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RELIGION, POLITICS AND GENDER IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das's conversion to Islam on December 16, 1999 and the advertising of it, is not, as some have suggested, empathising with a minority, nor championing the cause of the underdog, but simply the most recent in a series of flamboyant gestures that have characterised her life and writing. Her reputation rests on a few acclaimed collections of verse, *My Story*, an autobiography which was advertised as "delightfully provocative", a collection of short stories and a series of articles in newspaper and periodical all of an entirely personal and whimsical nature. A significant chunk of her poetry – *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendents* (1970) and *The Old Playhouse And Other Poems* (1973), was published before the bulk of her journalistic and other prose pieces were written. This is important, because the kind of response that her poetry elicited may have encouraged her to write an exclusively contentious prose.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of Mrs. Das's poetry has never been in doubt. She was a pioneer among Indian women poets writing in English who expressed a profound dissatisfaction with their situation as women. Her first book, *summer in Calcutta* was a promising start. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Mrs. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girl fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love.

In spite of this early promise, Mrs. Das never matured into the outstanding poet that she showed signs of becoming. She claims always to have been a notebook poet, sometimes writing a poem a day, and this becomes obvious in the unevenness of her talent. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" begins with a long and cumbersome description which shows little regard for the inherent discipline of poetic form.

Her creative energies so memorably focused on the striking, but fragmented, image and the flash of insight, also suggests a mind that is incapable of rising above the immediate. Individual poems disintegrate into chaos or trail off into uninspired prose. But in spite of the obvious technical problems, there is enough concentrated energy and intensity of feeling to carry individual poems through to their conclusion. In the prose however, her inability to formulate a consistency of thought even in a single paragraph becomes much more palpable producing an autobiography that is flabby and unrestrained.

### Major Concerns in her poetry

"My Story" was published in 1976 and presumably written a year earlier. We cannot be certain because no dates are mentioned, not even the date of her birth. In the preface she claims that the book had caused her some pain. Yet there is nothing conspiratorial about the writing; it is almost disappointingly bland. The narrative presents two conflicting images of the author – Mrs. Das as iconic of the sexless and victimized is juxtaposed with Mrs. Das as the highly desirable, emancipated women. She claims to be "ready for love, ripe for a sexual banquet." Numerous male cousins grab and kiss her, she receives attention from her husband's colleagues. A famous Indian novelist living abroad and her father's friends give her lecherous looks. Lesbianism and rape are also played out at predictable intervals – in school, young girls fall in love with her and while traveling in a train, a college student creeps into her berth. She is also chaste, demure and misunderstood by husband and relatives. She frequently weeps and her companions rush to comfort her. An editor who had arrived to negotiate a contract held her hand. Her doctors, teachers and friends hold her hands. Carlo, her Italian pen friend takes her to a restaurant where she cannot manage the cutlery, but Carlo hold her hand tightly. Later she goes to his room weeping because she is miserable. Carlo comforts her, while she holds his hands, and then he takes her home. Mrs. Das in a social gathering never takes the initiative – she is vulnerable, gentle, passive and incapable of denying another pleasure.

For Mrs. Das, every fluctuating mood and private whim is worthy of being articulated so that her prose, particularly her autobiography, is an erratic record of meandering, discursive, fantasies. But even when she is at her most professional, she has always used her literary pursuits to embroil the public in her household disputes. As with the writing, so with the recent conversion. It is essentially a personal choice sensationalized to make it a subject of public debate. To what extent her conversion is a matter of conviction remains to be seen. Her comments in her autobiography and other writing also to suggest that she may have longed for a more circumscribed existence for some years now: "Before I was the rebellious type. I used to move around a lot, involve myself in various activities: most of the time taking risks and living dangerously. Now I have changed. I have become a virtuous, clean woman. A puritan in all sense, who prays daily, wears white clothes and is conservative in thinking." The only, not so significant difference between this statement made in 1983 and her description of hers present situation, is, that she has traded a white sari for a black burqa.

