrictive social space and, therefore, invites the censor of the 'categorizers'. Bruce King in his analysis of the poem betrays his own categorizing and blinkered approach to this woman-poet when he holds 'her sexual adventures' responsible for 'spoiling her name':

> Often her poetry offers her [Das'] versions of the *carpe diem* theme, a seizing the day both in awareness of the passing time and youth and in a need to live intensely. To a person who objects that her sexual advances are spoiling her name she replies: 'I know I have a life / To be lived, and each nameless / Corpuscle in me, has its life' (King: 1987, 151).

What strikes us in the above quoted excerpt is the critic's strategic and selective amnesia that leads him to categorize the 'adventures' as merely 'sexual'. King here conveniently forgets her other activities such as her frequent walks along 'the city's dusty / Streets', 'looking for old books, antiques, / And new thrills that might come my / Way'. As a result, a woman's assertion of identity, flying in the face of an authoritative culture, is reduced to 'her versions of the *carpe diem* theme, a seizing the day'.

Faced with this reality, the resilient 'I' lashes out, camouflaging her bold rejionder under the garb of derision: 'I feel I / Must laugh'. Of course the 'I' has a 'life to be lived', quite independent of the constrictive framework of name and norm. But, she is also aware of the perils of opposing culture in a reckless manner which may lead to social alienation or even social strangulation of the individual. So, she strategically disperses her individual identity and the urge to live to the 'corpuscles' (cells) that constitute her body and being. In fact, each 'corpuscle' is 'nameless', has a 'life' to be

'lived', and is unstable on account of cell division and mutation. Thus, the individual speaker's identity is first destabilized and then rehabilitated, only to be ultimately prioritized over culture.

The combative speaker fails to figure out why the constrictive framework of her 'name' should restrain her from meeting or receiving a 'man', when, as she has previously pointed out in 'An Introduction', they can 'meet' and 'love' as 'every man' and 'every woman':

> [...] why should this name, so
> Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room
> Where I go to meet a man
> Who gives me nothing but himself, who
> Calls me in his private hours
> By no name, [...] (*SC* 28)

The name-weary speaker seeks the same gift of anonymity so that she can be free to 'walk' the 'city's dusty / Streets', looking for 'old books', 'antics', and 'new thrills' that might come her way. The speaker's hatred of 'name' stems to a large extent from its incompatibility with her boundless vibrancy:

> [...] Why should I remember or bear
> That sweet-sounding name, pinned to
> Me, a medal, undeservingly
> Gained, at moments when, all of
> Me is ablaze with life? [...] (*SC* 28)

In this context, I.G. Ahmed states that 'The superfluity of a name contrasts with the beauty of the urge to live' (Ahmed: 2005, 60). But, we should add here that the 'name' is not only superfluous but positively undesirable as well, because the 'I' is well aware of the dangers it poses. Hence the refusal to 'Carry / This gift of a name like a corpse

and / Totter beneath its weight / And perhaps even fall [...]' (*SC* 28). Here, S.C. Harrex observes, 'Identity is not to be found in the "medal" of a name, but in inner commitment to living' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 172). The speaker's concluding statement that she loves 'This gift of life more than all' assumes a greater significance if we relate it to the phenomena of change and growth.

That the possibility of 'change' and 'growth' is often denied to the owners of 'this woman's frame' is clearly revealed in the next poem, 'The Descendants'; for change and growth that must lead to and culminate in women's renewal and redemption does not constitute a priority for heteropatriarchy.

In fact, 'The Descendants' is at once a satirical exposé of women's marginalization in a patriarchal society, and a sad realization of its inescapability. The word 'descendants' in the title as also the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we'/'us' bestows on the poem a representative quality. Immediately questions such as the identity of 'we' and the nature of 'descent' begin to haunt us. That 'we' refers to the marginalized 'women'-kind is determined by the poem's context. Naturally, such women can claim to be the 'descendants' of figures like Lilith and Ahalya. Throughout the youth, the speaker says, women like her had indulged in 'gentle sinning'. The ambiguous term 'gentle sinning' slowly explains itself as it is associated with the exchange of 'insubstantial love' and the adoption of 'cold loveliness':

> We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
> Exchanging some insubstantial love and
> Often thought we were hurt, but no pain in
> Us could remain, no bruise could scar or
> Even slightly mar our cold loveliness. (*D* 8)

Evidently, the 'love' that such women exchange with their lovers was 'insubstantial', because it was concerned with 'loveliness' (physicality) and ignored any 'cold'-ness (lack of emotion) that marred its vitality. In this context, I.G. Ahmed observes, "[...]

Descendants also sets out to expose the perverted male equation of a woman with her body" (Ahmed: 2005, 104). Society dubbed it sinful, but tolerated it with the palliative 'gentle', because it was needed to satisfy the carnal desires of the male. The marginalized women, however, had their own counterstrategy – that of emotionally substracting themselves from the affair. As a result, though they often thought they were 'hurt', they could easily forget those hurts and could maintain their 'cold loveliness' for their male admirers, undeterred by any personal desire or the lack of it.

That the 'gentle sinning' was the sin of the flesh – that of lying (engaging in sexual acrobatics) 'in every weather' – gets substantiated as the speaker mentions 'soft beds' and 'softer forms'. But, this cosy 'soft'-ness is immediately undercut by the word 'nailed' on account of its hardness and sexual associations. The women were 'nailed' to the 'soft beds' by their respective male lovers in 'every weather' and in spite of their 'cold loveliness'. Though the speaker denies being 'nailed' to 'crosses', the idea of crucifixion or, at any rate, that of sacrificing the women on the alter of male libido, can hardly be discounted here. In fact, their 'cold'-ness was precipitated by the routine drabness of this sexual act ('in every weather'):

> We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not
> To crosses, but to soft beds and against
> Softer forms, while the heaving, lurching,
> Tender hours passed in a half-dusk, half-dawn and
> Half-dream, half-real trance. [...] (*D* 8)

As the 'heaving lurching / tender hours' passed, the speaker could carry on with this mindless bed-game only by doing violence to her own nature, and this exacted a heavy toll on her and others like her. In fact, this act punished women with a spiritual stupor (trance) and a loss of perception that prevented them from knowing the 'dawn' from the 'dusk', and the 'dream' from the 'real'. In this context, Sunanda P. Chavan comments, "In 'The Descendants' (*The Descendants* p.8) the poet probes into the state of helpless

submission to the process of spiritual decay in the present world [...]" (Chavan: 1984, 68).

By defining herself and her ilk as 'yielders', 'yielding ourselves to everything', the speaker self-disqualifies from reclaiming the past or resisting the future:

> [...] We were the yielder,
> Yielding ourselves to everything. It is
> Not for us to scrape the walls of wombs for
> Memories, not for us even to
> Question death, but as child to mother's arms
> We shall give ourselves to the fire or to
> The hungry earth to be slowly eaten,
> Devoured. [...] (*D* 8)

Leaving aside the stupefied indeterminacy, the female-speaker now reassesses her situation. It seems to her that since they have yielded themselves to 'everything', and by implication yielded 'everything' they had (feminine dignity and sexuality), they could neither retreat to the antenatal memory of female bonding between mother and daughter within the secure confines of the womb, nor could they question and, by implication, evade death or eternalize their feminine mystique. In life, they had 'yielded' themselves to their lovers, in death they would yield themselves as 'child to mother's arms'. Here, by likening death to 'mother', and the fire/the earth to 'mother's arms', the female-speaker tries to reveal the full extent of her disenchantment with and distaste for life in the present condition; for at least in death she hopes to escape both the inescapability of yielding and the passage of the 'heaving lurching / tender hours'.

In this respect, Das' 'The Descendant' becomes a feminist critique of and rejoinder to the carpe diem theme as expressed in poems such as Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' (Marvell in Gardner: 1985, 250-252). What Marvell's male-speaker threatens the female-addressee with, namely death and dismemberment, if she refuses to 'yield'

and what Das' female-speaker sees as her impending fate, namely the same death and dismemberment, even after accepting to 'yield', testify to woman' doom in any case, and corroborate the contention of Hélène Cixous that the woman is always kept within 'the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty', 'guilty of everything, guilty at every turn, for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being too hot; for not being both at once [...]' (Cixous: 1976, 880).

In the concluding lines of the poem, as I.G. Ahmed asserts, the speaker expresses 'her gnawing awareness' of women's loss of both 'intellectual visibility' and 'freedom of choice' in the 'centres of powers', and the consequent 'commodification of their body' and devaluation of their being by the patriarchal society (Ahmed: 2005, 60). The climactic outburst apparently reveals the speaker's grief and helplessness, reverberating with inter-textual traces and echoes. She is well aware of the fact that 'none will step off his cross' or 'show his wounds' to women. Obviously, the allusion is to Christ, his reassurance of resurrection of hope and of mercy. She also knows that 'no god' (Zoroaster/Zarathustra) 'lost in / silence shall begin to speak' to them revealing ageless wisdom (he had received from Ahura Mazda, the lord wisdom) (*EWED*: 2171). She is also not impervious to the fact that 'no lost love' (like Menelaus in the Iliad) is going to 'claim' and accept them (like Helen). On the surface level, the speaker's words seem to suggest women's utter dependence on and subservience to the male gods to be 'redeemed' or 'made new':

> [...] None will step off his cross
> Or show his wounds to us, no God lost in
> Silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
> Claim us, no; we are not going to be
> Ever redeemed or made new. (*D* 8)

But, on a deeper level, the same realization of masculine inability or unwillingness to 'redeem' or 'renew' the female, may suggest alternative strategies for women, aimed at independent self-redemption and self-renewal through self-assertion. There is no

denying the fact that in the present condition there is no chance for women to be 'redeemed' or 'made new'. Writing this poem with that message, may help other women to develop alternative strategies to achieve the said goals. It is here that we find Das' poetics of resistance at work, proscribing women's dependence on male benefactors and promoting their self-reliance. The female-speaker seems to concur with Cixous, 'we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine', as well as question with Cixous, 'but who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them?' (Cixous: 1976, 885).

The role and rigour of the patriarchal culture in shaping and silencing a woman's identity receives Das' bitter reproach in the poem 'The Freaks'. That the poem is about the male-female relationship, and that the nature of this relationship is predominantly sexual, is clearly revealed in the first six lines of the poem:

> He talks, turning a sun-stained
> Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
> Cavern where stalactites of
> Uneven teeth gleam, his right
> Hand on my knee, while our minds
> Are willed to race towards love; (*SC* 10)

Significantly, it is 'he' who 'talks', turns his 'sun-stained / Cheek', laughs or, at any rate, opens 'his mouth', letting his teeth 'gleam', and places 'his right / Hand on my knee'. In short, it is he who takes the initiative in the game of 'love'/'lust'. The woman, the poem's speaker, is fated only to receive and reciprocate the male's sexual advances. That 'our minds / Are willed [by society acting under the cultural expectations of heteropatriarchy] to race towards love' is further proof, if proof were needed, of the marginalized condition of the speaker whose femineity, according to N.V. Raveendran, 'is projected only through the [her] capacity [...] to have coitus with the he' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 65). This 'will' is societal rather than individual (of the speaker),

and in lieu of any intimacy there is mere enforcement of that 'will'. As a result, 'our minds' can only wander, tripping / Idly over puddles of desire'. 'Puddles', in this context, become emblematic of the degenerate and putrefied nature of this 'coitus', whereby vitality is replaced by stagnation and sterility. In utter disgust, the speaker asks a brace of rhetorical questions with the realization of the futility of expecting any worthwhile answer:

> [...] Can't this man with
> Nimble finger-tips unleash
> Nothing more alive than the
> Skin's lazy hungers? [...] (*SC* 10)

And again:

> [...] Who can
> Help us who have lived so long
> And have failed in love? [...] (*SC* 10)

The answers, by implication, are in the negative, reinforcing the speaker's doom in the process; for 'this man' (her man/husband) cannot 'unleash' anything 'more alive than the / Skin's lazy hungers'. The 'hungers' are 'lazy' (ineffectual and short-lived) because they are 'skin's' (skin-deep). Das' strategy of qualifying and trivializing the grand *needs* like 'desire' and 'hungers' by respectively associating them with 'puddles' and 'lazy', testifies to the clash of inner feelings and outer experiences. The speaker's call for third-party mediation and 'help' is similarly foredoomed to failure; for there is no one experienced ('lived so long') or bold ('failed in love') enough to offer them any help or guidance. The 'heart' of the speaker, as a result, becomes 'An empty cistern' (a mechanical construct) – emptied of her natural feelings, and yet to be filled by either the deep affection or the passionate desire that love entails.

