

**THE FEMININE EXPRESSION IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE MATRILINEAL SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT
IN THE WORKS OF KAMALA DAS**

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**THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT FOR THE
AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2007

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “The Feminine Expression in the context of the Matrilineal Socio-Cultural Environment in the works of Kamala Das” submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is a record of bonafide research carried out by the candidate under my supervision and that no part of the thesis has been submitted for any degree before.

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DECLARATION

I, Sandhya. A.R., hereby declare that this thesis, “The Feminine Expression in the context of the Matrilineal Socio-Cultural Environment in the works of Kamala Das” has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

Calicut

July, 2007

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to acknowledge the help and advice received from a number of people during the course of research. First of all, I express my immense gratitude to Dr. P. Ramachandran who launched me into the work. But for his constant encouragement, support and patient guidance, the work would not have been completed.

I accord my sincere thanks to the Management, S.N. Trusts, Kollam for permitting me to pursue part time research work. I also thank the staff, University of Calicut for their help and support and my colleagues at S.N. College, Alathur and Nattika. I am very much thankful to the Staff at “Sakhi”, Women’s Resource Centre, Thiruvananthapuram for the help extended.

I am indebted to my husband S. Shaji who was instrumental in helping me carry out the entire project to the very end, providing me with congenial environment and facilities to bring the work to a successful end. I am equally grateful to my parents, brothers sisters and son for their advice and support.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to trace the feminine expression in the context of matrilineal socio-cultural environment in the works of Kamala Das. The topic has been taken as Kamala Das is a unique case. She was born in a matriarchal family. However, her life at Mumbai and Calcutta brought her close to the patriarchal culture. But she did very much suffer its negative impacts as she lived in the comforts of a nuclear family. Here was a double advantage for her. The best of what a matrilineal society had to offer her led to a consummation or completion in the best of what the modern westernized world had to offer.

She was born at a time when the matriarchal set-up was undergoing great transformations. It was then on its last legs like the Neermatala tree in the courtyard of Nalapat House.

This house to which Kamala Das had great attachment was a gift to Kunji from her husband, a thampuran. This woman was Kamala Das's

grandmother's grandmother's mother (Das, Neermathalam Pootha Kalam (NPK) 7). The house was four hundred years old (Das, My Story (MS) 112). The most beautiful aspect of the house was the many trees bearing flowers or fruits forming a green shadow all around the house. Among the innumerable trees stood the Neermatala tree, which is a rare tree: This tree is scientifically named as Crataeva Nurvala. It is a medium sized deciduous tree which bears yellowish - white flowers. It is usually found only in dry deciduous forests which is its natural habitat. But it used to be planted in courtyards long back for the medicinal quality of the bitter leaves as well as due to its use as fodder for cattle. Its four petalled flower is endowed with a sweet fragrance. The atmosphere at Nalapat to her was like the tender evening sun, the moonlight and affection (Neermathalam Pootha Kalam - 274). While at Nalapat she felt "no fear, nor even joy but an anonymous peace" (MS - 208). In almost all her literary works there is the expression of a nostalgic longing to live in such a house.

The family was not very rich. But it had its traditions of low living and high thinking. The

financial position at Nalapat was “precarious”. The jewellery were sold for fighting off litigation and bankruptcy associated with the disputes related to inheritance and partition of family property. (MS 4). Being staunch followers of Gandhiji and his principles the family led a very simple life. They used to wear only Khaddar clothes. Even the servants there were made to wear only Khaddar. The grandmother spent her leisure hours spinning khadi yarn on a thakli. Whatever little jewellery remained at home were donated to the Harijan Fund (13). Though the life style was very humble the family could boast of great intellectuals known for their philosophical insights and literary talents. Kamala’s mother Nalapat Balamani Amma and her grand uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon were great writers. Apart from such great literary personalities there were also talented people like Ammalu, Kamala’s great grandmother’s younger sister who used to write beautiful poems about Krishna but never let the world know of her ability. Thus the family had a rich poetic tradition.

The elegy entitled ‘Kannuneerthulli’ written by the grand - uncle brought him fame. The translation of the same was printed at a press in

Great Britain. He is also famous for the book 'Rati Samrajya' which was a study based on the works of Havelock Ellis and the Indian Sexologists. Vallathole Narayana Menon the famous Malayalam poet was a friend of his and the two together used to have literary and philosophic discussion at Nalapat (MS 33). At the grand - uncle's evening durbar there would be occasionally present brilliant grammarians and writers coming from distant places to stay with him (15). Nalapat Narayana Menon was also a member of the Theosophical Movement and so personalities like Sardar K.M. Panikkar, James Cousins and Miss Lightfoot, the Australian danseuse were his friends. Therefore Nalapat provided a platform for "intense and intellectual talk" (33).

Kamala's mother is also a well-known poet. She was always busy engaged in composing poems in Malayalam. She used to be devoted to her writing all throughout day that Kamala Das says there was a period in her life when she believed that an adult woman's sole duty was to write verse. (Suraiyya, Path of the Columnist (PC) 161). Nalapat Balamani Amma was honoured with a fellowship by the Sahitya Academy. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan and

the Saraswati Samman. She was a scholar in Sanskrit and Malayalam. In her early days she was attracted to Theosophy and was “fed on the ‘vedas’ and ‘upanishads’ “ (73).

Nalapat also had a grilled library full of books consisting of those written by Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Havelock Ellis and Varahamitra. It also had a fine collection of palm-leaf manuscripts written mostly in Vattezhuthu (MS 14). All these certainly have done a lot in whetting Kamala’s innate qualities as a writer from her childhood itself. She had inculcated a reading habit from a very young age itself and used to read books of great writers in Malayalam and English. She had fascination for reading books like Isadora Duncan’s autobiography, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary and so on. These books influenced her thinking. It is obvious from her own words, “Society can well ask me how I could become what I became, although born to parents as high-principled as mine were. Ask the books that I read why I changed. Ask the authors dead and alive who communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself. The books like a mother - cow licked the calf of my thought into shape and left me

to lie at the altar of the world as a sacrificial gift” (MS 152-53). The book My Story is also said to be a consequence of her reading My Life, Isadora Duncan’s autobiography. It is assumed that Kamala was much influenced by the liberated unconventionality of this U.S. dancer who rejected the conventions of classical ballet. (Saradakkutty, Mathrubhumi Weekly, March 11-17-2007).

However, it is around her grandmother that her memories linger more. It was from the grandmother that she used to learn about the stories from Indian Puranas, stories about Krishna and the like. The grandmother also helped her a lot to know about her roots and bind her to the family tradition. Kamala Das with her unconventional way of thinking could never attempt doing any thing that may cause displeasure to her grandmother. Even her pseudonym “Madhavikkutty” as she is known in her Malayalam writings was donned by her to mask her identity from the grandmother so that she will not be hurt by the unconventional observations of her grand daughter in her works.

The Neermathala Tree was also like an “ancestress” for her. The very thought of it soothes

her aching heart like the “lullaby sung by a mother”. (NPK 39). The beauty of the tree in bloom and the fragrance it renders to the atmosphere around is beyond description to her. She always used to carry the desire in her even during her student days in Calcutta to reach Nalapat every year when the tree was in full bloom. But she could not do so then and even now, she says in Neermathalam pootha kalam . All the same, she says, the picture of the tree in bloom was kept locked behind the safety of her eyelids so that whenever she wanted to have a look at it all she need do is to close her eyes. It is very significant that she attributes some kind of a connection between the tree and the matriarchal system which she very much wants to pervade once again in the social set up. The tree remains a symbol of “emotional security” for her (91). The emotional security she speaks is that derived from matriarchal system.