In 1984 in an interview with Shobha Wariyar for Eve's Weekly, she made the following statement : " Yes, I know, yesterday I might have been against liberation, today I am for it. Tomorrow I do not know what I would say, and how I feel." The timing seems to be a propitious one. At 65, partially immobile and helped by nurse, her conversion coincided with the end of a supposed millennium - a time of apocalyptic endings and new beginnings. She has little to lose at this stage of her life by choosing purdah. And if she wishes to trade freedom for the security of a more ascetic lifestyle, if she wishes to protect herself from a somewhat messy reality, it is her personal choice, relevant exclusively to her situation. But Mrs. Das seeks public approval for her personal decisions by interviews with the press, the wearing of burqa. Writer and controversy queen Kamala Das, now Kamala Surayya had again stirred a hornet's nest by announcing that she intended to convert to Islam. She also started off an acrimonious debate with her remarks on Lord Krishna.

But having done so, the passion and the scale of reactions from various quarters have exhausted the ailing 65- year old author. According to Surayya, who has taken to wearing the burqa now, some people whom she suspects to be from the Sangh Parivar, have been threatening her on the phone for "running down" Hinduism and Krishna. The walls of her ancestral home at Punnayur-Kulam village are plastered with graffiti. Even the screening of a documentary based on her life was collected after the theatre owner came under pressure from unknown quarters. A "divout Hindu" has sent her a lawyer's notice for hurting Hindu sentiments by saying her favourite God, Krishna, was no longer resident in Guruvayoor Temple. She says in her heart she has converted Krishna to Islam and now calls him Mohammed.

According to Mrs. Das, her action was not sudden. She says that she has been yearning to do it for the past 27 years. "I am lonely and need the solace of a protective religion like Islam and a merciful God like Allah," says the writer who moves about with the help of a nurse, sometimes on a wheel chair. The formal conversion

ceremony took place on December 16 at Kochi but over the past weeks, Mrs. Das had already started writing poems in her rudimentary Arabic in praise of Allah. And denying the rumours that she is planning to marry Muslim League Rajya Sabha member Abdul Samad Samadani.

It has not been brickbats all the way. Many have congratulated Mrs. Das on her "bold" decision. A congratulatory telegram she particularly likes to flaunt came from Salem Central Prison. It is from people's Democratic Party leader Abdul Nasser Madani, incarcerated in connection with the Coimbatore blasts. Comments writer, Paul Zacharia: "I suspected her of having Pro-Hindutva feelings as shown by her distribution of "payasam" to celebrate the nuclear tests conducted last year. I now stand corrected and congratulate her for having taken this decision." But Zacharia is not enamoured of her adoption of overtly Islamic symbols like the burqa.

She says one of the best things about Islam is the purdah. "I used to wear it occasionally in the past too. It's most protective dress. You can avoid ogling eyes even as you see everything". Kamala Das's embracing of Islam has caused consternation to some while the Hindutva brigade is stunned by the reason she enumerated. Her views on purdah are not recent. In an intimate interview with (late) Iqbal Kaur on 18th August 1992 she had advocated burkha as a "bullet proof" dress: "It protects a woman against the piercing eyes of men. You are so safe inside the burkha.... I myself have tried it so many times." Similarly, the Shoba De kind of feminism was equally condemned by her way back in 1992; it is not feminism. It is just animal lust."

Surayya's choice of Islam comes as a stunning blow to these who regard Islam too suffocating for woman. One is never too old to reform and repent. Surayya's convictions are strong enough to enable her to brave the onslaught inflicted on her. Since she has been pondering over the pros and cons for 27 years, her decision is neither hasty nor provoked by some recent incident. She is well aware of the implications. Islam means surrender of the self to God's will, hence she has voluntarily imposed on herself restrictions with regards to conduct. The debate on conversion shall be renewed with fresh vigour. As a writer, Kamala Das earns substantial royalty from renowned publishers. Nor can the charge of misguiding the ignorant be leveled this time. Her intellectual acumen has been recognized so well that her poems are taught throughout the country and even in foreign universities. We have yet to watch the reactions of the „secure“ and „pseudo-secular“ academicians, whether or not they permit her some space in the syllabus. The obvious chances are that she will now be discarded from the curricular not on academic grounds but on emotional and fundamentalist considerations.