The woman-speaker's marginalized status is foregrounded as her 'heart' is kept 'waiting' for the touch of intimacy. This 'touch of intimacy' is never forthcoming, so the 'cistern'-like 'heart' 'fills itself / With coiling snakes of silence'. The speaker's 'silence', as contrasted with the male-figure's 'talk', frames a context of social inequality, whereby the marginalized woman has to wait for and accede to her own sexual exploitation on account of socio-cultural norms:

> [...] The heart,
> An empty cistern, waiting
> Through long hours, fills itself
> With coiling snakes of silence... (*SC* 10)

But, she has to pay a big price for doing so – that of going against her own nature and predilections. She is intelligent enough to realize this as she calls herself 'a freak' (abnormal person). The speaker proceeds to rationalize her behaviour as being directed towards saving her face:

> I am a freak. It's only
> To save my face, I flaunt, at
> Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (*SC* 10)

This 'face-saving' is directly associated with the cultural expectations of patriarchy, because the woman has to 'flaunt' (keep up the show of) 'a grand, flamboyant lust' in order to retain/maintain her spousal acceptability. The prepositional phrase 'at times' (sometimes) accentuates the 'irregular', 'unusual', and 'unnatural' aspect of this role-playing that dissipates the speaker to the level of being a 'freak'. Here, Vincent O'Sullivan comments that 'Das' fretting at having to keep in time with another's beat brings her to designating herself as grotesque, as unnatural' (O'Sullivan in Das, 1986: 187).

It is quite striking that the woman-speaker of the poem intra-textually calls herself 'a freak' whereas the woman-poet gives the poem the title 'The Freaks'. This apparent anomaly opens our eyes to a deeper level of significance, whereby the freakish woman-speaker stands for and speaks out on behalf of other women placed in similar circumstances. In this context, Arlene R. K. Zide holds that Kamala Das' themes transcend the 'personal' because what she attempts to poetize is the 'universal experience of women'. Zide argues that the self-explorations of Kamala Das are beyond the feminist haranguing because they have a universal appeal (Zide 1981, 239).

The poem, however, demands and deserves an alternative reading, since the woman-speaker is too resilient and individual to put up with the socio-cultural impositions without resisting and subverting them and asserting her indomitable feminine identity. The first step in this assertion of identity is the poetization of her condition, whereby the 'sufferer' becomes the 'speaker', enlisting both the liberation and the empowerment that comes with it. In this context, if we care to remind ourselves of how often Das has grumbled of having to disintegrate under the immense pressures that patriarchy puts on a woman like her (c.f. 'An Introduction', 'Spoiling the Name', 'The Old Playhouse', etc.), we may perceive specific points of similarity between her praxis and the precept of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar regarding those manoeuvres a woman-writer must go through with herself before she can write her 'self' into song:

> If the novelist [...] sees herself from the *outside*, as an object, a character, a small figure in a large pattern, the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the *inside* [...] she must be [...] assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness – and hence, by definition, profoundly "unwomanly", even freakish (Gilbert and Gubar: 1979, xxii).

The lyric poet in Das shows her self-awareness from 'inside' when she expresses her 'freakish' flaunting of 'a grand, flamboyant lust'. At the same time, she asserts her

powerful feeling of disgust, first in revealing the inability of 'this man' to 'unleash' anything 'more alive than the / Skin's lazy hungers', and secondly by referring to 'The heart' as 'an empty cistern' that has to wait 'through long hours' and 'fills itself / With coiling snakes of silence'.

In order to assert her identity, the speaker has to make light of 'this man' as the agent of patriarchal culture. The strategy she adopts is two-fold – 'disfigurement' and 'condemnation'. In the poem, the possessive 'his' occurs twice, in '*his* mouth' and '*his* right hand' (italics mine). As a result, we are left with no clear indication/implication as to whether the body parts ('mouth' and 'right hand') belong to the one and the same individual. This fact, according to N. V. Raveendran, may be read as 'an attempt by the poet to disfigure the "he"' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 65). In fact, in so doing, the poet tries to establish some kind of domination over the male by reversing and subverting the 'practical' (life experience) by the 'poetic' (art experience). Moreover, throughout the poem, as Anisur Rahman has observed, the male is 'presented with scorn' by describing his cavernous 'mouth', stalactite 'teeth', 'nimble fingertips', and lecherous motive of unleashing the 'Skin's lazy hungers'(Rahman: 1981, 9). In respect of semantic specification, 'mouth' and 'hand' are '+ human' while 'cavern' and 'stalactites' are not only '- human' but also '- animate'. The linguistic ploy of suspending the 'he' between '+ human' and '- human' features, along with the artful condemnation implied therein, amounts to an overt denial of the male-figure's individuality. Subsequently, this ploy provides the speaker with the necessary background against which she can then assert her own 'individuality' and 'identity'. The comparison between the 'heart' and the 'cistern' and the loaded use the verb 'fills' signify 'mechanization' of physical responses and total loss of feelings that indulgence in or rather surrender to 'the / Skin's lazy hungers' has caused in the woman-speaker. On another level, they may refer to a feminine strategy of countering sexual exploitation by substracting her 'self' from the sexual act.

The appearance of the first person pronoun, 'I', at the fag end of the poem, as the subject of the assertive sentence ('I am a freak'), gives the speaker both the space

and the pretext to stride over the 'he' (the male partner) who has been left in his insubstantial disfigured state. The female-speaker, on the contrary, emerges as a woman capable of realizing her own marginalized status and patriarchal domination, and of asserting her own human identity through both the choice and the claim of being 'a freak', since it suggests the woman-speaker's decision as well as determination to face the situation rather than flinch from it. As Santosh Chakraborti has explicated, "What she seeks to convey in her love poems [like 'The Freaks'] is a fervent clamour for space for the woman – the Indian Woman – emotionally tyrannized and sexually marginalized in the socio-familial set-up in which she lives" (Chakraborti in Kundu: 2003, 182).

The companion piece of 'The Freaks', 'In Love' at once deals with, elaborates on, and deviates from the themes and concerns expressed in the former poem. The critical dissensus regarding the poem's merits (or otherwise) can be pointed out if we refer to the opinions of Linda Hess who calls the poem 'a superb example of poetic talent making it one of the excellent pieces in *Summer in Calcutta*' (Hess: 1977, 40), and Vrinda Nabar, according to whom 'it lacks the tautness of "The Freaks" and is characterized by the tendency to indulge in some trivial questions' (Nabar: 1994, 24). I. G. Ahmed has put forward one possible reason for this dissensus, by pointing up the presence of heteroglossia in this poem, whereby Kamala Das blends 'dissimilar discourses' of 'death' and 'sensuality'. In fact, Ahmed has highlighted the simultaneous occurrence of 'Bol Hari Bol', the auditory image that 'lends a native hue to the poem and its context', and the 'pleasure' with 'deliberate gaiety', that provides the poem with 'the overall cultural framework' (Ahmed: 2005, 89). Needless to say, at first sight, the two seem utterly incompatible with each other. So, Linda Hess' praise and Vrinda Nabar's censor of 'In Love' may have resulted from their readiness (or the lack of it) to accommodate and appreciate this heteroglossia in the poem.

The poem begins with the 'burning mouth of the sun', reminding the female-speaker of 'his mouth' and 'his limbs':

Of what does the burning mouth

Of sun, burning in today's
Sky reminds me... oh, yes, his
Mouth, and... his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust. [...] (*SC* 14)

Obviously, the point of comparison is 'burning'. But, instead of warmth and life that the sun's 'burning' encapsulates, the lover's 'burning mouth' stands for the fire of carnal desire which makes 'his limbs' like 'pale and carnivorous plants', and, by describing them as 'reaching out' for her, the woman-speaker highlights the uncontrollable intensity of the male's sexual urges, and its killing ('carnivorous') effects on her. Significantly, the lust-laden 'limbs' reach out not only for her but also for some kind of reciprocity ('my unending lust'). But, her 'unending lust' is a 'sad lie' – at once 'sad' (causing unhappiness/regrettable) and a 'lie' (falsehood/wrong impression deliberately created). In fact, the woman is forced to keep up the show of an unending lust to save her face. On the contrary, K. P. Saradhi asserts, "The lover, whose mouth is like 'the burning mouth of the sun' spreads his limbs like 'carnivorous plants reaching out' for her and draws her up in embraces which are like a finished jigsaw" (Saradhi: 1974, 34). Of course, where 'lust' reigns supreme, there is no 'room', 'excuse', or 'need' for 'love'. Consequently, 'each embrace' becomes a 'complete thing' or a 'finished jigsaw':

[...] Where
Is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each
Embrace a complete thing, a
Finished jigsaw, [...] (*SC* 14)

In this sexual encounter between the active/willing male and the passive/reluctant female, the active male folds up the speaker in his embrace, considering it to be a

'complete thing' or a 'finished jigsaw'. 'Complete' and 'finished' while qualifying 'thing' and 'jigsaw' respectively hint at purposive action, undertaken by the male who considers 'lust' as an end in itself, and for whom there is no 'need' for 'love'. As the female has to keep in time with his beat, she is left with no 'room' (space or chance) and no 'excuse' (pretext for love).

In keeping with her decision and determination to face the situation rather than flinching from it, as expressed in 'The Freaks', the woman-lover has to carry on with this dreaded sexual acrobatics in spite of herself:

> [...] when mouth on
> Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor
> Moody mind, while pleasure
> With deliberate gaiety
> Trumpets harshly into the
> Silence of the room. [...] (*SC* 14)

The immediate context of embrace and coitus necessitates her lying with the male 'mouth on mouth'. But, she can bring herself to do it only at the cost of ignoring her 'moody mind'. That she 'lies' (sleeps with) as also 'lies' (tells a lie) because she has to, at once causes and ignores her moodiness. The sexual 'pleasure' arising out of this self-denial ('the sad lie of my unending lust') helps her feign 'gaiety'. But, if the woman has to participate in the sexual encounter to save her face, then 'gaiety' can only be 'deliberate' ('forced', and then, therefore, a 'false' state of feeling). The 'pleasure' with 'deliberate gaiety' trumpets 'harshly' to break the 'silence of the room'. So, whose pleasure and whose silence become the conundrum. The action 'trumpets' and its manner 'harshly' suggest intrusion, violence, and violation that the male can subject the female-speaker to. Here, we must remember that for the female-speaker, lying 'mouth on mouth' with her lover/husband and 'ignoring my moody mind', takes place simultaneously. So, N.V. Raveendran's contention that 'she reflects on an ecstatic union

with her lover and *then* evaluates its impact on her' (italics mine), proves logically untenable (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 49).