In addition to all these, Kamala was also able to fill her mind with a wide cultural spectrum. In Kerala she enjoyed bathing in the pond. The festivals like Vishu, Onam and Thiruvathira were colourful and offered a wide variety of fun and gaiety. Then the

houses were decorated with paddy and coconut blooms. The oracle of the local temple used to visit every house on a certain day every year. He would be escorted by drummers and singers. In the Nalapat house there used to be performances of Kathakali and Ottamthullal several times a year. While in cities like Mumbai and Kolkata she experienced a totally different life fashioned according to western standards like eating with a fork and knife, having soup, cutlets and stew for lunch instead of rice and curry etc.

Nalapat, like all matriarchal families was a sisterhood of women. The feminine society, their aspirations, disappointments and short comings were a world by themselves. And Kamala Das, as part of this feminine world at Nalapat is richly qualified to deal with them. The relationship between women or among women's community is called by people as the Lesbian continuum. This has nothing to do with sex as such.

The school experiences of Kamala were also an extension of those in her own house. At the age of nine, she was admitted into a boarding school run by Roman Catholic nuns. It was a convent school

exclusively for girl students. Therefore as in her family, females dominated in school as well. The school life gave her some ideas of Lesbianism as sex.

Implied in the concept of sisterhood are the sympathies of a wider nature and a concern for sufferings of women all around. Kamala Das shows great sympathy towards career women who have to face a lot of difficulties while trying to do justice to their twin roles as working women and house wives; she has her concern for the poor and uneducated girls who work as domestic helpers, coolies and even as sex workers. This extends to larger segments of feminine concern and further towards the marginalized and deprived people all over the world. Thus, she shows much distress at the way minority groups like the Sikhs in 1984 at Delhi and the Tamils in Sri Lanka were ruthlessly killed. She also shows ardent fellow feeling for the poor.

The heights to which Kamala Das could rise is a measure of the extend to which the potentialities of a woman of her background could be realized. Of course, in her case as well as in the case of her mother, the co-operation got from the spouse has been something significant. In order for a woman to

pursue her career successfully there ought to be a completely supportive family to encourage and help her. Both V.M. Nair, Kamala's father and Madhava Das, her husband were equally good in this respect. We find her stating that it was because of her father's abundant support and encouragement that her mother was capable of devoting her time entirely to poetry writing and become acclaimed as a poetess. Mr. Das was also there behind every literary pursuit of Kamala. He would give her tips regarding the kind of materials she should deal with and the like. The very fact that he quietly bore the negative image she had created of him through MY Story and various poems is in itself sufficient proof of his supportive attitude.

Kamala Das is fortunate to have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances from different walks of life. They range from ambassadors to artists and writers. This has contributed much in broadening her perspective of the world and life itself. Participation in great literary seminars and conferences at national and international levels has enabled her to have contacts with almost all eminent Indian writers particularly in English and Malayalam

as well as those from other countries. These are not mere passing acquaintances. They have high esteem and regard for her personally. In Path of the Columnist, we find her referring to a gift sent by the Australian Ambassador in Mexico. It was the biography of Friedo Kahlo, The Mexican painter. She values the gift as a great treasure not just for the gesture on the part of her friend, the Ambassador, but also for the experience of being “stimulated” by the genius of the painter (95). In My Story she speaks of the great Indian diplomat and statesman, V.K. Krishna Menon’s visit to her at a Delhi hospital when she was admitted there. The man who was considered to be very arrogant in his behaviour seemed “kind hearted” to her as she heard him scold the nurses for not being careful and when he wiped her damp forehead himself with a corner of a towel (170).

Her work My Story is not merely an autobiographical effusion of Kamala Das. It deals with a lot more than the personal details of the author. It is a work abounding with instances pointing to the social and cultural scenes in Kerala especially during the transitional phase from matriliney to patriliney

which the Nair community was then undergoing. In it, she speaks about the situations of Nair women as well as all other women belonging to various social strata in Kerala. She also gives relevant details of the various forms of exploitations, discriminations and prejudices which were not just part of Kerala society but Indian society as a whole. In addition to the class/caste prejudices we also find her pointing out through the work, the discrimination people of India had to face at the hands of the British who ruled India then.

But the book is widely known for the blatant revelations of her personal or private matters. In it, she speaks about her lesbian connections and extra-marital relationships; about her growth into womanhood; her first night with her husband and a lot more such things which astounded everyone. In it she states with down-right frankness “like the majority of city-dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while.” (183). She also gives a candid description of what is termed as “cocktail season” in Calcutta where respectable men and women belonging to high level social sphere indulge in immoral practices. Such outspoken expression of

feminine self which every other woman would want to conceal was something new and rather unexpected on the part of a woman writer, so that a lot of controversy ensued the publication of the book. She was very much misunderstood for her frank and open manner of writing and she is still not free of censure..

But it has to be acknowledged that her creative genius has wide acclaim the world over. She has hoards of admirers who admire her for the outspoken manner of her writings. There are as many critics too. The recognition she has received from all parts of the world is because of her boldness and daring attitude. She does not confine her writings to any ideologies least of all feminism. Though she herself has never tried to act as a role model for anyone, women writers in India and abroad attempt to model their writings in the way she does. In this sense she is a path-finder. Kamala Das got the courage to write the way she does because of her family background. Her creative genius had been nourished by the tradition of Nalapat family and its head, the grandmother.

The two beautiful and never-fading images that haunt the memory of all readers of Kamala Das for years to come are those of the oil-lamp at the grandmother's window and the Neermathala tree. As we shall see later they are the symbols of the matrilineal system with its characteristic codes of behaviour and relations.

In a conversation with Eunice D'Souza, in answer to a question whether her frankness is part of her upbringing as a Nair woman, Kamala Das replies, "I was not brought up as a Nair woman. My father was the family bread winner and he treated us like menials. The servants were paid salaries we were not." (D'Souza, 32). Such a kind of sense of loss creates in her a yearning for matriarchal life and values as she feels she has not been able to enjoy its advantages completely. Eversince her childhood, she has always been trying to hold firmly on to a relationship that would be everlasting. She found that such a relationship can be provided only by the grandmother and a family like Nalapat. But unfortunately, as she records in Ente Katha, her autobiography in Malayalam, whenever she felt she had at last got hold of a solid footing at Nalapat

something or the other would happen which would sweep her away from it (51). This inability to become part of such an atmosphere permanently brings a nostalgic longing in her for her feudal, matrilineal ancestry which according to P.P. Ravindran is her “intimacy to the past” (Rajan, P.K.84). And past to Kamala Das is Nalapat house, the Neermatala tree, the grandmother and the matriarchal set up. The purpose of the thesis is therefore, to examine how far the expressions of her feminine self is influenced by her matriarchal social and cultural environment as revealed through her works.

CHAPTER II

A Critical Survey of Select Works of Kamala Das

Kamala Das reveals extremely confidential and private matters of her life through her works. In this regard, she is often considered to be a confessional writer. She is a confessional writer also in the sense that she brings awareness to her female counterparts about their dormant sexual desires and their discontentment in their sexual relation with their husbands which they conveniently try to suppress for fear of societal censure. Her confessional writing, like most such writing has a therapeutic effect on her as it is written when the writer undergoes intense grief or resentment from which she would like to get relief. This intense personal grief is widened to the level of a universal anguish in confessional writing. Poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman are known for the confessional quality of their poems. Kamala Das' poems too can be ranked along with theirs in this respect. Like a good confessional writer, she sheds all inhibitions and openly defies all the restraints imposed by society

and writes about subjects which are considered as taboo for a woman, like speaking about sexual acts, sexual desire, description of private body parts, extramarital associations, lesbian relationship and the like.