Those who used to shout from the roof-tops about the right to freedom of expression for a writer shall find this incident difficult to swallow. Religion apart, the feminist must be gnashing their teeth. The sheet anchor of Indian feminism has turned the tables topsy-turvy. Even in the heydays of feminism the widow feels: "He was sunshade; he was my home, now I walk naked as a babe". If she is looking for "the solace and protective religion like Islam", the message is crystal clear that Islam is not as beastly as has been projected by some quarters so far.

Welcoming a new shining star on the horizon of Islam, we fervently hope that her vow to write poems in praise of Allah would instill some sanity in the poisoned minds of Rushdie, Nasreen and their ilk. This will be her redemption. Through her conversion to Islam, Kamala Das has crossed yet another frontier. Whether the conversion was spiritually inspired or matrimonially motivated is irrelevant. Religion is a matter of personal choice. As in the decision to marry at 67, age matters only to the couple concerned. People can lead their lives as they see fit, and this includes choosing companions.

Kamala Das has always been something of a cult figure in Kerala. She does have an impact. Women with literary aspirations still hope to write like her. In that sense, her private life cannot be completely separated from the public sphere. In any case, she has never been a private person has always realized wearing her pet hates and design on her sleeve. She is a respected writer. Hailing from the illustrious Nalappat family; daughter of the well-known poet and Jnanpith award winner, Balamani Amma and Mathru bhoomi director V.M. Nair, she grew up in a intellectual and literary ambience. Her facility with words found expression in every literary form fiction, the short story, poetry and journalistic articles.

She has in her writing explicitly and imaginatively dealt with the gray area of sexual relations – acquiring the label of a free, uninhabited spirit. She is a wizard at anatomizing the micro-mechanics of mental life, at charming the quicksilver zigzag of the mind. Her writing has a carnal lyricism that escapes being pornographic. She is a master crafts person when it comes to depicting everyday life, straddling both the English and the Malayalam literary words.

Her childhood memories are unmatched in brilliance. Her autobiographical work, “My Story”, which came out in 1976, demolished traditional sexual barriers by dealing in female sexuality. For the first time, perhaps, in the history of women’s writing in India, the “love need” for unsatisfied sexual yearnings of women were delineated. That a woman writer could dare to speak in this fashion of female sexuality was something that the Kerala psyche could not easily countenance. Indeed, the reaction that her evoked locally made Kamala Das feel rejected and alienated.

She was in her sixties, when she took up painting seriously. Once again she shocked polite society her water colours were largely of female nudes. But they provoked critics to read new insights into them and they certainly sold well. And whenever she spoke publicity, she emerged an ardent advocate of freedom in love. The media quoted her and counted her. Many women were inspired to look at her as an icon.

Yet today, as Surayya she seems to have renounced those old ideals, projecting herself as a woman who prefers bondage to freedom, bondage, with love. There are many ways of looking at Kamala Das’s conversion to Islam. For some, the fact that an upper caste woman can convert to a minority religion is evidence of a commendable courage with eccentricity. Especially now when a strong anti-conversion drive has been launched by certain extremist Hindu groups. But then that is Kamala Das all over again. All her life she has enjoyed defying taboos.

Certainly, her action has electrified Kerala’s social scene. The state, many feel, is evolving into a land of widows, with women outliving men and depression stalking the land. In such a scenario, Kamala Das may even appear to provide an alternative. Whether her change of heart is hormonal or spiritual, her joyful decision to marry, adopt a new religion, explore new realms of a faith and preach it to the world, injects not only optimism but euphoria.