Since the whole poem is an extended rumination on the speaker's experiences and emotions, she now goes on to deal with temporal adverbials such as 'at noon' and 'at night'. At 'noon' she sees 'sleek crows' whom she likens to 'poison on wings', and at 'night' she hears the corpse-bearers who register their (and by implication death's) presence through their cries of 'Bol Hari Bol' as 'a strange lacing / For moonless nights'. Moonless 'nights', in this context, take on some of the death-like associations in view of the close affinity between death and darkness. Here, the speaker's description of 'Bol Hari Bol' as 'a strange lacing' for 'her' 'moonless nights' remind us of the owl's cry in Edward Thomas' poem 'The Owl' (Thomas in Palgrave: 2000, 441-442). In both cases, 'strange' as they are, the respective cries foreground death and decay and break in on the unsuspecting listeners:

> [...] At noon
> I watch the sleek crows flying
> Like poison on wings - and at
> Night, from behind the Burdwan
> Road, the corpse-bearers cry
> 'Bol Hari Bol', a strange lacing
> For moonless nights, while I walk
> The veranda, sleepless, a
> Million questions awake in
> Me, and all about him, and
> This skin-communicated
> Thing that I dare not yet in
> His presence calls our love. (*SC* 14)

The female-speaker of this poem hears the 'cry' while walking 'the veranda sleepless'. Subsequently, 'a million questions' 'awake' in her 'all about him' and this 'skin

communicated thing' ('the skin's lazy hungers'). That the 'questions' awakening in her are all concerned with 'him' (the male) and the 'skin communicated thing' (that this man unleashes), suggest her awareness of the reduction of 'love' into mere physical union as well as its cause (i.e. the sexual obsession of the 'him'). The questions that assail her require immediate answers, and the answer that she finds is that real love goes far beyond this 'skin communicated thing' and aims at the sublimation of 'unending lust' into eternal fulfilment through death. But, one problem which still remains is that she dares not call 'it' 'our love' in 'His presence'. If on the one hand, it suggests the male's stubborn refusal to accept the extra-physical dimensions of love, on the other hand. It also highlights the marginal status of the female-speaker who is forbidden to share her sights and insights with 'him' (the agent of patriarchy).

The ironic title of the poem, 'In Love', is at once a realistic commentary on how a patriarchal society palms 'lust' off as 'love' and on the proximity of Eros and Thanatos in the perceiver's psyche. Who is 'in love' (?), is s/he really 'in love' (?), and what does it mean to be 'in love' (?) – these questions are all left either unanswered or ambiguously answered. Since the woman is a prey to the 'carnivorous plants' of the lover's 'limbs', after the sexual encounter she feels physically and spiritually routed. This feeling, at a later stage, makes her identify with both the dead and death. The 'sleek crows' (scavenger birds) and the 'corpse-bearers' (the announcers of death) can both be projected as exteriorizations of her mental state, whereby even indulgence in this 'skin communicated thing' causes a virtual death of her soul.

This theme of spiritual annihilation is carried forward in 'The Stone Age', in which the husband's might and mindlessness turns the sensitive woman-speaker into 'a bird of stone', 'a granite dove'. In fact, Kamala Das' simultaneous awareness of the woman-speaker's marginal status, and attempts at de-marginalizing herself and her ilk, informs the poem 'The Stone Age'. As S.C. Harrex has pointed out, the poem 'objectifies subjective experience' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 166), and in so doing, it at once reveals what I.G. Ahmed has called 'familial colonization' (Ahmed: 2005, 58) and Gajendra Kumar has termed a sensitive feminine soul's quest for 'freedom and

redemption' (Kumar in Dodiya: 2000, 146). The role and rigour of patriarchy in subjugating woman has been brilliantly shown in this poem through the portrayal of the female-speaker whose acceptability depends on her acceptance of domesticity. The moment she revolts against the social/cultural constriction with a view to asserting her identity, she has to pay the price of ostracism to attain her bliss.

The poem begins with the female-speaker addressing her husband in ambiguous terms, whereby the 'fond' husband is equated first with an 'ancient settler in the mind' and then with an 'old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment':

> Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
> Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
> Be kind. [...] (*OP* 51)

The question as to whether his 'fond'-ness for the wife has been a result of his ancient settlement in the wife's mind does no sooner begin to baffle us than we come across a further identification/comparison of the husband-figure with an 'old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment'. Obviously in our 'bewilderment', we cannot help thinking whether this 'fat'-ness of the spider/husband has been sustained on the 'cowering' of the wife. The settler/colonizer-male conquers the mind of the wife much as the spider gradually increases its territory by weaving its web. Thus, the wife is projected as a helpless victim, caught in the web of familial bonds. So, when she asks for kindness from her husband, this should imply as slackening of his 'fond'-ness (possessive attachment) for her. This interpretation seems all the more plausible when we read the following:

> [...] You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
> Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room,
> And stroke my pitted face absentmindedly while
> You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep.
> You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. [...] (*OP* 51)

The husband, the 'you' of the poem, wields the supreme authority over the wife, and that this control is at once mental and physical, becomes clear since the husband is free not only to 'build around me a shabby drawing room' but also to 'stroke my pitted face absentmindedly'. The result of the husband-figure's total domination, and then therefore, the female-speaker's utter bondage is disastrous, as the wife is turned into 'a bird of stone, a granite dove'. The 'bird', with its love of freedom, is stupefied within the narrow confines of the drawing room. No wonder the 'drawing room' seems 'shabby'. Anisur Rahman, in this context, has stressed the 'collocation of opposites', whereby 'innocence and tenderness' get contrasted with 'hardness and granite' (Rahman: 1981, 21). According to Rahman, by identifying herself as a 'granite dove', the female has tried to reveal her predicament, whereby the 'symbol of peace' ('dove') gets juxtaposed with the 'symbol of death' (granite) in her being (Rahman: 1981, 21). Almost in the same vein, N.V. Raveendran has tried to explicate the twin images as indicative of the sorry state of the speaker (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 100). In Raveendran's view, a 'bird of stone' is a bird curved out of stone for show, and the 'granite dove' which is the stone image of a pretty innocent bird symbolizes the frozen state of beauty and innocence within the institution of marriage (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 100). I. G. Ahmed, however, draws our attention to a new aspect of these images by stressing the role of the husband in turning the wife into the lifeless bird:

> The animal imagery is functional and suggestive of the predatory character of the deceiving male always weaving a "web of bewilderment" and waiting with a trap to catch the gentle dove-like woman and like a python to strangulate her gradually, reducing her to a soulless shape, a mere plaything with no emotion of her own – she the "dove", he the "granite" with all their symbolic associations (Ahmed: 2005, 59).

At this point, we should recall the title of the poem ('The Stone Age') which with its twin associations ('Stone' and 'Stone Age') links the present condition of the wife

('bird of stone') with the past predicament of her female predecessors (victims of 'ancient settler in the mind'). The term 'ancient settler', as applied to the husband and as contrasted with the present tense of the description, hints at the subjugation/colonization of the female that started in the distant past and still persists unmitigated.

Coming back to the poem proper, the unfeeling cruelty of the husband that led him to turn the wife into 'a bird of stone', with its ocular and tactile implications, gets reinforced by his 'loud talk' that can 'bruise' the wife's 'premorning sleep'. The auditory association of this description shows up the utter unconcern of the husband for the female-speaker's peace or privacy. Her suffering acquires a physical dimension when 'you stick a finger into my dreaming eye'. On one level, his acts of bruising her 'premorning sleep with loud talk' and 'sticking a finger into her dreaming eye' betoken his complete control over her, whereby he can wake the reluctant and sleepy wife up with no qualms. On another level however, words like 'bruise', 'stick', and 'eye' may tempt us to find a veiled reference to marital rape in this description. In N.V. Raveendran's opinion, "The images in these lines show the husband as a loveless and cruel man – loveless in not giving the speaker a blissful experience and cruel in keeping her in confinement" (N.V Raveendran: 2000, 100). That the female-speaker is none too happy with her conjugal life becomes clear when she freely speaks about men who can enamour her:

> [...] And
> Yet on my daydreams strong men cast their shadows, they sink
> Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood;
> Secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities. (*OP* 51)

The use of 'strong men' after the discordant conjunction 'yet' bring into sharp focus the difference of those other men from her husband who, despite his complete control over her mind and body, fails to kindle her desire. Vrinda Nabar has conveniently found in this the poet's 'escapism and darker passions', overlooking in the process the sensitive

feminine soul's dire need and its consequent quest for an identity beyond the granite dove that Gajendra Kumar talked about (Nabar: 1994, 77). The facts that these 'other men' sink like 'white sun' into the swell of the speaker's 'Dravidian blood', and that this process continues 'secretly' as 'secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities', combine to imply a social/cultural constriction that arbitrarily categorizes cities as 'sacred' and regulates woman's desires beneath the veil of secrecy. The attribution of 'sacred'-ness to cities as well as to women corroborates Harrex's classification of Indian society as one 'whose moral codes maintained feminine sexual propriety by maintaining powerful inhibitions' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 166). The temporary slackening of patriarchal control liberates the 'granite dove' from her frozen exterior, affording her an opportunity to assert her identity:

> When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
> Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
> Noisy steps to knock at another's door. (*OP* 51)

As N.V. Raveendran has rightly pointed out, 'the suppression of the speaker's individuality by her husband becomes an incentive [for her] to celebrate the pleasure of being an individual' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 100). This pleasure, however, is a strategic ploy of the speaker to drown out the heartfelt sorrow to which Rahman has directed our attention; for the car she uses to get away from 'the familiar grooves of love' and to seek peace and tranquillity, is both 'blue' (the colour of sadness) and 'battered' (by her life experiences). Moreover, the 'blue sea' that she drives along 'stands here as an agent of peace, one that incorporates all sorrows'. The slackening of patriarchal control, however, does not entail a complete absence of the panoptic gaze of society. In fact, through the eyes of the neighbours, society watches her 'come and go like rain', presumably to assess and censor.

The rest of the poem deals with the speaker's affair with her lover, the 'he' of the poem. The 'ask me' series explicitly reveals the speaker's responses to her lover through a detailed description of the physical aspects of sex. Evidently, the female-

speaker started this affair with a lot of hope and confidence. But, she is ultimately disillusioned because the lover can offer her nothing more than a temporary 'bliss', and that too at a heavy 'price'. This price that the female-speaker has to pay for attaining the bliss of individuality links the present poem with 'An Introduction'. Significantly, here too, the female-speaker's attempts at reaching out can only bring her ultimate shame and exhaustion. This 'shame', however, is again a social construct like 'sacredness'. So, the speaker records her disappointments flying in the face of social constrictions. As Harrex has pointed out, "Exhibition against inhibition is the name of the game of protest in Kamala Das' poems about love and sexual morality" (Harrex in Das, 1986: 166). To extend the argument further, we can safely say that this exhibitionism informs and creates Das' poetics of resistance against the unmitigated marginalization of women that goes on in our society, sanctioned by the institution of marriage.

If the woman-persona's resistance to her marginal status as wife gets revealed through her full-throated denunciation of her husband, the poet's resistance to the process of marginalization on the basis of gender comes to the fore in her chronicling of the whole situation. The hysterical tone of the speaker may remind us of what Juliet Mitchell has said in this connection, "Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse" (Mitchell in Lodge: 1988, 427). To relate Mitchell's precept to Kamala Das' poetic praxis, we may say that since 'the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism' is virtually impossible either to dismantle or to embrace, the woman-speaker has to subvert it from within, camouflaging her 'refusal' as a kind of acceptance. So, the woman-speaker plunges headlong into the uncharted sea of sensuality to simultaneously fulfil her essentially feminine desires and to repudiate the patriarchal expectations of acceptable femininity, namely domesticity, submission, and service.

In 'The Looking Glass', Kamala Das proceeds pro se to reveal and resolve the tensions arising out of the clash of woman's honesty and patriarchal expectations. The

'Looking Glass' of the title simultaneously refers to the mirror as an object and 'looking' as an ideologically formed and discoursally framed act. As a result, 'who looks', and 'why in the glass', become immediate quarries that complicate the poem's tenor. Since the poem's immediate discoursal space stretches from the female-speaker to the internalized male partner, both of them perform the 'looking' act. By the same token, since their 'looking' is determined by their respective expectations or desires, this 'looking' act culminates in and confines itself within the reflective surface of the mirror. Chris Wallace-Crabbe has highlighted how the first person pronoun has become 'you' 'just as a mirror transforms the not full visible self into another who (or which?) can be scrutinized' (Wallace-Crabbe in Das, 1986: 219). Thus, 'The Looking Glass' provides the poet with the means to fracture oneself into the constitutive 'self' and 'other' to help her find the 'self' in the 'other' and vice versa. Thus, as Wallace-Crabbe explicates, 'the self advises herself' ('you') 'to stand nude before the glass with him' 'so that the lover can see both mirrored bodies in close comparison' (Wallace-Crabbe in Das, 1986: 219). But, what Wallace-Crabbe does not point out, is how the female sees not only herself (her reflected image) but also her male partner (his 'fond' details).