She confesses a lot of things about herself. Though sexual frustration is the predominant theme in majority of her works, she is found to be unable to distance herself from the snares of the body so that she goes seeking sex from elsewhere other than her husband. In her poems, she discloses her feelings and thoughts as a mother, a wife, a lover, sister, daughter, granddaughter and above all a fellow being to thousands of suffering human beings. A survey of her select works reveals interesting facts about herself and her family. She works in a variety of literary genres like short story, poetry, Autobiography etc.

My story is her best work. It is a work abounding with instances pointing to the social and cultural scenes of Kerala during the early twentieth century. It is a great work written with much frankness and sincerity about her experiences at home, at school, about her experiences as wife, mother, lover etc. In

it, she portrays her life and experiences at Nalapat House in Punnayurkulam in Kerala as well as her experiences from cities like Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi as a small child and as a grownup woman. The book begins with an account of the humiliation she had to suffer from school at Calcutta because of her being a 'brown' child. It was a school run by Anglo-Indians. The authorities in the school had their loyalties towards the British rather than the Indians. Therefore, the Indian children had to suffer much discrimination from their hands. Whenever eminent visitors came to the school, the Indian children were 'hidden away' from their sight asking them to "wait in the corridors behind the lavatories" (3). Perhaps, Kamala Das' first experience of discrimination and subordination to white hegemony may have been this.

The writer's words in describing Shirley as "a combination of beauty and brains" (3) is charged with cynicism and sarcasm. This gets aggravated even more while describing the five native Indians as "brown" and a sixth one named "Louis" who was hated even more for his "black" complexion. While Shirley, the Scot gets a special kiss for something she

has not done, Kamala Das is hidden away because she is not a “white” and hence holds a subordinate position. This awareness of being subordinate must have stamped itself strongly on her psyche, hurting her much for we find her thinking why she was “born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses” (9). It may be this inferiority feeling in her that used to make her reluctant to mingle freely with her school mates. She got her punishment for this as she was branded as “peculiar” by the teacher.

Later, when she was brought to Kerala, she found to her dismay an entirely different world. To her, it was a sort of “cultural death” (20) and was getting reborn into another kind of a world where “the hard-eyed British were no longer . . . co-rivals” (20). If she belonged to a subjugated class before the Whites in Kolkata, here, in Kerala, she belonged to a privileged class. While the members of her family were looked at as lords, there was a subordinate class constituting the field hands, carpenters, servants, cooks etc. It was from Nalapat House that she detected the snobbery of the upper classes who always used to consider themselves as much

powerful an authority to prescribe for the lower classes and middle-classes certain strains of decorum to be maintained in their presence.

While at Kolkata, she and her brother used to exhibit their various talents. They used to take the initiative to start a manuscript magazine when Kamala was aged just six. She had then written sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity (8). The children also had the talent to organize dramatic performances from their home with well-made dialogues and costumes.

But her memory always lingers at Nalapat House, her ancestral home and around her grandmother. It was a family following the matriarchal system and hence it is her mother's family. She gives a vivid picture of this house in the book. According to her description, the house was not a large one by local standards but it had the typical structure of old aristocratic Nair 'taravads' with an inner courtyard, a gate house, portico supported by pillars, snake shrine, considered to be two hundred years old, 'sradhapura', which is the house built for cooking food for the dead on the death anniversary,

bathhouse etc. The entire house was surrounded by a green canopy by tall trees of a wide variety.

As a child, she experienced a life of neglect from her parents. Her mother and father had their own interests to pursue and so had very little time to spare for the children. Her married life also offered her no escape from the neglected life she underwent earlier. It could offer her only disillusionment because she found that her husband was an utter failure in providing the kind of a romantic life she had always dreamt of. Like her father, he was also rather busy with his official work and could not spare much time for romance and pampering. Even in their most intimate moments his attitude was no different. She also doubted his sincerity towards her as he had relationships with many women and even with a young man. This resulted in creating disillusionment and frustration in her. She tried her level best in those days to fit in well to the role of a typical Indian wife seeing to the requirements of her husband and busying herself with domestic work. But the attempt was an utter failure.

Frustration of this sort makes her long to escape from the drudgery of house keeping. She also had a

strong urge to free herself from the bondage of a conventional wife. She wanted to break away from the monotony of house keeping and pursue a different kind of life where she would be able to have an identity and individuality of her own. The inconsiderate attitude of her husband also shaped her attitude to love and sex. She finds sex devoid of love to be a dull and tiresome affair. Therefore, in the initial days of their marriage, she confesses, she could not indulge in sexual relationship with her husband surrendering herself to him completely. Because of such disappointments and dissatisfaction in her, she had even gone to the extent of attempting suicide (98). She also underwent a phase of nervous breakdown because of the wretched attitude from her husband. During this phase, while undergoing treatment for her severe depression, she realized her husband's affection for her. He used to tend to her affectionately, taking her for a walk, washing her and dressing her up. This ultimately resulted in her surrendering whole-heartedly to him. After this surrender, a spiritual attitude, which co-existed with her desire for sex, began surfacing itself. She starts a

quest for love that transcends the body like the love between Krishna and Radha.

In the course of her search for love, she had formed close relationship with many men. But although she had had such alliances other than her husband, she states very frankly that her husband meant some one very special for her and that she had no wish to leave him. This is very much obvious when she says to Carlo, her Italian pen-friend, “we can probably have a love affair. . . I am not the divorcing kind . . . (121). From this attitude it is very clear that basically she is a traditional woman and cannot break away from being so.

All throughout My Story there is a rebellion or revolt against all sorts of domination including male domination. It is her rebellious attitude that makes her disclose the atrocities committed by rich zamindars and wealthy Nair men towards poor women. She had to face a lot of animosity from relatives for such honest narration of facts which would otherwise have remained hidden from the knowledge of the world.

In addition to the personal details of her attitude to love, sex and lust, there is also embedded in this work a beautiful picture of a typical Kerala society with its remarkably different culture and life-style. There are interesting references made by the writer about temple festivals and rites typical of Kerala like the Oracle's visit to the houses during the harvest season when the houses would be decorated with paddy blossoms, the feasts given by rich families to the poor ones during birthday celebrations, the festival in the Bhagavati Shrine during the month of 'Makaram' (Sixth month in the Malayalam Calendar falling between January and February), the Ottanthullal and Kathakali performances that used to be conducted at matriarchal houses, the feudal system that existed in Malabar half a century back, the joint-family system prevalent among the Nair community during the matriarchal times etc. She also gives an account of the traditional home-made cosmetics used by Nair women then which include the dabbing of turmeric on the cheeks, sandal line on the forehead, the collyrium in the eyes and betel in the mouth (22). The description of 'Thiruvathira' festival and the rites associated with it is elaborately

rendered in the work. She describes it as 'water festival' which young unmarried girls as well as married women celebrate by first plunging into the cold ponds hours before dawn, splashing in the waters and singing. They then sit around bon-fires, blackening their eyes with collyrium, decorating the brow with sandal paste and 'chanthu' which is made out of burnt rice. Later, after swinging on the long bamboo swing tied from tall trees, they have their breakfast of arrowroot pudding, banana and tender coconut (134). This festival like Onam is a typical Malayalee festival celebrated by women for achieving a long-lasting, happy and prosperous married life. Thus, in her works, she tries to portray the picture of a rural, traditional life-style which is alien to the present day Malayali society that follows the modern, westernized culture and life-style.

There are also instances in the work where she gives details of how her grandmother gives instructions to her in her social behaviour. She asks instance, not to have anything to do with Devaki, a schoolmate who handed a love-letter to young Kamala. The old lady diplomatically evades the topic of Kamala's infatuation for Govinda Kurup a young

revolutionary of her school, My Story is also very much significant in that it helps us to understand her poems better. However, it does not act as “a source book of methodical information” (Nabar 1).