Like most Indian poets writing in English, Kamala Das is also bilingual. She writes both in Malayalam and English. Once when asked why she chose to write in English, she replied that English being the tongue most familiar to her, she used it to express herself. Her choice of English was by no means a deliberate one. One of her better known poem “An Introduction”, which has often been regarded as her poetic manifesto, throws considerable light on her use of English: “Why not speak in/Any language I like? The language I speak/Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness’s/All mine, mine alone.”

In other words, she recognizes the immense possibilities of English to bear the various shade and nuances of feelings, its vast storehouse of emotional analogues and other equivalents. It is as useful and transmutes her ‘Joys’, ‘longing’ and ‘hopes’ into the sensitive and plastic mould of English, “the speech of the mind”. These lines also reveal that to her what she says is more important than the medium in which she says it. She confirms the view that the choice of medium is only of marginal significance since a genuine poet does not chose to write in a language which he is not fully conversant with.

#### **The poetic craft**

Kamala Das received no formal education. She has no university degree, still almost instinctively, she is aware of the value and significance of words, and recognizes fine shades of meaning of one word and another. In the poem entitled as “In Words”, the poetess reveals her sense of the value and significance of words, and also that words come to her spontaneously, “All round me are words, and words and words,/They grow on me like leaves, they never/Seem to stop their slow growing/From within..... But I tell myself, words/Are a nuisance, beware of them, they/Can be so many things...”

She is fully aware of the immense potentialities of words. She uses words with caution. Poetry, for her, is an organization of the best words in the best possible order. They harvest of words in the poems is rich and

varied; it gives the true picture of the poet's moods and feelings. She achieves an easy commerce between the idea and the word.

Further light on her article methods is thrown by the lyric "without a pause". A poet must be no gap between the occurrence of an idea and its expression: "Write without/A pause, don't search for pretty words/ Which dilute the truth, but write in hast, of/Everything perceived, and known, and loved." With the occurrence of ideas, words also occur on the fingertips of a born poet like Kamala Das. But this does not mean that she writes carelessly or shabbily. As a matter of fact, her diction reveals her mastery of her chosen medium, and when at her best she has almost Shakespearean felicity of expression, an almost classical simplicity and clarity. She is a poet in the confessional mode, and hence, her diction is colloquial-her vocabulary being drawn largely from the language of everyday use. Kamala Das's poetic diction has nothing to do with philosophical musing or religious chants. Nor does she wield her instrument to compose songs or religious chants. Nor does she wield her instrument to compose songs of love or of nature. She is unlike the modernists whose dislocated syntax startles us as much as their poetic apprehensions puzzle.

Kamala Das does not make experiments with words but only imparts a personal touch to them. Diction is not a tool in her hands but a poetic medium pure and simple. Kamala Das uses words imaginatively, so that they are adequate to express her emotions. Her words come to her effortlessly, and become one with her emotions. Sometimes, a powerful verbal-drama is enacted through her use of emotionally charged words. Thus in "My Grandmother's House", the use of the word, 'withdrew' is vivid and active, and as a result the empty, deserted house comes to life and seems to be a partner in the grief of the poetess. Similarly, in these lines from "A Hot Noon In Malabar": "This/Is a noon with a mistrust in/Their eyes, dark, silent once, who rarely speak/At all, so that when they speak, their voices/Run wild, like jungle voices."

The words, "Jungle Voices", adequately convey the poet's emotions, enact a real drama, and impart to the poem its peculiar tone. Every epithet tells and glows with emotion. There is a perfect fusion of sense and sound in the poem, and such fusion shows Kamala Das at her best. She is not a conscious artist with words, her diction is common place, she does not hunt for words, but words come to her naturally and spontaneously, get charged with her emotions, acquire vigour and intensity thereby, and so the common place and prosaic is raised to the level of highest poetry. In this way, the distinction between 'poetic' and 'unpoetic' is obliterated. It is quite remarkable that her words assume various forms with the shift in attitude and are, consequently, tortured, relaxed or plain as the situation demands. Words are natural, colourless until they are used in an emotive way in poetry. The words and metaphors of Kamala Das pulsate with life since they embody feelings and not thoughts. Her language in comparison to that of her fellow poets is distinct for its emotional overtones and imaginative rendering of the words and metaphors. She uses the words with their accepted meaning and import, and does not search for novelty. She herself says, "It is not essential that a good poet should change and recreate the language. But some words when used by a poet are changed and acquire a different meaning. Every good writer is a sculptor with words. An artist has the right to do what he thinks best with his material. This right he acquires gradually with experience".