Apparently, the poem begins with the female-speaker thinking aloud about a fact and its proviso. According to S.K. Tripathi and G.A. Ghanshyam, "The poet here [in 'The Looking Glass'] asserts that the physical gratification may become possible in a relation if the woman is 'honest' in her wants, but the emotional fulfilment is hardly possible" (Tripathi and Ghanshyam in Ray and Kundu: 2005, 120). Whether the easy availability of a male lover is contingent on the woman's being 'honest' about her female 'wants' or whether a man's love can only be retained by being 'honest' about female desires – these are factors that enhance the poem's appeal. If we start detecting an instructional tone in the words 'be honest' and 'stand nude', we may easily realize with S.C. Harrex how Das 'subverts' and 'inverts' 'the classical-religious ideals of Indian womanhood' (e.g. Savithri and Sita), by opposing 'a fiction of idealized and contented femininity', by putting forward 'brute facts of sexual experience and female suffering' (Harrex in Das, 1986: 163). Here, being 'honest' about her 'wants' as a

woman and standing 'nude' before the 'looking glass' for a traditional Indian woman run to a rebellion against the socio-cultural constrictions:

> Getting a man to love you is easy
> Only be honest about your wants as
> Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
> So that he sees himself the stronger one
> And believes it so, and you so much more
> Softer, younger, lovelier [...] (*D* 25)

But, standing 'nude' before the 'glass' with 'him' (the easy-to-get male) is motivated not only by the female-speaker's rebelliousness but also by her 'need' and 'wish' to satisfy the male ego. This she hopes to achieve by assuring the male of 'his' strength and control over 'her' as compared to her own softness, youth and loveliness. In other words, she wants to make herself more desirable to her male. Devindra Kohli betrays his own patriarchal bias when he calls 'The Looking Glass' 'another of Kamala Das' hymns to sexual love', and can perceive in it only a 'patronizing' and 'indulgent' tone (Kohli: 1975, 96). But, I.G. Ahmed has alerted us to the poet's 'concealed postcolonial feminist agenda to expose patriarchal expectations about woman as quintessence of physicality' (Ahmed: 2005, 67).

The next few lines of the poem seem to corroborate Ahmed's contention. The poem, as Bijay Kumar Das points out, 'turns out to be a kind of homily for womankind as how to satisfy their emotional and physical need' (Bijay Kumar Das: 1999, 33). Of course, the strategy suggested by the woman speaker is two-fold – to satisfy the male ego as well as male concupiscence. So, the woman is apparently instructed to admire the 'fond details' of the lover's body and being that would make him feel 'male' and her 'only man'. Similarly, she is told to yield herself completely by gifting 'him' all that makes her 'woman':

> [...] Admit your

Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinates. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. [...] (*D* 25)

That it is imperative on her part to convince him about his 'male'-ness and his exclusive access to and control over her sexuality ('your only man') shows the same patriarchal expectations at work to which Ahmed had alluded. Besides, she has to 'gift him' both the coveted female sexual favours and the 'Endless female hungers'. The gifts of the 'scent of long hair', the 'musk of sweat between the breasts', the 'shock of menstrual blood' constitute the quintessential feminine mystique. What the speaker thinks will make the woman more irresistible to the male-lover is the biggest gift of the 'Endless female hungers'. Significantly, the fact that the woman has to 'gift' (and not satisfy) her own 'female hungers' (sexual urges) to the male-lover and make it seem 'endless' betrays her marginal status in the male-dominated society.

That like 'The Descendants', this poem too is a warning to woman against yielding 'too much' becomes clear in the last few lines where, according to N.V. Raveendran, the mood of the poem 'shifts' from the initial 'statement' through the medial 'directions' to the eventual 'prediction' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 59). The 'prediction' that Raveendran refers to is one of separation, whereby too much of sexual satisfaction may lead to the man's loss of sexual interest in the woman, leading to estrangement from or 'living / Without him'. That in spite of all her bold assertions of female 'wants' and 'hungers' she is culturally conditioned to be attached to 'her only man' becomes clear when she defines 'living without him' as 'living without life'.

Moreover, in such an eventuality, she may have to remain bound to the past affair, with her eyes and ears expecting and accepting her 'only man' even after his disappearance from the scene:

> [...] Oh yes, getting
> A man to love is easy, but living
> Without him afterward may have to be
> Faced. A living without life when you move
> Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that
> Gave up their search, with ears that hear only
> His last voice calling out your name and your
> Body which once under his touch had gleamed
> Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute. (*D* 25)

In the aftermath of this estrangement, the woman may have to undergo a physical transformation as well, whereby her 'body' that once 'gleamed' like 'burnished brass' under 'his touch' becomes 'drab' and 'destitute'. To the poet, women's attachment to a specific 'face', 'voice', or 'touch' that may cause at once excessive elation (gleam like 'burnished brass') and utter desolation (becoming 'drab' and 'destitute') is a sufficient cause for concern, since it goes against her advice to women like herself to be 'honest' about their 'wants as / Woman'. It is this realization of women's vulnerability to the socio-cultural norms and the passive acceptance of suffering and silence that prompts Kamala Das to write her life and write her body in this poem in a bid to 'invent' for Indian English poetry a new discourse of l'ecreture feminine, the 'impregnable language', as Hélène Cixous would call it:

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse [...] (Cixous: 1976, 886).

These connected ventures of 'writing the life', 'writing the body' finally refutes Kohli's claim, whereby the tone of the poem is ultimately revealed to us not as 'patronizing' but as 'practical' – not as indulgent but as ironical.

The desire to trample 'unsacred laws' that keep women tied to the 'inherited memory of a touch' and as 'another's country', and such a woman's cultural inhibitions to oppose or trample those laws in real life, constitute the thematic tension of the poem 'Gino'. Strongly refuting the views of myopic critics like Vimala Rao who can only find in this poem 'a medley of sexual images thrown in together' for the sake of 'cheap' 'effect' (Rao: 1980, 94), 'Gino', in Sunanda P Chavan's opinion, adds 'a psychoanalytical dimension to the theme of love' by dealing with the 'dreams which form a part of the feminine psychic's obsession with love in terms of sex' (Chavan: 1984, 66).

According to Anisur Rahman, the poem begins with a powerful expression of the 'terror of sex', 'its attraction' and 'revulsion' (Rahman: 1981, 16). In fact, the 'he' or the husband-figure warns the woman-persona of an inevitable annihilation if she is kissed by the second 'he' (the lover-figure). By comparing the 'kiss' of the lover with Krait's bite, 'he' tries to connect sex with death. The circumstantial evidence of a 'July' 'full of rain', however, soon negates the thanatonic associations of sex by foregrounding the scope for rejuvenation and rebirth. The cursed essence is thereby cleansed to become the sap of life:

> You will perish from his kiss, he said, as one must
> Surely die, when bitten by a krait that fills
> The bloodstream with its accursed essence. I was quiet,
> For once, my tongue had fainted in my mouth.
> It was July, a July full of rain, and darkness
> Trapped like smoke, in the hollows of the sky, and
> That lewd, steamy smell of rot, rising out of earth. (*OP* 13)

The tempest of feeling raging in the woman-persona creates for her a dilemma of choice. She, as a result, is torn between a strong desire to enjoy this potentially poisonous 'love' and equally strong inhibition arising out of her 'inherent memory of a touch':

> He walked one step ahead of me, the west wind leaking
> Through his hair. And, I thought, if I could only want
> Really, really want his love, we shall ride happiness,
> Great white steed, trampler of unsacred laws,
> If I could only dislodge the inherited
> Memory of a touch, I shall serve myself in
> Bedroom-mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter,
> While he lies watching, fair conqueror of another's
> Country, I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes.
> And in jealous moods, after bitter words and rage,
> I shall wail in his nerves, as homeless cats wail
> From the rubble of a storm. [...] (*OP* 13)

She is well aware of the fact that by accepting 'this love' she stands to gain both the freedom of choice and the fulfilment of so many 'female hungers'. She, however, fails to forget her past attachment to another male – the 'man of substance' who owns her body as his 'country'. The fair conqueror (her present lover) is, therefore, kept waiting, and her love for this other man remains an unfulfilled dream.

Presenting a hypnotic situation that reflects her unfulfilled desire, she talks of serving herself in 'bedroom mirrors' as 'dark fruit on silver platter'. Dorothy Jones, in this connection, observes how the woman presents herself as 'an object for her lover's delectation' (Jones in Das, 1986: 207). Jones is of the view that this situation is reinforced here by the fact that 'the man is European not Indian' (Jones in Das, 1986: 207). The word 'fair', on which Jones bases her observation, may problematize her inference on account of its second meaning (i.e. just); for the woman who has already

been another's 'country' may as well be conquered by still someone else. Thus, the 'fair' skin of the 'fair conqueror' cannot be proved 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

The woman-persona's imaginative wish fulfilments continue with a make-belief catalogue of her possible activities in love – polishing the moody panes of her lover's eyes, having a tiff with him, and her subsequent whining – all presenting the dependant and marginal status of women in love. Here, her comparison of herself with 'homeless cats' becomes quite instructive. Like the cat, the woman-persona too is 'homeless' or bereft of any emotional anchor and dependant on her master.

Though it is in the middle of the poem's first stanza, we can perceive here a change of thought and approach on the part of the poet-speaker. She is well aware of the fact that one gets the life one deserves and dreams only such dreams that are comprehensible as well as acceptable to the 'old soul'. The use of 'old' to qualify her soul leads us to believe that it is a slew of old customs and conventions that has taken possession of her inner being, determining thereby not only what she does or says but also what she 'dreams'. As a result, there appears a big chasm between what she should be dreaming, faced with this opportunity of accepting another man's love, and what she dreams in reality, based on her prior experiences and previous memory:

> [...] But one only gets
> The life one deserves, and dreams only such dreams as
> The old soul can comprehend. I dream of obscene hands
> Striding up my limbs and of morgues where the night lights
> Glow on faces shuttered by the soul's exit. And
> Of ward-boys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors
> To the X-ray room's dark interior.
> O, the clatter of the trolleys, with the dead on them,
> As loud as untimely laughter. And, of aeroplanes
> Bursting red in the sky... I should be dreaming his
> Peerless dreams, his dreams of sunlit villa and of fat

Half-caste children, lovelier than Gods and of
Drinking wine in verandas, he and I, ageing
And at peace, all disguise gone from us. (*OP* 13-14)

The woman-persona cannot forget the masquerade of lust as love, whereby her encounters with the man of substance, owning her body, only meant 'obscene hands / Striding up my [her] limbs' and never any emotional attachment with him. Moreover, frequent bouts of illness turn her dreams nightmarish, setting forth 'morgues' and 'dead bodies', 'X-ray room's dark interior', and 'the clatter of trolleys', and 'aeroplanes / Bursting red in the sky, in the war torn country'. She is not averse to the happiness of realizing her lover's 'peerless dreams', pertaining to 'sunlit villae', 'fat half-caste children' 'drinking wine in verandas', and 'ageing in peace' with him. But, since his dreams are devoid of any contact with reality her old soul cannot comprehend them and she, as a result, does not deserve the life exhibited in them.