Summer in Calcutta, The Descendents and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems are her major poetical works in English. Apart from these there are also The Collected Poems and Only the soul Knows How to Sing. A critical evaluation of her works reveals a lot about her attitude to love and lust, about her concern for the suffering humanity and also information about her matriarchal ancestry.

The theme of most of her poems is love, especially the disappointment faced by a woman at her failure in receiving love and her frustration at being betrayed in love. “The Dance of Eunuchs” is one of her most popular poems. The Eunuch’s dance signifies the emotional vacuum in her caused due to the frustration at her husband’s attitude towards her. The ‘vacant ecstasy’ in which the eunuchs ‘wailed and writhed’ is symbolic of the same emotional vacuum that she experienced within her. All the images and symbols used in the poem like “lovers dying” and “children left unborn” signify the

barrenness in her caused due to her inability to assert her womanhood. In this regard, she is also like the eunuchs. The convulsed dance of the eunuchs is equated to her agitated mental state.

Poems like 'The Freaks', "In Love" etc. also speak of her frustration in sexual experience where love stoops to the level of mere "skin-communicated thing". ("In Love"). In her later poems, though she deals with the same theme of betrayal in love and frustration that ensues, her attitude appears to have slightly bettered in maturity so that she is capable of accepting things with a little more equanimity. Like the image of the sun and its scorching heat in varied dimensions in her earlier poems, most of the later poems carry the image of the sea and its different shades and moods differing according to the varying intensity of her emotion.

In the poem "The Descendants", the poet says, "we were the yielder/yielding ourselves to everything" (Only the Soul Knows How to Sing. [OSK 89]. This yielding suggests the poet's attitude of succumbing to the will of destiny and to the ways of the world as she is aware that nothing can be done to bring in any change. In almost all her later poems,

there is a sense of loss and despair and a feeling of defeat and decay. In the poem “A Request”, she says,

When I die
Do not throw the meat and bones
away
But pile them up
And
Let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth
What love was worth
In the end (OSK 83)

The poem “composition” also displays a weary tone in which the poet appears to be looking forward to death. The poem is in the form of a conversation between her and the sea in short simple lines. The sea is rendered as a powerful image to convey her emotions. The poem “Invitation” also deals with a similar theme. The image of the sea is present here too. In fact, it is the sea itself that invites her to jump into its waters and end her miserable existence. But, the woman is reluctant as she wants to continue

living holding the bitter-sweet memory of her sexual love with her lover who had left her for good.

Though she has written poems about disillusionment in marriages, in her later poems she gives the idea that basically she is a family woman and also that she is mature enough to realize the truth that all marriages do not end in court rooms because of disillusionment and frustration. In poems like “Love” and “Larger Than Life was He”, she says that just as there are lots of problems in married life, there are also as many charms as well in it that makes it beautiful and worth entering into. In the poem “Love” she says,

Until I found you
I wrote verse drew pictures
and went out with friends
for walks. (OSK 101)

Here, it is clear that the woman had lots of interests to pursue and preoccupy her mind with before she was married. But after having found the man of her choice, she finds contentment in life “curled like an old mongrel” beside him. From this, it can be assumed that every woman who finds herself very

much in love with the man she lives with lives a contented life.

Through the poem “Large Than Life was He”, Kamala Das recalls how much she missed her husband after having lost him for ever despite the fact that she considered themselves to be a “mismatched pair”. But there was always some sort of a freedom each has given the other to exploit and be exploited which they seemed to have enjoyed. She says she could have been as much a devoted wife to him as Sita was to Rama but never got an opportunity to be so. This was because he was always too busy to give her time; too busy even to notice the sons growing. Nevertheless, he was their beloved father. She states that she could never remember him having ever taken her to a film, a play or a concert or even having shared any light moments. In spite of all these, she missed him terribly. He was “larger than life to her” as she realizes the warmth and the protection provided by the “insulation of his care”.

There are lots of poems by her noted for the protest against all forms of domination and violence. One such poem is “The Old Play house”. In it, the

poet protests against male domination and female subordination. She voices her protest at the way women is subjugated by making them do only conventional roles and not allowing them to rise above that. In her words,

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea
and to offer at the right moment the vitamins.
Cowering beneath your monstrous ego I ate the
magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will
and reason....

(OSK

30)

Her mind “is like an old playhouse with all its lights put out”

In the poem “The Inheritance”, she protests against religious fanaticism. According to her, though all religion exhorts its followers to inherit love for fellow beings, what they gain in reality is an inheritance of hatred since people belonging to different religions vie with one another to express their hatred for fellow beings.

The poem “Nani” is another poem of protest though in a different way. Here, the poet exposes the cruelty

of rich zamindars and aristocratic men towards the poor maid servants during the feudal times. These women were misused by them and sometimes even killed afterwards to hush up matters. The matriarchal head turned a blind eye to such things to protect the image of the family.

Kamala Das is not merely a writer of her personal experiences. The plight of her fellow beings does not go unheeded by her.

The story of Nani is an example. Here is an instance of skeleton in the cupboard of many aristocratic families. People are inclined to keep such things unspoken in the name of the prestige of the household. But there are matters which have wider relevance from the point of social justice.

In her works, she covers a range of issues other than concern for gender. In certain works there is a sympathy and concern which widen to entire sections of humanity apart from topics related to love and lust. Thus, she writes about the riots in Delhi in 1984, about the atrocities against the Tamils in Srilanka, about society's attitude to the poor etc. in her poems.

In addition to the themes of love, sex, death and decay, there are also poems by her which have extremely autobiographical elements in them. "To a Big Brother", "Punishment in Kindergarten", "Next to Indira Gandhi" "The eighty sixth Birthday" are some such poems. The poem "To a Big Brother (About to be Married)" gives the picture of a brother and sister who were very much attached to each other. Now that the process of growing up has caused a gap in their life, the memories of their childhood are all that is sufficient enough to keep life moving ahead happily. "The eighty sixth Birthday" is about her husband in his old age, the man, "once so beloved/He plunged himself as a blade/Into the recesses of my heart" (OSK 141). In "Next to Indira Gandhi", she speaks of her father whom she feared a lot.

In addition to such poems, there are also those where she describes her matrilineal background and Nalapat House. This house was a source of solace and security for her. She describes it as a place from where she received love once. She can never forget the amount of love she received from these and the woman, her grandmother who gave her so much of

love. The house is now inhabited only by snakes. Whenever utter loneliness and her husband's indifference made her miserable, she used to long to be 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. (OSK
119)

Years after the death of her beloved grandmother, she cannot help but recall how the grandmother's presence in the house added to its gaiety. In the poem "Evening At The Old Nalapat House", she says,

Only my grandmother walks there
Then, though dead for eighteen years and
wispy
As a shed of mist, walks on the white sand
Of the courtyard where she watched us play
as
Children, a long long time ago . . .

(OSK 142)

The poem "Blood" describes her beloved Nalapat house and gives an account of the aristocratic lineage of the house and the members in it. It is done through the lamentations on the part of her great grandmother who seem to be chiding her for having neglected the tradition and conventions of such a family. The house which is very old is now in a dilapidated state. It symbolizes for her the crumbling down of a social system, the matriarchal system which the family followed. Kamala Das feels that she has failed in shouldering the responsibility of upkeeping the family tradition which is to be done through the female line in the family. A feeling of having betrayed her great grandmother gnaws at her always because of this. There is a hidden confession from the poet of her having distanced herself from the matriarchal tradition and a feeling of guilt over the thought that she may have dishonoured the family with her unconventional behaviour as she herself suggests in My Story. Therefore, she asks forgiveness from her ancestors. She feels that she has let down her family and its traditions because of her failure to feel proud of having been born in such a house.