Kamala Das herself has acquired this right, and so in her hand words acquire a new meaning and significance. Thus in 'My Grandmother's House', "Frozen air", "Blind eyes of the windows" and "Armful of darkness" are the metaphors of silence, dereliction, loneliness and past memories. By attributing the qualities of one object to another, she made the "frozen air" and "Blind eyes" more expressive than what they actually are in plain language.

Kamala Das claims that her language is half English half Indian, but her effortless casual style shows nothing remarkably Indian in structure, rhythm or choice of words. It is possible, however, that future scholars going over this material by computer methods, will discover specifically Indian turns of phrase, rhythms, and sentence structures and even associate them with predominantly Indian emotions in certain situations. There is no doubt that the poetess has said that her language is half Indian and half English, but her primary concern is to find verbal equivalents for her emotional states, and she does neither care to cultivate Indianness nor to modify or alter the meaning of words.

These are not the mechanical intensifiers, rather they reveal the poet's tendency to discount the use of many words and rely on just one word for the maximum effect. They also create a sense of drama and the sound pattern that emerges corresponds closely with the phonetic of thought. This habit of doing away with words is also manifested in her use of ellipses. For instance in the "The Invitation" we read "I have a man's fist in my head today/Cleansing, unclesing..." The ellipses indicate the silence after a pause and also pin point the poet's suffering. The repetition of a phrase followed by ellipses occurs in "Substitute": "It will be all right, it will be all right/It will be all right between the world and me/It will be all right, if I don't remember/The last of the days together..." The ellipse suggests here both the points and joys of living the last of the days together. In a nutshell, these are some of the most expressive devices for communicating the real sense of suffering. The poet makes virtue of them instead of regarding them as mere contrivances.

A stylistic device, which reinforces the predominantly emotional quality of the poems of Kamala Das is the frequent repetition of words, lines and even sections of a poem. One of the few poems in which repetitions work in Kamala Das's poetry is "Substitute" in which the repetition of the phrase, "It will be all right, it will be all right", suggests exactly the opposite, in fact: the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life. But she often repeats words, which do not bear repeating. There is no need to repeat "their naked fear... (An Apology to Goutama) to forget/To forget oh, to forget" (The Sun Shine Cat) or cough, cough the lungs out" (The Flag). The line would be stronger with the repetition cut out.

Kamala Das's diction is marked by simplicity and clarity. It is the language of her emotions and she speaks to her readers as one human being to another. In this lies her originality and her distinction. There are no abstractions, no complications and no intricate, tortuous constructions. Her imagery is always functional; never merely decorative, and is drawn from the familiar and the common place. Often her images are symbolic and thus they increase the expressive range of her language. The sun and heat, house and window, cremation and burning, objects of nature, human anatomy, sleep, sea, the mystic grandmother and Krishna constitute her whole range of imagery.

#### **The Recurrent Images**

Images drawn from the human body are used most frequently. The male body is an agent of corruption, a destroyer of female chastity and individuality. Thus in the "Freaks", the male anatomy furnishes her with images of horror and ugliness. It is represented as repulsive and destructive. The mother is "A dark cavern", "the cheek is", "Sun-stained" and the teeth „are gleaming and uneven". It is an instrument of destruction, her rejection of the male body is total, and is symbolic of her revolt against the male ego and the male dominated world. She is conscious of the beauty and glory of the human anatomy and is attracted by it, but its raging lustfulness disgusts her and hence the use of images like, those cited above. She is also conscious of disease and decay to which the human flesh is heir to, and this awareness also colours her imagery. In the following lines from "The Looking Glass": "Notice the perfection/Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under/Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,/Drooping towels, and the jerky way he/Urinate." The images concretize her fond awareness of the intimate human details. They express adequately her abiding love for the human body as also her aversion to it. Indeed, images are her themes as well as the modes of expression. They dramatize her passion and impart certain depth and resonance to her fillings.