The woman-persona realizes that her life will certainly take a different course and come to a different end. So, she reluctantly, yet firmly, rejects this option of loving another man, choosing instead to satisfy herself with the reverie of a dream-life and dream children:

But I shall end differently, I know, our bloods'
Tributaries never merging. It is
A dream-river, keep it so, the children are
Dream-children. Real ones never bear such splendent eyes.
This body that I wear without joy, this body
Burdened with lenience, slender toy, owned
By man of, substance shall perhaps wither, battling with
My darling's impersonal lust. Or, it shall grow gross
And reach large proportions before its end. (*OP* 14)

With the memory of 'obscene hands / Striding up her limbs', she suspects that her body will either 'wither battling with my darling's [her husband's] impersonal lust' or 'reach large proportions' before its end. True, this expected end is at a far remove from the prospect of 'ageing in peace' with her lover. But, the marginalized woman-speaker is forbidden as well as unable to aspire to break the patriarchal norm. She, as a result, will have to 'wear' 'this body' 'without joy'. Since she is little more than a 'slender toy', owned by a man of substance, her body has to bear the burden of 'lenience'. Here, her response is formed and framed by her knowledge, 'every wife is her one man's whore, / Earns her bread easing him pubic bliss' ('Effusions V', *Symposium*: 48). Her slenderness (inconsequentiality), as contrasted with her man's substantiality, renders her little more than another's country, and shows up Das' poetics of resistance at work.

In her imaginary avatar as a 'fat-kneed hag' in the long bus-queue, she stands to be reduced to an object of ridicule; for from her shopping bag 'the mean potato [must surely] roll across the road'. Z.F. Molvi has rightly found in this 'the banality of her common life' (Molvi in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 96). The second possibility visualized by the woman-persona is that she may become a hospital patient, 'lying in drugged slumber and dreaming of home'. The prospect, in this case, is very bleak, as 'drugged slumber' indicates a lack of natural sleep whereas the dream of home is precipitated by a removal from/loss of it ('home'). The third possibility envisaged by the apprehensive speaker is of becoming a grandmother, 'willing away her belongings'. That the objects she proposes to will away (i.e. 'the scraps' and 'the trinkets') are meant to outlast her bones subtly introduce the theme of imminent death. The transformation of 'dark fruit on silver platter' into brittle 'bones' reinforces the themes of transience and mortality. On another level, however, it points up the marginalized woman-persona's inability to bequeath something more substantial than the mere 'scrapes and trinkets'.

The last words of the poem at once carry forward and complicate this theme of mortality, because the poem which began with an apprehension of death ends on the same note as well:

[...] Perhaps some womb in that
Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent. (*OP* 14)

Of course, the woman-persona will die and the womb of death will begin to convulse before letting in this 'legitimate entrant'. Her legitimacy (socio-culturally determined) will be judged even at the point of death, approved at the cost of her discontent. In other words, it is only by performing her socially sanctioned duties and roles as wife, mother, and grandmother, and suppressing her personal desires, that the marginalized woman-speaker can hope to gain a posthumous legitimacy.

That these expectations of acceptable femininity when accepted by the woman-speaker may lead to disastrous consequences is brilliantly brought out in the poem, 'The Old Playhouse'. Considered by Kamala Das as her best poem (in an interview with Atma Ram: 1977, 42), 'The Old Playhouse' gives us a horrendous picture of suppression which countless number of women are subjected to all over the world. Written in a characteristically colloquial style, this poem is a virtual dialogue between an astounded 'I' and an absent 'you'. The 'I' being the poet-speaker, the possible identity of the 'you' has become a bone of contention between critics like Vrinda Nabar (Nabar: 1994, 63) and Dorothy Jones (Jones in Das, 1986: 200) on the one hand, and other critics like I.G. Ahmed (Ahmed 2005, 139) and N.V. Raveendran (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 94) on the other. Conveniently forgetting the half line 'you called me wife' and over-emphasizing the statement 'It is not to gather knowledge / Of yet another man that I came to you', both Nabar and Jones have confused Das the person with Das the poet, and inferred that the addressee of the poem is the lover-figure and not the husband of the persona. As a result, the victimization of the woman gets somewhat downplayed, and questions of adultery or promiscuity rear their heads.

It is unfortunate to see perceptive critics like Nabar and Jones failing to fix their critical priorities, and this problem of mistaken priorities in dealing with Kamala Das'

poetry often give rise to popular misconceptions. R. Raphael's article, "Kamala Das: The Pity of it" (Raphael: 1979, 127-137) which includes a discussion of 'The Old Playhouse' can be cited as a representative case in point. Generally dismissive of Das' poetic talents, Raphael finds her use of 'love' as 'an euphemism for sex'. However, a close reading of the poem under discussion may easily discredit Raphael's contention. He interprets Das' coming to the 'you' after being close to other men as indicative of her promiscuity, and her desires to grow in contact with the male-figure as a selfish desire for egotism (Raphael: 1979, 135). But, the following section of the poem may also be interpreted as a woman's quest for self-actualization in/through love:

> [...] It was not to gather knowledge
> Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
> What I was and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
> Lesson you gave was about yourself. [...] (*OP* 1)

In fact, this excerpt should be interpreted retrospectively to comprehend the woman-persona's intention and expectation in view of the response it evoked from the male 'you'. As Sunanda P. Chavan has pointed out, she came to him to attain self-knowledge through 'a meaningful sexual relationship' (Chavan: 1984, 63) as well as emotional and intellectual companionship. She, however, was averse to the suppression/loss of her individuality. Her desire was thwarted by the overbearing personality of the male who 'planned' to 'tame' a 'swallow' (the referent for the 'I'). The sinister motive of the male is to wheedle the woman-persona into forgetting not only her past freedom but also her freedom-loving nature:

> You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
> In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
> Not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind, but
> Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
> Pathways of the sky. [...] (*OP* 1)

This brief discussion may open our eyes to Raphael's myopic view which may make us impervious to the marginalization of the woman-persona at the hands of patriarchy as well as that of a woman-poet at the hands of her predominantly male-critics. To maintain our critical neutrality, we may, therefore, follow Saleem Peeradina in being moved by the woman-persona's 'ultimate resilience in the face of any relationship that threatens to devastate her vital and potential self' (Peeradina: 1972, 86).

The lessons learnt by the persona were all given by the husband-figure who not only called her 'wife' but also colonized her body:

> [...] You were pleased
> With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
> Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
> Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
> My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. [...] (*OP* 1)

Significantly, it was 'you' who became 'pleased' with the woman's frame and its 'responses', 'dribbled' 'spittle' (semen) into 'my mouth', and 'poured / yourself into every nook and cranny'. The woman's 'poor lust' (normal sexual desires) was 'embalmed' (artificially preserved for future enjoyment) by the husband-figure with 'bitter sweet juices'. True 'he did not beat' her but her 'sad woman body' felt so beaten ('An Introduction', *SC* 59).

The colonization of the woman, however, did not stop at her physical territory and extended to her mental realm as well. She had to pay the price for being called the 'wife'. Being 'taught' by heteropatriarchy of which the husband was the microcosmic figure-head, she learned to break 'saccharine' into the husband's 'tea' and offer him the 'vitamins' at the prescribed hour. As Nandini Sahu has observed, "In nourishing the male with vitamins, the female persona succumbs into a weakling [...]" (Sahu in Ray and Kundu: 2005, 39). The 'monstrous ego' of the husband forced her to cower

'beneath' it and eat 'the magic loaf' of do's and don'ts. As a result, she became a 'psycho-pathological dwarf', to borrow a phrase from I.G. Ahmad (Ahmad: 2005, 80).

Faced with this fierce attack on body and mind, she 'lost' her 'will', and by and by, not only her logical faculty, but her power of articulation as well:

> [...] I lost my will and reason, to all your
> Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. [...] (*OP* 1)

But, old habits die hard. So, giving the lie to all the male attempts at inducing amnesia, the swallow-like woman-persona still remembers 'the ruder breezes of the fall' as well as the smell of the 'burning leaves'. And the 'long summer of your love' begins to 'pall' (grow wearisome):

> [...] The summer
> Begins to pall. I remember the ruder breezes
> Of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves. Your room is
> Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
> Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
> All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
> In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. [...] (*OP* 1)

These bits of tactile and olfactory memory seem at a far remove from, and then therefore, much more desirable than the regulated cooling of the 'air-conditioner', the 'all pervasive male scent' of 'your breath' and 'human sweat'. Niranjan Mohanty, in this context, has remarked, "Her [the speaker's] female ego is invulnerable to the male-dominance. So, she raises a voice of protest, sharply defining the chasm between the two worlds – one masculine, the other female [...]" (Mohanty in Kaur: 1995[a] 56).

Desirable that memory might be, the woman-persona is fully aware of its unattainability. This realization, therefore, breeds a sense of dejection the expression of which is almost matchless even in Kamala Das' poetry:

> [...] There is
> No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old
> Playhouse with all its lights put out. [...] (*OP* 1)

The beauty and striking originality of this metaphor has led even such a sceptic as Vrinda Nabar to praise Das, 'Nothing could more effectively convey the collapse of her psyche, of her essential vitality, than this image of derelict, and abandoned place of entertainment' (Nabar: 1994, 65). We may add that the 'playhouse' whose dereliction the persona mourns is not only a place of entertainment (performance) but a place for applause (praise) as well. In fact, as Sharada Iyer avers, "Her quest for self-knowledge only leads her to the painful realization that is an 'Old Playhouse with all its lights put out'" (Iyer in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 120).

It is her subservience to her 'strong man' (husband) and awareness of the same reality in many other marital relationships such as that of her parents that makes the persona pessimistic about her future prospects in life. The strong men who 'serve' their 'love' in 'lethal doses' ultimately try to expropriate even the emotion of love. Their love, therefore, is at once selfish and self-seeking. Enamoured of themselves à la Narcissus, they are always haunted by the 'lonely face' of love sans compassion and understanding. But, the resilient woman-persona is bent on reclaiming love – love of identity and love for freedom. So, she must embark on the last quest for 'a pure, total freedom' even at the cost of self-annihilation.

In 'Luminol', this quest for freedom leads the woman-speaker to the lap of 'sleep' and its attendant forgetfulness. As a matter of fact, the succinct expression of women's wretched condition within the institution of marriage and their urge for withdrawal from the daily confrontations and conflicts makes it one of Das' most

effective poems. According to Eunice De Souza, this poem 'records' the profound loneliness of the neurotic persona, longing for the cessation of conflict, however temporary this cessation may be (De Souza: 1977, 44). On the paraphrasable level, the poem seems to be an advice to a fellow woman proffered by the persona. In fact, the addressee who is categorized as being 'love-lorn' is urged to surrender to 'sleep' and allow it to 'make holes in memory'. As I.G. Ahmed points out, 'The moody sea of memory "thumps" against the shore of her consciousness in an unwelcome manner' (Ahmed: 2005, 101). The painful nature of this memory makes it intrusive in character. So, the only way to ward it off is to let 'sleep' and oblivion take hold of her mind. Even if this 'sleep' is not naturally obtained but artificially induced, it seems much more desirable than the violated privacy of a tortured wakeful state:

Love-lorn,
It is only
Wise at times, to let steep
Make holes in memory, even
If it
Be the cold and
Luminous sleep banked in
The heart of pills, for he shall not
Enter,
Your ruthless one,
Being human, clumsy
With noise and movement, the soul's mute
Arena,
That silent sleep inside your sleep. (*D* 11)

Even the 'cold and luminous sleep', 'banked in the heart of pills' (tranquilizers), is preferable, since it can dissuade the male-lover ('your ruthless one') from entering the 'soul's mute arena'. His absence 'at times' is surely preferable to the clumsiness, noise, and movement with which he disturbs her wakeful hours. Vrinda Nabar perceives a note

of authenticity in this poem. According to her, "Though ostensibly addressed to another, the poem is undoubtedly about the poet herself" (Nabar: 1994, 46). But, it is this note of authenticity that forces the poet to point out the temporary and contingent nature of the woman's escape into the realm of sleep, because she knows and shows it in 'The Stone Age' that the 'ruthless one' can 'bruise' her 'premorning sleep' with 'loud talk' and 'stick' a finger into her 'dreaming eye' (*OP* 51). She, as a result, is hell-bent on making the most of her limited access to privacy and oblivion, be it the wine-induced oblivion of 'Summer in Calcutta' (*SC* 48) or the sleep-induced 'holes in memory' of this poem. Be it what it may, Das' poems admirably express the agonies of an over-taxed mind led to despair by the utter unconcern shown by society.