Thus, there is a nostalgic longing for a past in her works. A past when she enjoyed the comforts of a matriarchal joint family. But this longing does not deter her from accepting change or considering modern outlooks as inessential. To her change is necessary so as to bring a progressive attitude in people. But this should not be brought forth at the expense of tradition. Besides, she also does not favour change disregarding all feminine qualities in women.

Kamala Das has also made valuable contributions in the field of short stories too other than poetry. But, most of her short stories are in Malayalam. In these stories, she deals with deep insight the complicated tangle of human relationships. Some of her magnificent works in English are "Padmavati, the Harlot", "A Little Kitten" "The Tattered Blanket", "A Doll for The Child Prostitute", "Grandfather", "Moongphali" etc. In her works, she deals with the self-centred attitude of people under various circumstances. The extreme concern for their own well-being makes them forget all their responsibilities. This same self centeredness also make them insensitive to the feelings of others. Like

her poems, her stories also abound in instances of betrayal, self centeredness and loneliness. The sense of loneliness pervading her stories is a result of man's intense quest for material gains in the course of which he forgets the subtleties of human relationships and responsibilities.

Ramachandran, the protagonist of the story "Walls" represents such an individual. He had ascended the ladder of official success conveniently forgetting his duties as the master of the house. He had not failed in his duty as the provider of course. But, in the course of his pursuing more and more benefits from his official positions, he had distanced himself from his family who had already adapted themselves to his grave silence at home and did not mind the yawning gap of communication that crept between them. It is only much later in life that he comes to realize that in the balance sheet of his life, there was an absolute nothing as credit.

This kind of a theme where men are too intent on climbing the social ladder disregarding their responsibilities towards the family is a recurring theme in her stories. In the story "Darjeeling" too the husband, Mr. Raghavan, is a work addict who has no

time to spare for his family, He lives under the wrong impression that he does everything a man should do for the sake of his family. He fails to recognize the truth that what his family needs is his presence and not the money and conveniences he brings home. When his wife had to be hospitalized because of a heart attack, we find him looking surprised as to why she, who had all the peace and luxury at home ever get such an illness, which according to the doctor's words is normally caused in such a young age due to extreme mental strain and tension. Mr. Raghavan was too busy even to fulfil his wife's longing to go holidaying to Darjeeling.

Kamala Das also deals with the theme of homosexuality in men and women in certain works of hers. In these stories, she does not valorize such relationships. In "Iqbal", she depicts two homosexual men one of whom is a married man. His wife is expecting a baby. This makes the other friend feel uncomfortable. He feels that his partner is not fully devoted to him. The husband would keep his ears pressed to his wife's belly to hear the baby's heart tick. This became so unbearable to Iqbal, his friend, that he attempted suicide. At the hospital, his

friend's wife comes to visit him quite triumphantly and tells him that she knows why he attempted to kill himself. It was because, she says, he was unable to be pregnant from her husband.

In "The Sandal Trees", it is the lesbian relationship between two educated women that the writer uses for her theme. Here again, she takes the stance that such relationship cannot blossom into fulfillment. So she makes Dr. Sheila, one of the lesbian women continue her relationship with the husband with a mind free from any tension of holding any secrets from him further.

"The Tattered Blanket" and "Grandfather" are stories depicting the attitude of modern generation towards the aged. In the first story there is an evasion of responsibility towards an aged mother and a widowed sister by a son who was well-settled in life. The son holds a high position in government service and is married to a collector's daughter. Despite his cozy and comfortable life, he comes home with the intention of making his aged mother agree to sell the ancestral property. While the son longs to add more comfort to his already luxurious life, the mother longs for a blanket to keep away the

cold in the mornings, the one she already has with her being tattered beyond repair. "Grandfather" is yet another story portraying the picture of an old man of eighty two who is very much an unwanted element to his son and daughter. They did not want to shoulder the responsibility of looking after him since he was extremely old and had lots of health problems related to old age.

If this is the case with the old in affluent families, it is even worse in poor households according to Kamala Das who never turns a blind eye to the pangs of the poor. In the story "Padmavati, the Harlot", she paints the picture of an old harlot who was unwanted to her family for having followed a profession which was not noble. She was a sight for sore eyes to the entire family as they considered her to be a fallen woman conveniently forgetting the fact that it was for their sake that she stooped to that level. Though they hated her for the profession she was in, the money she brought home was not looked at as unacceptable by them for it was with the money she earned in this way that she was able to tend to her sick, bedridden mother for seven long years, educate her brother and marry off her sister.

As in the case of her poems, there are also stories dealing with the theme of betrayal. But, in contrast to her attitude in the poems, in her stories the betrayal is done by women as well. In the story "Little Kitten", the wife begins having an extramarital relationship to settle a score with her husband, who she felt was having an affair with his secretary Miss. Nadkar. In the story "Sanatan Chowdhury's wife" too it is the woman who deceives her husband by following an affair with another man. The husband is very much shocked and surprised to learn of his wife's infidelity for he was under the impression that a girl born and brought up in a Kerala Village can never resort to such a deception. Mohammed Elias finds in this story a reflection of the matriarchal system of long back when women belonging to the system had the freedom to have more than one husband. He finds Kamala Das to be full of admiration for this system which may have induced her imagination to make Mrs. Menon of the story resort to polyandry. To prove his observation, he quotes Kamala Das' own words in an article titled "Why Not More Than One Husband?" which appeared in Eve's weekly in 1972. In this article, she says, " I

plead for the return of a social order that allowed a woman to have more than one husband if she so desired. They change or end. But the blood is an eternal river and in my vein flows the robust blood of my ancestresses who married two or more men and were happy” (Rajan 31)

CHAPTER III

THE MATRIARCHAL FAMILY AND THE NEERMATHALA TREE

Until recently, among the Nair community of Kerala, the Matriarchal System was prevalent. It is to be assumed that in the early and pre-historic times, this system must have been prevalent all over Kerala among all communities. The reason for this is the geographical condition of Kerala and the constant fights the people of the region had with the neighboring states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka of the present time. The southern part of Kerala was constantly under the attack of Chola and Pandya kings. In course of time, the members of Nair community became the fighting class of the Kerala kings. As men had to be away in the battle fields for long periods of time this system was evolved for the protection of women and children. Some of the still prevailing customs in certain communities show that they also followed the matrilineal system in Kerala. For example, the heir to the throne of erstwhile Travancore and Cochin states of Kerala was decided

by the matrilineal system. Among the Malabar Muslims the titular queen, Arakkal Beevi, is selected on the basis of Matriliney.

Regarding the emergence of the matriarchal practice among the Nairs of Kerala, there are many theories. According to Robin Jeffrey's observations, the matriarchal system was established by the time Europeans began arriving in the 16th century. He finds, the system to have actually begun to be practiced during the hundred year war between the Chera and Chola kings in the 11th and 12th centuries. He also finds a second possibility according to which, the Nambuthiri community in order to keep their vast estates intact formulated a practice that only the eldest male member could marry from their own caste. The rest of the men were to marry from the Nair community. The children from such relationships were to be the responsibility of the women. (Jeffrey 24). The exact period of its origin is still a cause for dispute among historians. But there is no difference of opinion on the fact that Nair men were away from home for long periods of time which made the women take up the responsibility of looking after the family and their properties. In course of

time the Nair men slowly began to be relieved of their customary obligation especially when King Marthanda Varma established a trained and paid standing army (Saradmoni. 61). This liberation, according to K.K.N. Kurup, persuaded the Nair community to give more attention to agriculture and other occupations which marked the commencement of a transition from medievalism to modernity... (Kurup 8). These historical facts are especially significant in that during what is termed as the medieval times women of Kerala had an identity of their own and security provided by a practice called the joint family system.