Another recurrent image is that of the Sun and the heat it generates. It is used most frequently as a symbol of lust and corruption, rather than vigour and regeneration. In "The Dance of the Eunuchs", "Summer in Calcutta", and in a host of other poems, the sun with its scorching heat is an agent of pain, suffering and lustfulness. Like the male body it is destructive and corrupting in its influence. The four elements – air, fire, earth and water, also contribute to the imagery and symbolism of Kamala Das.

The sea image recurs most frequently and acquires symbolic significance. The sea, for her is a place of retreat both from the ravages of the boastful male and the scorching sun. The desire to merge with the great blue sea is also symbolic of her desire for union with the right man through whom she can achieve emotional fulfilment. In "The Invitation", the poetess ultimately decides to merge with the sea. The sea here symbolizes a

place of retreat from barren lustful relationship as well as the comic home, the eternity, the basic principle of life and regeneration.

Another recurrent image in Kamala Das's poetry is that of the window. It recurs in a number of poems. It is a place to view and review the past as well as the present. Often it is used as a link between the past and the present. In "My Grandmother's House", "the window image", under lines here, with sufficient emphasis, the languishing desire of the poet for a sentient peep into her past and resurrect her dreams and desires. With the dereliction of the old house, the windows have become blind. Only the heat of reunion with the house will melt the ice and its windows will again be restored to old life.

Kamala Das makes frequent use of the Radha-Krishna and Mirabai legends to provide a mythical frame work to extra marital sex in her poetry. Krishna is the mythical lover, and Radha and Mirabai are the eternal seekers for their object of love, Krishna. These mythical personages are re-currently used as symbols to sanctify the quest of Kamala Das's woman persona for emotional fulfillment outside marriage. They also bear testimony to her "Indianness" which is also borne out "by her use of the typically Indian flora and fauna, scenes and sights, for her purposes. Her poetry is deeply rooted in the Indian soil and in Indian cultural tradition and despite her modernity, and her "revolt" against the rule a woman is traditionally expected to play in Indian society.

The quest for intimacy so pervasive in Kamala Das's poetry, then, is a supremely political, ideologically loaded, exercise. Her craving for intimacy is at bottom an unconscious flight from the dominating other towards a counter-creed that has a well-defined structure. There are two distinct, yet interrelated, ways in which this counter-creed, this ideology of intimacy, operates in Kamala Das's poetry, one on the spatial level and the other on the temporal level. On the spatial level it manifests as a complex desire for the body, of the loved one, of the archetypal man, of the mythological Krishna, or of the unidentified "you". The promiscuity implied in this desire is extended on a temporal level to indulge in nostalgic thoughts over her feudal, matrilineal ancestry. The one is intimacy to the subject, and the other to the past. The desire in either case can be read as indicative of an urge to demolish the identity that colonialism has constructed for her.

The flight from the external world to the personal world and from the private elements of human experience back to larger historical realities may not be as tortuous as at first might appear. A whole tradition of psychohistory can be collected in support of this suggestion. Kamala Das seems to vaguely recognize the interconnectedness between the two worlds when she says in a poem: "Perhaps it had begun as a young man's most/Normal desire to subjugate a girl,/But when she, being silly, spurned him, he took/The country as his bride and rode her/For thirty years..."

Her identity as an Indian, as a woman, as a wife, as a poet, everything comes under attack. Kamala Das recognized the gravity of the crisis very early in her career. Here is testimony from the poems beginning with "An Introduction": "...The language I speak becomes/ Mine, its distortions, its queernesses all mine, mine alone./ It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps but it is/Honest, it is as human as I am human, you know..."