Close to the heart of a writer whose negotiations with the dialectics of interiority and exteriority at once encourages 'the steepest / descent' into the self and instigates the same self to 'gatecrash into the precincts of others' dreams', the 'Anamalai Poems', in the words of P.P. Raveendran, enact an intense 'interior drama' (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 48). I.G. Ahmed has reminded us that this 'sequence of poems' was written or rather spoken 'into a taperecorder' 'during her [Das'] sojourn in the Anamalai hills of Tamil Nadu following her crushing defeat in the parliamentary election of 1984' (Ahmed: 2005, 141). Of the twenty-seven poems that Kamala Das was reported to have written for this series (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 47), eleven, including 'The Anamalai Hills', were published in *The Best of Kamala Das* (149-158) whereas six other poems (12-17) have been published in *Literature and Criticism* (156-157).

According to P.P. Raveendran, 'The Anamalai Hills' which though not a part of the Anamalai poems in the strict sense of the term serves as the 'prologue' to the series (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 49). This poem immediately establishes a deep bond between the lonely silent hills and the lonely woman-walker. On account of a paradigmatic interchangeability, both the object and the observer can perceive an inner affinity as regards their shared loneliness and silence:

[...] I hear the mountain

speak: I was alone, I am alone, I will be alone...
with the languor of queen's enciente, the fog ascends
the stairways of the sky. Anamalai stands undisturbed.
Wrapped in the shrouds of betrayals, the woman walks alone
no longer seeking comfort in human speech. The mountain
seems deaf-mute, but the flesh of her spirit is but its flesh,
and, her silence, despite the tumult in her blood, its destined
hush. (*BKD* 149)

On the biographical level, it may seem that the woman, 'Wrapped in the shrouds of betrayals' and 'no longer seeking comfort in human speech', is a poetic presentation of Kamala Das after her election-debacle. On the textual level, however, she can be any 'woman', betrayed and displaced as and for being woman, a gendered being. As a result, she too can empathize with the 'mountains' when it exclaims, 'I was alone, I am alone, I will be alone'. Loneliness naturally creates silence, but, by characterizing that 'silence' or 'hush' as being 'destined', the poet-speaker subtly refers to their state as being externally imposed on them. The woman no longer seeks 'comfort' in 'human speech' presumably because 'human speech' has only given her dis*comfort* and 'betrayal'.

That the 'woman' referred to in 'The Anamalai Hills' can be conceived of as the poet-speaker herself is made clear in the first of the Anamalai Poems (*BKD* 153). Here, he poet-speaker goes on to point out a deep attachment that she feels for these 'hills' and 'mountain paths', because walking these 'winding roads' she can be free to lay aside her 'poor body' and become 'an unbodied joy', to borrow an expression from Shelley (Shelley: 1994, 374). By calling the body 'poor', and suggesting that it may have 'no home', 'no territory to call its own', the woman-persona carries forward the theme of betrayal mentioned above.

In the second poem, the persona enumerates her reasons for loving this loneliness and shunning human speech (human company) (*BKD* 153). Continuing with

the theme of a split between body and soul – the public self and the private self – she remembers 'nights' when her 'own voice' (a hyponym of her body) awoke her (presumably her soul) out of her 'dreams'. It is perhaps a realization of her or an imputation from others that dubs her 'a misfit' when 'awake'. It is perhaps this 'misfit'-status that expels her from 'warm human love' in the wakeful hours. Hence this love of dreams and lonely mountains.

The third poem proffers to the persona an alternative to the dream world of infrequent excursions by reminding her of her writings (*BKD* 154). Thanks to her writing faculty, she can 'write away' her 'loneliness' and 'grief' 'on sheets of weeklies, monthlies / Quarterlies' ('Loud Posters', *SC* 23). Though unable to mitigate her real life 'loneliness' and 'grief', this talent has helped her release those disappointments and create poetry out of them.

Giving the lie to the popular misconception of Das as a sex-obsessed woman-poet, the fourth of the 'Anamalai Poems' advocates the need to look 'beyond the / chilling flesh' (*BKD* 154). Das traces our fear of death back to an 'obsession' with 'physicality', implying thereby her own sense of ease with the prospect of dying.

Das' woman-persona who introduces herself as a poet in the fifth poem betrays an inner struggle between her personal desire 'to hide behind' her 'dreams' and her poetic achievement of 'gatecrash'-ing 'into the precincts of others' dreams' (*BKD* 155). In personal life, it is her realization of having let down herself that takes away her capacity to 'look the day in the face' 'with gumption'. But, in poetry at least, the same experiences are so adequately recorded as to make her readers stir in their sleep and sigh.

In the sixth poem of the group, the poet-speaker tries to cut herself adrift from 'those' she had once loved. Aware of her unwanted status and the possibility of 'betrayal' and deeply saddened by the loss (death/absence) of those who did really love her (e.g. her grandmother), the woman-persona cries out:

No, not for me the beguiling promise of
domestic bliss, the goodnight kiss, the weekly
letter that begins with the word dearest,
not for me the hollowness of marital
vows and the loneliness of a double bed
where someone lies dreaming of another mate
a woman perhaps lustier than his own. (*BKD* 156)

Her aversion to 'the beguiling promise of / domestic bliss' or 'the hollowness of marital / vows' stems from her sense of betrayal, because she has experienced 'the loneliness of a double bed' where 'someone [presumably her husband] lies dreaming of another mate / a woman perhaps lustier than his own'. As revealed in *My Story*, such an episode really took place in Kamala Das' life when her husband hurt her womanhood by talking of women sexier than her (*MS* 87). Thus, the marginalized status of women in a male-dominated world and within a sex-dominated marital relationship is adequately highlighted in the poem mentioned above.

The seventh poem brings to the fore the speaker's love of the 'kind night's embrace' with its 'genial dreams' as well as her sense of unease with the 'sorrowful day' and the real world (*BKD* 156). As a result, in the next poem, she finds sufficient motivation to embark on a journey of self-discovery that would end in the 'steepest / descent'.

In the ninth poem, the woman-speaker finds herself 'trapped' in the middle phase of human life when marriage and the duties of domesticity deprives one of the 'true meaning' of life, revealed only in 'early youth' or 'weary / age'. As a result, she has to make do with only 'the outer / rind of human pain' and 'the seeds / of mirthless laughter' (*BKD* 157). This compromise, however, is not sustainable for any length of time. This is why in the tenth poem the persona compares her simultaneous awareness of 'existence' and 'non-existence'. According to N.V. Raveendran, in this poem 'the

dominant thought is about that "superior love" which enables a being to dissolve into the spirit of the universe' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 154). Of course, this 'greater' love is death that can not only release the care-worn and body-bound being from the anxieties of 'the random caress' and the 'languor' resulting therefrom, but renew the soul in the form of 'restructured perfection'.

With a view to relieving her own languor and loneliness gifted by human company, the poet-speaker in the twelfth poem expresses her desire to be one with the natural world of birds and the hills. She claims to have forgotten love, but surely remembers the 'musty'-ness of 'the human habitations'. So, she wishes to make the 'sky' her 'roof' and the 'hills' her 'walls', and to stay still to let the weary birds 'come' and 'roost' in her hair at dusk (*Literature and Criticism*, 156).

The neglect an aged mother gets from her grown-up children, is poignantly revealed in the thirteenth poem of the sequence. The speaker enters the room where her grown-up children are sitting, 'cold' and in search of the 'warmth of human love'. But, they remain impervious to both her presence in the room and her emotional needs for love and care. In the seventeenth poem, the reader bears witness to how the utter neglect of the persona by her loved ones and her resultant loneliness has turned her 'skin' so 'cold'. In fact, her 'skin' (a hyponym of her being) has become so cold that she welcomes even 'fear' to be 'her nightgown' just for a 'change'.

The 'Anamalai Poems' are certainly amenable to both feminist and postcolonial readings that can release the silenced subaltern voices of both a woman and a woman-writer, caught in the crucible of male domination and rigid social norms. Battered by life, disowned and neglected by the loved ones, and unsure of her identity, the woman-poet is seen to grope through the mountain mist as it were to reach the peak of self-actualization in the way of which the sun of male 'logos' proves to be the chief impediment.

The attainment of this self-actualization in spite of all impediments is the main theme in 'Composition'. The poem is a very ambitious and multifaceted work, giving a panoramic view of her personal and poetic selves. In fact, Das' candid and comprehensive presentation of her life in the poem has led S.C. Harrex to categorize it as 'her [Das'] own life-history' poem (Harrex in Das: 1986, 173). The poem is positively multifaceted, dealing with subjects such as the woman-speaker's childhood, adulthood, marriage, sexuality, the therapeutic value of poetry, and the mystic quest to attain selfhood. The present discussion, however, will aim at analyzing only those aspects and sections of the poem that deal with the marginal status of the woman-persona and Das' presentation of the same in and through the poetics of resistance.

As is often the case with Kamala Das, her poetry does flummox some critics while fascinating many others. Eunice De Souza, for example, considers 'Composition' 'a totally formless stream of unhappy consciousness' that has 'marred' *The Descendants*, her second book (De Souza: 1977, 46). Almost in the same vein, Vrinda Nabar suggests that 'in actual fact' 'there is little organized development' in the poem, and the poet merely covers ground she had already explored ad infinitum (Nabar: 1994, 46). On the other hand, Anisur Rahman has pointed out, 'in the course of the circular movement of the poem is enumerated the wages she has paid for her existence' (Rahman; 1981, 19). Similarly, Iqbal Kaur has detected in this poem Das' brilliant exposé of sexual politics that at once unmakes a female to make a woman (Kaur in Kaur: 1995 [b], 143, 166 & 169).

The poem begins with an air of finality that brings the poet face to face with the sea. On the spatial level, this may imply a Byronic contiguity with the vast expanse of the sea, pointing out thereby the paltriness of man and his empty vaunts. On the symbolic plane, however, it may refer either to Arnold's sea of faith or to Tennyson's equanimous approach to the sea of final reckoning. Be that what it may, Das seems to suggest the onset of maturity that transcends the mere auditory reconstruction of the sea of her childhood, 'In the beginning / the sea was only the wind's / ceaseless whisper in a shell' (*D* 29), or the mere visual remake of her adult life:

In the years that followed
I was busy growing,
I had then
no time at all for the sea,
But,
there was off and on a seascape
in my dreams,
and the water sloshing up
and sliding down. (*D* 29)

In the childhood of the woman-persona, she could peacefully dream about the sea under the loving care of her grandmother. But, then time came and took her love away, 'the old woman died', 'the red house that had / stood for innocence / crumbled', and, in a description redolent of her poem 'Blood', 'the skin / intent on survival / learnt lessons of self-betrayal' (*D* 29).

The lessons of 'self-betrayal' taught her that in her 'heart' she had 'replaced love with guilt', and that both 'love' and 'hate' were 'involvements'. That this knowledge 'signifies' 'growth' has led in her case to the 'tragedy of life', making her realize that 'friendship / cannot endure', 'blood ties do not satisfy', people grow 'old and useless', and more than 'love' (often the other name for 'lust') tenderness is to be desired.