This was a system where there would be lots of family units living together under a single roof known as 'tharavad'. The members of such 'tharavad' would be descendants from the female line of a common male ancestor. Often, the head of the family in such house holds will be the eldest male member on the maternal side or else, the eldest woman in the house. In such houses kinship was reckoned through the women. It was to the women that a major share of the family property belonged. The male head, or the 'Karanavar' though acting as

the chief or guardian was, only a care-taker of the women's property. The women under this system is said to have enjoyed much freedom economically as well as socially.

However, as time progressed, there was a call especially from men to bring in certain reforms in the system. Although various legislations finally brought in the disintegration of matriarchy, the custom still prevails in certain families. Mother - right or inheritance through the female line with regards to property and relationship, the bond seen to exist between a man and his sister or her children are said to be remnants of the matrilineal system. According to Kamala Das, even "the practice of making all the major decisions in the family by the women is in itself proof of matriarchy lingering in some old families" (PC 23). The members of such families exhibit great respect for the mother, grand mother or elder sister around whom all the activities in the family revolve. The Nalapat family to which Kamala Das was born is such a one. It is one of the traditional, aristocratic, feudal, matriarchal families of Kerala. She was born when matriarchy was in its decadent state. Still, traces of matriarchal attitudes and reflections

abound in the works of Kamala Das. The voyages she makes through the many generations of her ancestors and ancestresses at Nalapat House give us a glimpse of the social and cultural patterns of life that predominated in Kerala long back and what it has come to be like in the present times. Nalapat House is the most “vital part” of her life (Suraiyya, Path of the Columnist. 40) breathing innumerable memories and observations of activities around that has molded her into what she is now. The hallowed precincts of Nalapat provided the back drop to her dreams, aspirations and imagination. The house, every corner of it, every little stone, every tree and every occupant in it supplied her with themes for quite a number of works.

Two details of consequence with regard to life at Nalapat are always seen mentioned in her works. One is her grandmother, “her favourite relative” (PC 113) and the other is the Neermatala tree near the snake shrine “which burst into bloom every summer with large butter-coloured flowers that filled even inner rooms with perfume” (MS 13). The tree holds a lot of memories for her, “the lullabies my grand mother sang to put me to sleep during the late

war years when my parents in Calcutta sent me home to my grandmother for safety, the long looking glass that cradled my reflection when I stood before it as a fifteen year old, wearing my first saree” (PC 131). The grand mother acts as a mirror through which she is able to see her own self as well as the pulse beating within her and everywhere around, and the tree standing majestically at her old ancestral home provides the writer with memories of the good old days of her childhood. It remains as the residue of a lot of recollections, “your only clue, ... your guide “ (PC 132). The bond between herself and the tree is so strong that she believes she cannot sever herself from its hold easily. Once, when long after she had left Nalapat to stay in her house at Kochi, she says she was asked by “some one from the BBC and London Observer” who had come to film the Nalapat House why she had never thought of selling the place which was now inhabited by civet cats and rats mostly. Thinking over the question, she reasons that this was because of the Neermatala tree. “I wanted to hold on to my tree”, says the writer (PC 20). Holding on to the tree is symbolic of holding on to everything related to Nalapat House which abounds

with the “sounds and scents of her past” (PC 40). The tree was a mute witness to every important event in her life - her marriage to Mr. Das was in the month of February, when “all the flowering trees were in bloom including the Neermatala which perfumed even the inner rooms with it. (MS 86) and also too during the birth of the first baby in spring, and many many such incidents.

In the Nalapat family, the only male member was Kamala Das’ grand uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon, the poet and philosopher. The name itself suggests that matriliney was followed in the family. ‘Nalapat’ is the name of his mothers’ ‘taravad’ and not that of his father. This was a significant feature of maternal in which the women took their mothers’ name and even matrilineal uncle’s as surname. (Saradmoni 66). According to this system the women were known as belonging to a particular ‘taravad’ and not as the daughter of or wife of a particular man. This gives them an identity of their own unlike in the case of patriliney where a woman is known only in relation to a man. Kamala Das’ name itself has a patrilineal touch to it. What should have been Nalapat Kamala by way of her

matrilineal background takes the name of her husband 'Das' along with her own. The shift towards patrilineal culture was brought in by the demands of the time.

When the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1912 permitted individual partition of the matrilineal joint families it paved a smooth way for the removal of land lordism which in turn served in eliminating caste hierarchy (Kurup 136). This Act also resulted in bringing forth drastic transformation in the social and familial set up. Many educated men from joint families of Nairs began to leave their homes to work in distant places in search of better prospects. They used to take their wives and children along with them wherever they went. This can be considered as one of the ways in which nuclear family or single family system began to take shape in place of the joint family. In this way Kamala Das' father also left for Calcutta to earn livelihood when he found that like all other Nair taravads his too was financially in a precarious position. When he married Nalapat Balamani Amma in 1928, he did not leave her at her taravad. Instead, he took her to Calcutta with him. This was very much in contrast to the Nair

matrilineal system in which a woman can stay at her natal home even after marriage. But V.M. Nair's gesture was not a single isolated instance. All educated men forced by circumstances to find livelihood elsewhere other than from their own lands used to take their wives to wherever they were stationed. The slow but steady nose dive into the withering away of an age old practice had already begun to happen. This transformation created much apprehension in the women then, because till then they were very comfortable and secure in the home where they were born and brought up. Speaking of her mother's feelings when she had to leave Nalapat and accompany her husband to Calcutta, Kamala Das says, "She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security" (MS 4). Kamala Das' comments on her mother's experience are not mere suggestions about transformations brought in the sphere of marriage. Kamala Das remarks, further, "she was afraid of her father, and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin" (4).

Apart from the granduncle, there were women belonging to different generations at Nalapat House. Thus, there were her great grandmother and her two sisters, her grand mother and aunt Ammini. When Kamala Das came to stay at her ancestral home as a small child, it was her grandmother who was the pivot around which all activities at home revolved. Saradmoni quotes the anthropologist Anantha Krishna Iyer's statement that, it is the senior most woman in age who used to be the head of the matriarchal family. Her eldest daughter was the 'Prime Minister' and orders were transmitted to the little world through her (Saradmoni. 68). This system met with change subsequently and the senior woman's brother began to take the role of manager. In the case of Nalapat family when Kamala Das was a small child, it was the grandmother and not Nalapat Narayana Menon who held the authority to rule over the other members in the household. In this regard, it is highly significant that despite the presence of a senior male member in the house, the responsibility of managing the affairs in the house was vested in the hands of women including that of safe-keeping the money at home. Even Nalapat

Narayana Menon with his awesome personality and authority had to request money from his sister whenever he was in need (NPK 12). This legitimises the power held by women in those days. It was an ordinary course of a practice so that the men found no feeling of inferiority to ask money from the women.