Running through all this is the subject's sense of intense loneliness, the crisis arising out of its inability to establish meaningful relations with the world whose values it cannot accept. Kamala Das tries to revolve this crisis at the inter-subjective level in two ways: first, by flaunting "a grand flamboyant lust" ("Freaks"), and second, by writing poetry that allows her to "gatecrash into the precincts of other's dreams" "Anamalai Poems". There is a deliberate attempt at presenting an exaggerated picture of the response, and this seems to accentuate the unnatural aspect of the resolution. It this quality of excess is quite conspicuous in the use of phrases like "grand", "flamboyant", and "gatecrash", it is more conspicuous in "Loud Posters" a poem that combines the two levels of response in a single image. In speaking about her desire to "spread across wide highways/of your thoughts....like a loud poster," the poet seems to allude simultaneously to the practices of verse-writing and love making. The two experiences, however, are kept separate in most of the poems. The urge for withdrawal from the world of quotidian business is central to both experiences, and this is nowhere better expressed than in some of the love poems. Poems like Love, In Love and The Prisoner will illustrate this. In these poems the bondage implied in man-woman relationship is described as assuring a pleasant escape

from the trivialities of day to day life. This is a situation in which the subject willfully undergoes imprisonment, forswearing individual freedom. Though this notion of the “happy prison” is a central concept in Romantic literature, Kamala Das gives it a decisively un-romantic twist in her poems. She does so either by setting her prison in the Indian mythological landscape or by yoking it with an elementary humour: “Your body is my prison, Krishna/I cannot see beyond it/Your darkness blinds me/Your love words shut out the wise world’s din. /Now that I love you, /Curled like an old mongrel/My life lies, content/In you...” The quotidian, however, is not completely forsaken, and there is an occasional desire to go back to it, as in these: “As the convict studies/His prison’s geography/I study the trappings/Of your body, dear love/For, I must someday find/An escape from its snare.”

But the poet does not seem to have found a lasting escape from the snares of the body. The ideology of intimacy would not allow her to do that. In the event, she makes the best of it by letting her „flamboyant last“ grow into a symbolic lust for experiences of all kinds. “I always had a passion for symbols”, she declares in “The Blind Walk”. In poems like “A New City” and “Forest Fire” the body becomes as much an expression of the woman’s passion as a symbol for the poet’s passion for experience. In the poem “Morning at Apollo Pier” it is also identified with poetic imagination, as the following lines indicate: “You are the poem to end all poems/A poem, absolute as the tomb.”

### Conclusion

Verse writing, then, is not an experience totally unrelated to making love. The motivating forces behind the two experiences also seem to be identical. We have already seen that lust in Kamala Das is related to loneliness. It would be incorrect to interpret this as an instance of pure escapism. There is, obviously, a tendency to escape, but there are other forces holding it in check. Poetry for Kamala Das is an extension of the body, and she celebrates the one only in as much as she canonizes the other. Both are to be read as expressions of a deep-seated urge to socialize. That is why the apprehension of a failure in poetic powers often gets enmeshed with thoughts about old age and death. The correlation of poetry and the body might also account for the presence of organic metaphors for poetry in several poems: “Words are birds./Where have they gone to roost,/Wings, tired,/Hiding from the dusk?/Dusk is upon my hair,/Dusk is upon my skin;/When I lie down to sleep/I am not sure/That I shall see/The blessed dawn again.”

In an earlier poem, “The Cart Horse”, the image of a tired horse is used to suggest both physical weakness and poetic failure. Old age becomes oppressive not only because one feels abandoned and unwanted, but because there is a breakdown in communication. Even recollection of things and events, which is essentially communication with oneself, becomes impossible. In “Women’s Shuttles” Kamala Das finds it difficult even to recall the face of the man who admired her poetry the previous day. In old age there is no poetry; there is no communication; there is no present. Only the past seems to have any meaning for the old.

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