In fact, as revealed earlier in 'An Introduction', a girl's growth into woman is often more physical than intellectual. As a result, when she got married she sought in her husband a substitute for her grandmother who, as O.J. Thomas has pointed up, could understand, look after, correct, and advise her (Thomas in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 41). Naturally, when he decreed 'you may have freedom / as much as you want' (*D* 30) her 'soul balked at this diet of ash' (*D* 30). That even this 'freedom' was an imposition, administered and regulated by patriarchy, becomes clear from the reaction

of the persona:

> Freedom became my dancing shoe,
> how well I danced,
> and danced without rest,
> until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
> and I began to have doubts. (*D* 30)

As, revealed in the quoted excerpt, 'freedom' (a desirable state) 'became' (came to be) the woman-speaker's 'dancing shoe' (a means to help her entertain the male-inspectors), losing thereby the element of desirability. This dance, performed to the tune of patriarchy, was evaluated as 'well', and was continued 'without rest' to the dancer. As a result, it felt uncomfortable ('turned grimy on my feet'). But, by that time, the woman-persona had 'learnt lessons of self-betrayal', and could arrive at, if not realization, at least, 'doubts'. Faced with a virtual *freedom*-phobia and sexual disinclination, she asked her husband:

> I asked my husband,
> Am I hetero
> am I lesbian
> or am I just plain frigid? (*D* 30)

The answer, however, was quite predictable. The laugh of the husband showed to her the urgent need for seeking her answers from 'within'. Having sought and found those answers within, the marginalized woman-speaker comes to the realization that it is only by whipping up a 'froth of desire' for 'a man' (any man) and not 'the man' (her husband) and by letting off her steam in mental striptease that she can hope to regain her 'self'. In this connection, Vincent O'Sullivan observes, in her society where ossified conventions keep women in check, a 'normal' or 'traditional' woman has to be 'dismantled' – broken into pieces – to be 'frank' with herself and her readers (O'Sullivan in Das: 1986, 182). It is this frankness that allows her to reveal her essential

loneliness and woe at losing her grandmother, and cautions her readers against making any improper advances:

> Reader,
> you may say,
> now here is a girl with vast
> sexual hungers,
> a bitch after my own heart.
> But,
> I am not yours for the asking.
> Grovel at my feet,
> remove your monkey-suits and dance,
> sing Erato Erato Erato,
> Yet I shall be indifferent.
> Not because of morality
> but because
> I do not feel the need. (*D* 31)

The woman-persona's disgust at the lack of male self-restraint in matters of sex that Kaur has so rightly indicated (Kaur in Kaur: 1995 [b], 166) stems from the awareness that what she can offer can as well be rightfully offered by the man's wife and that 'we are all alike / we women / in our wrappings of hairless skin' (*D* 31). If Jyoti Rane finds in the above excerpt women's realization of male dominance and exploitation (Rane in Dodiya: 2000, 168), then I.K. Sharma discovers in Das a new Mary Wollstonecraft, vindicating 'the rights and the voice of women' (Sharma in O.P. Bhatnagar: 1981, 39).

Aware of the therapeutic value of woman's self-expression that Hélène Cixous has called attention to (Cixous 1976, 187), we can make a just reappraisal of Das' claim:

> I also know that by confessing

by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and
to the bone's
supreme indifference. (*D* 32-3)

Das also knows:

What I narrate are the ordinary
events of an
ordinary life. (*D* 33)

That the first school she had gone to has now been turned into a brothel shows her the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society where the concern for teaching them to be self-reliant comes a distant second to the need for exploiting them to make them 'toys / fit for the roaring nights' (*D* 33).

Anisur Rahman has pointed out that the 'consistently fatigued tone' and 'ironic overtones' dominate the poem's structure (Rahman: 1981, 19). In fact, the 'consistently fatigued tone' of the speaker is an outcome of the harsh treatment she has received from life whereas the 'ironic overtones' highlight her simultaneous awareness of and disagreement with the imbalance that characterizes the man-woman relationship. Her prayer to 'all women to kneel down before the male ego', for example, is marked with irony, since she cannot forget that this unequal status has been implicit in and perpetuated by the institution of marriage that is 'arranged' in the 'most humorous heaven'.

Reminding a lover of poetry of Shakespeare's sonnet no. LXXIII (Shakespeare: 1991, 1116-1117), Das now refers to her age and uselessness. Even though biographical criticism may hasten to point out that both Shakespeare (b. 1564) and Kamala Das (b. 1934) wrote these poems in question in their thirties, on closer reading, it seems that

their respective 'age' and 'uselessness' are socially demarcated on classist or sexist grounds. That she decides to forgive friend and foe alike and give her 'foe' a patient hearing, point at her attainment of maturity which in turn can prepare her to face the sea. In fact, this maturity is to be attributed to her realization of the inevitability of marginalization that awaits women as well as the aged. Her ultimate desire is to 'take a long walk / into the sea', to 'lie' in rest there, and to 'discompose' – crumbling, dissolving and retaining 'in other things / the potent fragments / of oneself' (*D* 35). The problem of over ingenuity, affecting otherwise perceptive critics is clearly revealed by Anne Brewster' confusion of the two verbs i.e. 'to discompose' and 'to decompose' (Brewster: 1980, 98-107). By substituting 'decompose' ('to destroy') for 'discompose' ('to quicken a new birth'), Brewster wilfully distorts Das' intended message, and nominally refers to the presence and significance of the sea in the poem, "'Composition' [...] opens with a reference to the sea, whose melancholy movement rolls throughout the poem and sweeps it on to its conclusion" (Brewster: 1980, 102). On the verbal level, the sea makes a re-entry towards the end of the poem when the woman-speaker expresses her desire to 'take a long walk into the sea' and 'lie there resting' forever. But, on the symbolic plane, the sea remains a looming presence throughout the poem showing the persona adrift in the sea of life, rudderless and battle-worn. Thus, Vrinda Nabar's charge that the 'sea' is given a subsidiary position in the poem (Nabar: 1994, 50) does not seem to hold true.

If the title 'Composition' refers to the 'composition' (shaping) of life by the forces of society and circumstance, it, on another level, surely signifies the 'composition' (making) of a poet and her poetry. The verb 'to discompose', therefore, rather than being 'strangely at odds with the title', as Vrinda Nabar would have us believe (Nabar: 1994, 53), actually refers to the continuation of the very process of composition by retaining 'in other things / the potent fragments / of oneself' (*D* 35).

If on the 'vital' level, it indicates the preservation of the stream of life through and with the death and dissolution of the 'perishable body', as I.G. Ahmed has pointed out (Ahmed: 2005, 91), then on the 'literary' level, it stands for the woman-poet's

bequeathal to posterity of the 'potent fragments' (poetry) of herself (the poet) that will surely outlast her.

Along with 'Composition' and 'Advice to a Fellow Swimmer', 'Suicide' constitutes the series of Kamala Das' poems dealing with the sea and the associated things of temporality and perenniality. As Anisur Rahman asserts, the poem moves on a pattern of 'dialogues' (with the sea) and 'reflections' (in isolation) (Rahman: 1981, 18). The sea here embodies a symbol of eternity and incorporates all. The poem begins with the dejected and confused woman-persona, offering the sea the right to choose between her soul and her body, with the sad realization that she is not qualified enough to make the choice herself. The answer of the sea, when it comes, is more decisive and forceful than the originary question. The sea accepts the soul instead of the body, because it is the 'smell' of the body (its perishability) that seems unbearable to the sea.

On the linguistic level, this poem illustrates Das' poetics of resistance. As N.V. Raveendran has observed, talking to a non-human entity (sea) which is a cardinal feature of the poem is a 'violation' of a 'selectional restriction' stipulating that the 'object of direct address must be human or animate or human like' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 135). Das circumvents this stipulation by presenting the 'address' as an 'apostrophe' as well as by presenting an instance of 'personification' to characterize the 'addressee'. On the emotional plane, her choice of the addressee is determined by an internal affinity that only connects the 'soul' with the 'sea' in view of their shared perennially.

This affinity notwithstanding, the woman-persona is shocked to perceive the remarkable difference and dissimilarity in their respective duties. The sea merely plays a 'child's game', roaring 'a hungry roar', and constantly leaps 'forward' and 'retreats'. Its duty, therefore, seems at once 'easy' and 'simple'. The woman-persona, on the other hand, is tied to her assigned roles – socially assigned and not self-determined. She has to 'pose' and 'pretend', acting to perfection the roles of 'happy woman' and 'happy wife'. Evidently, both these roles are assigned by patriarchy, and she has to perform

them willy-nilly. Vincent O'Sullivan calls attention to the fact that as with many performances the motive here is survival (O'Sullivan in Das: 1986: 186), with the awareness that non-performance may invite both censor and sanction. So, she 'must' maintain her station in life, keeping safe 'distance' from both 'the high' and 'the low':

> But,
> I must pose.
> I must pretend,
> I must act the role
> Of happy woman,
> Happy wife.
> I must keep the right distance
> Between me and the low. (*D* 2)

The absurdity of the whole stipulation comes to the fore from Das' repeated use of the modal auxiliary 'must' to pinpoint her obligation to perform the roles assigned to her. Significantly, she has to pretend happiness even if she positively lacks it in terms of her gender-status (woman) as well as marital-status (wife). So, Iqbal Kaur has reminded us "She [the woman-persona] must 'pretend'. She must 'act' her satisfaction with her position as the 'inessential', the 'accidental', the 'object', the 'other'" (Kaur in Kaur: 2005 [b], 147).

The woman-speaker's feeling of a deep unease at this constant role-playing induces in her the thanatonic desire. But, the old inhibitions and prohibitions again come in her way. So, she confides in the sea that though she can muster enough courage to die, she cannot take the plunge after all. In Fact, she is not courageous enough to disobey him (her husband) who had forbidden her to die and, in so doing, succeeded in hurting her. Engaged in a constant struggle to extricate herself from the drudgeries of her ordinary life, the persona gets fed up. She wants to be 'simple' and wants 'to be loved'. But, if 'love' proves unattainable, then she would rather court death than cling to a drab life. I.G. Ahmed, in this context, has demonstrated how 'the failure of her

search for love very often releases her contrary urge to embrace death' (Ahmed: 2005, 89).

If the persona is ultimately enabled to 'disobey' 'him', she clearly wants to surrender her soul to the sea. As Anisur Rahman has pointed up, 'The poet yearns to go deep into the bed of the sea and negate all drudgery arising out of her emotional displacement' (Rahman: 1981, 18). In fact, in such an eventuality, she will go 'deeper' and gleefully discover that the 'sea's hostile cold / is after all skin deep' and the 'sea's inner chambers are all very warm'. Life, there, will be free from the patriarchal impositions, and then therefore, blessed with unblemished happiness. Once under the sea's protection, the life-weary woman hopes to re-discover her natural movement of swimming; for it will remind her of an idyllic childhood in Malabar when she was free and happy and 'swam about' in a pale green pond. In carefree abandon she could lie 'speckled' green and gold' and do all her 'growing' there. But, then came the hour of reckoning as she was taught 'The tragedy of life / is not death but growth' (*D* 29); for all of a sudden her grandmother 'cried', 'Darling you must stop this bathing now / you are much too big to play / naked in the pond' ('Suicide'). According to I.G. Ahmed, 'the unselfconscious adolescent is forced to take note of the change coming over her' (Ahmed: 2005, 81).

An alternative course of action for the woman-persona is suggested at this juncture by the introduction of a 'white man' who 'offers' to induce forgetfulness and 'offers' himself as a 'stiff drink'. This white man, unlike her husband, gives her the choice and allows her to escape her marital roles. But, she cannot forget 'the only man who hurts' (*D* 3) and, as a result, fails to 'dislodge' the 'inherited memory of a touch' ('Gino').

Not knowing 'what else to ask for', Das' personae often ask for love. But, in 'Suicide' the persona recalls 'what the bliss and what its price'. To get him to love her was difficult enough, and when he did love he served his love in lethal doses'. Consequently, her woman-body felt 'so beaten' as to make her 'sob like a fool'. Her

apparent realization, at this juncture, is that, like the sea, she too is a flop, because they are both excessively sentimental. But, this so-called sentimentality, associated as it is with her love of the soul that alone knows how to sing, is, in reality, an exposé of the way of the male-dominated world. So, her requests to the sea to 'toss back' her 'body' and take in her 'naked soul' are inspired by a kind of revenge motive, because 'he' (the husband) knew how to 'love the body' and 'embalm' her 'poor lust' with his 'bitter sweet juices' as well as how to 'hurt' her 'soul' by taming a 'swallow' (the symbolic equivalent of the female-speaker) and making her 'forget' the 'endless pathways of the sky'.