The grandmother was a quiet woman, “plump fair-skinned and good looking” whose throat smelt of sandalwood (MS 13). Nalapat House to the writer is her “Grandmother’s house’. The knowledge of all the traditions and conventions that are part of Nair taravads acquired by Kamala Das were all through her grandmother. She was a very efficient lady who could see to everybody’s requirements to their satisfaction. Kamala Das still recollects the graces the old ancestral house possessed in the time of her grandmother’s surveillance (PC 111). She was married to a ‘Thampuran’ from Chittanjur Kovilakam - an educated man full of wisdom and humility. She had a very happy life with him. Unlike other husbands of the time, this man did not leave Nalapat House every morning after his visit there at night as was the usual custom. Instead he used to go in one

of the rooms upstairs to chat with his wife there or play dice with her. He was a kind and loving husband who was willing to take up any responsibility at Nalapat house as well. He also used to take his wife for an outing occasionally as is evident from what Kamala Das says about her grandmother's constant refrain about her husband having taken her to see 'Thrissur Pooram' (NPK 11). This is very much in contrast to the usual concept, about the husbands of Nair women tied in a conjugal relationship by a simple ceremony called 'Sambandham'. According to this concept it was considered that the men were not bound by any responsibilities towards their wives and that the relationship between the husband and wife had no basis other than sexual gratification. This was the ground on which the practice of sambandham was branded as an immoral one. Despite the knowledge that this system is a socially sanctioned practice, a lot of young men in those days took an antagonistic stance towards it. Their antagonism was because of the derogatory remarks about the practice uttered by people from outside the state who had no knowledge of such a custom. These people equated sambandham to concubinage,

women to mistresses and the children bastards (Saradmoni 65). Saradmoni's extensive study of the materials available on the matter, particularly biographies of persons born after mid-nineteenth century reveals no "prevalence of polyandry or the absence of awareness of a biological father (66). Kamala Das' account of her grandmother's married life reveals there is nothing inferior or uncultured about the practice of sambandham.

Ever since her widowhood, the grandmother had been living a very simple life tending to the needs of everyone in the family. She was a representative of the traditional society and was very much contented with the sort of life she had there. Nowhere in the works of Kamala Das do we find her making any complaint regarding her life as a widow. Widowhood did not deny her any of the privileges she had by right as a member of the Nalapat house. This is yet another significant advantage which matrilineal women enjoyed over their patrilineal counterparts. In a patriarchal family in India a widow is supposed to be an ill-omen. Her presence brings discomfiture to others. She is not associated with any auspicious functions or rituals.

Even seeing a picture or photograph of hers is unwelcome. This is not the case in the matriarchal families. The grand mother in the Nalapat House was all in all in the family. Her presence added sanctity to all occasions. Nothing took place in the family without her consent.

Other than seeing to the requirements of everyone, the grandmother also made her contributions in imparting social and cultural values to the children and the servants as well. There are also instances recorded in Kamala Das' works where she refers to her grandmother's disapproval of the way in which her sister-in-law, Balamani of Ambazhath family, Nalapat Narayana Menon's second wife, used to dress herself up in a gaudy way (NPK 12). Her words are never said to have brought any discords in the family. On the contrary it appears to have been given much weight. Such was the authority enjoyed by a Nair matriarch then. Nothing ever happens without her approval and acknowledgment.

The grandmother was very conservative in her attitude and so like a true matriarch she too gave importance to the family and its honour rather than

to any individuals. Therefore it was that very often when something untoward happens to the servant girls we find her refusing to speak for the poor girls and seems to be keen on sending them away from service for fear of tarnishing the family's reputation.

The pivotal figure in the family is, however, not the only one who has the freedom to say or do anything according to her discretion. The rest of the women too shared the right to assert their individuality. This is made very much obvious through Kamala Das' observation of her grand uncle's second wife. This woman had a personality much different from that of her sister-in-law, the writer's grandmother.

She was emphatic in her view of life. She knew for certain what it was that she wanted in life and never failed to make efforts to get them. Her accomplishments lie in the fact that she did what she thought was right for her and did not merely follow what was conventionally found executed by society. Thus it was that, instead of making Nalapat Narayana Menon come to her house every night as was the usual custom adapted as a rule in the sambandham system, she would gracefully arrive at Nalapat

House, her husband's home, all decked with flowers and jewellery, accompanied by her maids (MS 23). Though this may not have been a benefit enjoyed by all matriarchal women, instances like this provide proof of the privileged position women then enjoyed. Unlike in the patriarchal system where men own the liberty to go to the partner, here, it is the woman who goes to her husband and that too only if she wants to. This is a great advantage in favour of women belonging to the matrilineal society.

Ambazhath Balamani, the grand aunt though branded as a great dunce by her erudite husband, was a woman with strong reservations about all topics, even politics and political figures. One day, during a conversation among her husband, herself and her sister-in-law, the subject reached 'khaddar'. Her comment that people who wear khaddar may hold patriotism but not aestheticism irked the sister-in-law. Much hurt, the sister-in-law, an ardent follower of Gandhiji and Gandhism wanted to know if Gandhi and Nehru were all such people lacking in aesthetic sense. The sister-in-law retorted that she had a very poor opinion in this respect especially of Gandhiji for having made Kasturba clean

lavatories forcefully. She even went to the extent of making it very plain to her husband that had she been in Kasturba's position, she would have very well left Nalapat for good. In her opinion a woman does not marry for the sake of converting themselves into scavengers (Varshangalku Munpu 147). These words reflect a matriarchal woman's refusal to become subservient to anyone in the name of marriage. This is something which her counterpart from the patriarchal world cannot imagine even in one of her wildest dreams. The high-handedness of a patriarchal man towards his wife may be tolerated by her because it is expected of her and she has no other alternative before her. But this is not the case with a matriarchal woman. Even the slightest misbehaviour on the part of the husband may not be put up with.

Having been born and brought up in such an atmosphere where there was absolute freedom for women to design their lives as they wish to, it is not surprising that Kamala Das should have felt suffocated under the patrilineal system followed later on. As has already been stated, by the time she was born, matrilineal system had almost begun to meet with its destruction. Her father was an advocate of

patriarchy and followed the patriarchal mode of male domination at home. He was the decision maker in everything related to the family matters while the mother had only a silenced presence. Other than this, the social and cultural atmosphere pervading in Calcutta was also patrilineal. Therefore, she is favoured by the fact that she has personally experienced both the systems which entitles her to speak authoritatively on the drawbacks and advantages of both. From her writings, however, we gain the impression that matrilineal precepts appeal to her as much conducive to the emancipated existence of women in society. It is this staunch support of matriarchy which makes her declare, "Introducing the system of matriarchy all over the world may be the only solution to the growing problem of exploitation women and in particular the young girls face today" (PC 170)

It is no wonder that she was much disillusioned with her own marriage which was solemnized without taking care of her views. Her marriage was arranged by her parents. No one asked her opinion in this respect - even the grandmother, who said, "Das is a very good young man and

entirely without vices (MS 81) she came to learn of her marriage being already fixed only when she came to Nalapat House from Calcutta. When she came to know about it, she tried her best to protest at it. But she succumbed to all this because she felt she was a “burden” and a “responsibility” her parents did not want to shoulder for long (82).

In one of her columns, she says that her father always had the impression that she was a dunce since she used to fail in Mathematics often. She recalls the humiliation and fear she felt when her angry father shouted at her for having expressed her desire to follow a career. “A career!”, he shouted, “what kind of a career can a girl like you have? What work can you possibly do? Sweep the floor?” (PC 51). It is with strong bitterness that she says, “That there was a mind residing somewhere within the body attached to it, nobody seemed to notice”. (Path of the columnist 52) Kamala Das is a woman with high aspirations, who wanted to lead a meaningful life and contribute something substantial to the world other than “sleep with a man and produce his children”. This is why she was very much depressed and

disillusioned on learning about her marriage being fixed.

Apart from this ardent desire to study more and follow a career, there was also the revulsion she felt for the man of her parents' choice. She disliked him at first because he was always rough in his manners and words. He would talk about homo sexuality in a frank way and found it to be something very natural at a certain stage in life which made her afraid that her grandmother, if she comes to hear of it, may not appreciate it. The embrace he gave her from near a hedge during leave taking was also a humiliating experience (MS 81). The love which he showed to her was totally different from her idea of showing such intimate emotions which were "flowers in the hair,... the yellow moon light up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear". The revulsion she felt towards her husband may also be on account of her lesbian leanings which will be dealt with elaborately later.