The woman-speaker's distaste for the body and persistent death-wish are motivated by her experiences of suppression in the male-dominated society as also within the sex-obsessed institution of marriage. The erosion of her personality meant that she was fated only to play the 'other', as Iqbal Kaur had pointed out (Kaur in Kaur: [b] 1995, 159). Unable to choose or change her destiny, she is relegated to the subordinate positions of a slave or an idol or as she had mourned in 'An Introduction':

> [...] I am sinner,
> I am saint. I am the beloved and the
> Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
> Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (*SC* 60)

In the face of an all pervasive male domination, Das' poetic personae, like the women in Raji Narasimhan's novels, can only find solace in female bonding. In 'The Millionaires at Marine Drive', for example, the poet-speaker remembers the 'warmth' that she could receive only from her dead grandmother who could 'put an arm around' her 'shoulders without a purpose'. Her male-partners, on the contrary, had 'The great brown thieving hands' that 'groped' beneath her 'clothes', since 'their fire was that of an arsonist's, warmth was not their aim' ('The Millionaires at Marine Drive').

I.G. Ahmed has characterized 'Millionaires at Marine Drive' as a poem of 'strong binaries and contrastive features' in which 'past derives its meaning from its opposition to the present' (Ahmed: 2005, 36). The poem begins with a psychic projection, whereby a bygone time ('eighteen years' ago) wells up inside the poet-speaker who can perceive a mobile concurrency of past with its remembered happiness and security, and present with its suffered humiliation and ennui:

> Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death;
> I wonder why the ache still persists. Was
> She buried, bones and all, in the loose red
> Soil of my heart? All through the sun-singing
> Day, all through the moon-wailing night, I think
> Of her, of the warmth that she took away, (*CP* 97)

In the above excerpt, the poet-speaker shows her partiality for the past (her childhood) which comes to haunt her in the form of her dead grandmother. Here, Devindra Kohli opines, 'It is perhaps consistent with the matrilinear [sic.] tradition to which she traces her ancestry and with her general criticism of men for their failure to give her tenderness and warmth, that the only figure whom she presents as ideal is her great-grandmother' (Kohli: 1976, 183). Of course, it is the present that forces her to seek sanctuary in the memories of an idyllic past in the old Nalapat House and under the loving care of her great grandmother whom she has presented in her poems as 'grandmother' ('My Grandmother's House', 'The Millionaires at Marine Drive', 'Blood', etc.). Now that her 'grandmother' is no more, the poet-speaker thinks of her all through the 'sun singing day' and all through the 'moon wailing night', since, in lieu of the warmth that her grandmother could offer, she has to make do with the 'skin's lazy hungers' (*SC* 10) or the fire of sexual passion that burnt her 'cities down'. As a result, in place of the life sustaining 'blood', only the corrosive acid could flow through her arteries, hastening her 'autumn years' and an unwanted freedom of unconcern:

> [...] no longer was

There someone to put an arm around my
Shoulders without a purpose, all the hands,
The great brown thieving hands, groped beneath my
Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist's,
Warmth was not their aim, they burnt my cities
Down, it was not blood but acid that flowed
Through my arteries and in autumn years
I yellowed, sickened like the leaves on trees,
Gained a freedom I never once had asked for. (*CP* 97)

This 'unwanted freedom' took a heavy toll on the female-speaker whose 'laughter' became 'crazed with pain' and whose hedonistic excesses led to the eventual feeling of remorse:

The millionaires at Marine Drive scattered
Grain to feed the early rising doves,
Like the fluttering of their wings was laughter,
Crazed with pain. Oh, why did I mix my
Pleasures like I mixed my drinks to pass out
So soon on the velvet couch of life? [...] (*CP* 97)

This clearly exemplifies what women expect out of marriage and what they get, to borrow the title of one of Das' articles (*WWEMWTG* 20-21). This freedom was appointed to her in place of the loving identity with her husband that she had asked for. In fact, paired with an insensate husband she was made into a social butterfly, a party animal whose ignorance and unwitting mistakes were caused by the marginal status of woman and the abusive guile of patriarchy as personified by the 'guests' who 'only change their painted masks'. The trapped female is fated to 'see' 'the fog of their hate', 'hear' their 'off key' songs, and satisfy their 'lust'. Having turned 'old', 'frigid', and 'grey haired', she can only crave for reciprocity in love that she had never received:

[...] I have turned old, frigid, grey haired, but
Surely somewhere lovers still cling with wet
Limbs, wet eyes, near doorways at parting hour? (*CP* 97)

Thus, in this poem, we are made privy to the poet-speaker's kaleidoscopic consciousness that leads her to substitute present disappointment with the male-figures with reminiscence of a virtually pre-lapserian childhood and pine for what is not – understanding and respect from a male-lover (the husband-figure of Das' poetry).

Disillusionment with the present state of lovelessness in an unfeeling urban world, often leads Kamala Das to take an imaginary flight to a person who did once love and protect her (her grandmother), and a place where she was loved and cared for (the Old Nalapat House). In 'My Grandmother's House', as reflected in the title itself, the person and the place are brought together to give vent to the time that was. As Harish Raizada has opined, the Old Nalapat House and its 'presiding deity', her grandmother, 'symbolize' for the poet-speaker 'love', 'innocence', 'respectability' and 'traditional values' that are her sore needs at her present condition of rootlessness (Raizada in Prasad: 1983, 118).

The poem is thematically divided into three sections. In the first section, by describing a definite event in the past (the grandmother's death) that occurred in a far off place (the Old Nalapat House), the poet-speaker foregrounds the idea of remoteness and its therapeutic value for the speaker in distress. In the second section, by expressing an oft-felt desire to revisit that far off place and relive the past experience of loving warmth and security, the unfulfillability of her present desire is clearly revealed. In the third and the final section, by presenting her past glory of being 'loved' and 'proud' as incredible, her present love-lorn status is thrown into a sharp relief.

The poem shows us how in Das' 'automythology' as Shirley Geok-lin Lim has pointed out 'the maternal home' becomes 'the trope for the condition of proud and loving freedom', 'a condition that the poem raises as absent in the degraded woman's

life' (Lim in Kaur: 1995 [b], 94). Of course, the 'house' acquires this 'trope'-status thanks to its associations with the poet-speaker's now-dead grandmother ('That woman') whom N.V. Raveendran has identified as 'the mother substitute', the poet-speaker feels the urge to be 'near to her' and 'under her loving care'. The frustration of this urge creates the thematic tension of the present poem, positing in dialectical contrast 'the fullness of the distant [the house] and the absent [the grandmother] and the emptiness of the near [her urban abode] and the present [her love-lorn state]' (N.V.Ravendran: 2000, 148). In fact, as Miss A. Selvalakshmi observes, in this poem we get to see 'the woman-persona' both in the past and in the present, whereby these two separate worlds 'flash' before our eyes. In the world that was hers, she was the 'proud recipient' of her grandmother's love; whereas the world in which she now lives, she has to pine for love 'at least in small change' (Selvalakshmi in Balachandran: 2004, 62).

The poem begins with the poet-speaker's remembrances of things past, whereby her beloved Nalapat House and 'my grandmother' get distanced into 'far away' and 'That woman' respectively. As 'That woman' 'died' and as 'The house' 'withdrew into silence', the possibility of the female-speaker's receiving love was set to naught. So, she was left in a loveless world and her 'blood turned cold like the moon':

> There is a house now far away where once
> I received love.... That woman died,
> The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
> Among books I was then too young
> To read, and, my blood turned cold like the moon. (*SC* 15)

Faced with this loveless existence in which even her memory of having received love is distrusted by the husband-figure, the poet-speaker loses all hopes and expectations from the present:

> [...] 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, at least in small change? (*SC* 15)

In her case, this forlorn condition accentuates the need of taking a 'pastward flight', as I.G. Ahmed has put it (Ahmed: 2005, 39) that may alleviate her emotional woes:

How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog [...] (*SC* 15)

Of course, the acts of peering 'through the blind eyes of windows' or listening to the 'frozen air' may in Anisur Rahman's words signify 'a sentient peep into her past'(Rahman: 1981, 56).

That the poet-speaker wants to 'pick an armful of / Darkness' and 'bring it here' at once highlights her 'wild despair' and her efforts at alleviating that 'despair'. The 'armful of / Darkness', when brought 'here' to 'lie behind' her 'bedroom door' like 'a brooding dog', brings out her sense of 'lack' as regards the pre-natal darkness/ innocence of the womb and the canine fidelity of happy memories. This 'lack' may have stemmed from a desire to be one with the mother separation from whose womb, according to Martin Heidegger, subjects the self to 'uncanniness' or the affective state in which the self finds itself in its encounter with the world. In this alien 'world', it finds itself to be all alone and 'discovers the sheer fact of existing' (Heidegger: 1962, 233).

Thus, in 'My Grandmother's House', the poet-speaker dispassionately analyzes her present in terms of her past and vice versa, and comes to think of herself as a 'victim' who, once 'loved' and 'proud', is now forced to 'beg' at 'strangers' doors' to 'receive love' in spite of the presence of her 'darling' (husband-figure). His inability/refusal to 'love' her makes the speaker's nostalgic yearning for her grandmother and her grandmother's house all the more intense and poignant. In fact, the poem's appeal is enhanced and universalized, thanks to the poet's ability, as K.V. Surendran indicates, to 'transform her intense personal experience into a general truth' (Surendran in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 135). Any other woman living under similar circumstances and aware of her own marginal status in this male-dominated and love-denying society, may easily identify with the experiences and desires expressed by the woman-persona in this poem.

Kamala Das' 'performance' of all the 'gender roles' of 'daughter', 'sister', 'wife' and 'mother' has made her aware of the different strategies adopted by heteropatriarchy to marginalize women and make them accept that marginalization as their lot. She seems to concur with Griselda Pollock:

> Patriarchy does not refer to the static, oppressive domination by one sex over another, but to a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable (Pollock: 1988, 33).

Similarly, she seems to be agreeable to Hélène Cixous' statement:

> But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their [women's] individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is

inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible (Cixous: 1976, 876).

It is this gender-consciousness that Kamala Das seeks to propagate through her poetry. As I.G. Ahmed has commented, "She talks more about women because they are more oppressed than men" (Ahmed: 2005, 133). But, she is alive to the fact that neither patriarchy nor femininity can be straightjacketed as monoliths. According to Pollock, in the context of the construction of gender, these processes of representation that at once reflect and mediate a gendered reality operate 'by means of winning our identification with the versions of masculinity and femininity which are represented to us', 'binding us into a particular – but always unstable – regime of sexual difference' (Pollock: 1988, 33).

The poet who has both experienced and witnessed the sinister aspect of this 'sexual difference' tries to highlight a more fundamental human similarity, 'I too call myself I' ('An Introduction'), or rationalize the naturalness as well as desirability of this 'difference':

Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier... ('The Looking Glass')

But, when she perceives the reluctance of the male to accept gender equality or tolerate 'difference', she lashes out at them:

Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood. ('A Losing Battle')

Or, boldly declares, 'I no longer care whom / I hurt with love and often without?' ('Glass'). Disillusioned with the present and the male, she goes down the memory lane and remembers her grandmother who could 'put an arm around my / Shoulders without a purpose' ('The Millionaires at Marine Drive'), but her rueful realization, 'That woman died' ('My Grandmother's House') or 'every wife is her one man's whore, / Earns her bread easing a pubic bliss' ('Effusions V') makes her exclaim:

> All I want now
> is to take a long walk
> into the sea
> and lie there, resting,
> completely uninvolved. ('Composition')