Though she was not ready for a marriage then there was no choice before her. This situation is typical of arranged marriages in which the bride or the bridegroom normally has very little say in the

matter. After her engagement, she says, she felt rather moody worrying with all kinds of apprehensions as to whether he would be considerate to her and be a kind and loving father to the children. This sort of a fear would never have been undergone by her ancestors at Nalapat House.

Her observation also does not fail to notice the extravaganza that has crept in place of the old simple Nair weddings. Speaking of the elaborate preparation far in advance of her marriage day, she states, "Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent half a Lakh on its preparation. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue". (MS 87) But this was not the case earlier. Very little importance was given to the ceremony as such. In her words, "Marriage does not seem to be very significant for Nairs. A marriage ceremony lasts only for five minutes. A cloth left unstitched on its edges is called a mantrakodi. It can either be a mundu or saree. It is handed over to the bride. The groom ties a tali around his bride's neck. At times you can see his sister tying it. The ceremony is over" (PC 178). Due

to the excessive importance given to the ceremonies and the money spent, very often the emotional compatibility of the two most important people concerned is overlooked. This is what makes marriages these days end in disasters. Other than this, the extravaganza in relation to marriage ceremonies is also in a way what propagates the social evil called dowry system which did not exist during the time when matrilineal system was followed. Since, in the matrilineal system the family property belonged to the women and also since their husbands had no claim whatever on it, the women then were never made to suffer any sort of atrocities from their husbands or in-laws in the name of dowry. And also since the married girls were not required to leave their natal homes and stay at the husband's home there was no question of harassments either mentally or physically.

The problem of the wife having to leave her home after marriage is a great disadvantage with regard to patriarchal marriages. Kamala Das speaks of the miserable mental state of such a girl in "My Grandmother's House". There is a lot of autobiographical element in the poem because the

writer discloses the unhappiness and misery she used to feel after her marriage with the man of her parents' choice. Her husband had no time to spare for her or the children being always busy with official matters. Of course, she had lots of friends and her children too kept her busy then. But they were poor substitutes for the kind of love she wanted from her husband. In her lonely hours she would long to be there in the grandmother's house which holds a lot of memories of her good old childhood days.

Through the poem Kamala Das points to the plight of girls under patriliney who has to adjust to the new atmosphere around her. Occasions where a girl in her new role as daughter-in-law is ill-treated for having brought less dowry than expected or even for being less competent than expected of her as a home-maker are not rare. However hard a woman might try, she cannot blend into the picture there, for there is always an unseen barrier of isolation that alienates her from her husband's family. She is always a stranger and an outsider and the only person she feels close to happens to be her husband. In such a situation she expects to get a lot of consideration and love from him. Failure in getting

this result in tears and tantrums and her frustration manifests itself in quite a number of ways.

But circumstances do not entitle a woman leading a very detestable life with her husband to leave him and return home. Kamala Das notes that, “a broken marriage is as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy” in the eyes of society. In her work My Story she mentions how she had to rethink her decision to separate from her husband despite his ill-treatment of her. This is how she puts it:

If I had at that time listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to find another who would ... volunteer to marry me for I was not conspicuously pretty and besides, there was the two year old who would have been to the new husband an encumbrance (102).

These words evidently reflect the limited choice before a modern woman. In spite of all the humiliations and miseries a woman may have to undergo she has to cling on as tightly as she can to her marriage ties for various reasons, the prime one

being that unless there is male support a woman cannot thrive in society. Even those women belonging to families following the matriarchal system but do not have sound financial background had to face such challenges. Kamala Das' short stories like 'Ammalukkutty's husband', and "Fear" as well as the poem "A widow's Lament" testify to this. Fictional characters like Ammalukkutty cannot earn a livelihood even working as a servant maid for fear of being sexually exploited since that is how women like her are looked at by everyone. The widow in "Widow's Lament", is confronted by "packs of wolves" waiting cunningly for a chance to take advantage of her hapless situation. (Das, *Only The Soul Knows How to Sing* [OSK] 125). Soudamini teacher in "Fear" is a single woman who is always regarded with suspicion. These are all poor matriarchal women whose experiences speak volumes about the predicament of women who have to live without the conventional male support. We are made to assume from their plight how every society, be it patriarchal or matriarchal, exhibits the tendency to behave cruelly to women.

The fictional characters mentioned earlier can be taken as representing women belonging to the transitional phase from matriarchy to patriarchy. Women in such times especially those belonging to households which were not in good financial positions had to find employment for their means of sustenance. Due to their poor educational backgrounds or else, in certain cases, due to the complete lack of it, they found it hard to find employment in coveted positions. Since they had no other means of living and also since most of the affluent Nair families were then incapacitated to help these poor dependents as they themselves were facing problems related to family partition and the consequent financial crisis brought forth by the court orders related to property rights in a matriarchal set up, there was no other choice left before these women except to accept whatever employment came their way and thus come out from the security of their homes. The problems confronted by these women of the transitional phase are in no way trivial. Compared to the lives of these women, the rich and aristocratic matriarchal women lived in great advantage. The unmarried aunt Ammini, the

widowed grandmother, the deserted valiamma have all had a secure life at Nalapat House as is made obvious through Kamala Das' account of their lives in My Story.

Speaking of the advantages of the matriarchal system, Kamala Das says, "Before Gandhism entered the state, the matriarchal Nairs ensured with their laws of inheritance adequate protection for their women. It was the accepted practice to let the women stay on in their family home even after marriage. Their husbands could either live with them or visit them at night. A woman had the right to enjoy the family produce from the family land till her death. There is no ignominy in getting divorced either. These conventions helped women to maintain their self-respect and poise" (PC 9).

But it has to be said that matriarchal system had its disadvantages as well. One such disadvantage could be caused due to the autocratic power exercised by the Karanavar. He may apply this in different ways. There may arise occasions where he misappropriates the family property, or else, he may enforce his will with regard to the choice of a life

partner for the women in the family. Kamala Das refers to such an instance in My Story from which it can be assumed how women who are said to have immense freedom of choice in selecting their husbands themselves find it curtailed by the Karanavar's intervention. According to what is said by Kamala Das, Madhaviamma, Nalapat Narayana Menon's mother was very much in love with her husband and was following quite a happy life when disaster came in the form of a difference of opinion between her uncle, the Karanavar and her husband. The autocratic uncle not only dissolved the marriage but also found her another husband within weeks. She could never find any contentment and happiness with her new husband "who was not sensitive or gentle like the one who had gone away" (MS 32). The incident destroyed the sweetness from her and etched a hard bitter expression on her face. She was always very shy and lived a secluded life confining her to the inner precincts of the house. She refused to meet or mingle with anyone lacking the confidence to speak even to her own son to whom she felt she had done a great wrong. She lived a bitter life cursing herself for the betrayal of her son in having married

for a second time. The love she felt for the first husband was so strong that even after her second marriage she would wait at the fence under the lime trees just to have a look at him although he never appeared there. This gives added significance to her sorry plight.

Other than dissolution of marriages, the 'Karanavar' can also force women to enter into relationships they abhor or stop them from marrying the man of their choice. In situations like this, though the women appear to be holding a lot of freedom is actually only mute, silent victims of the Karanavar's despotism, says Kamala Das through the story of her father's Sister Lakshmikutty Amma who resided at Vadakkekara House in Guruvayoor. She was a widow. In the matrilineal system widows could remarry and were not looked at as inauspicious (Saradamani 65). So, it was that a Zamindar, an ardent admirer of hers came with a proposal of marriage. But her brother disliked his sister marrying for a second time and therefore declined the Zamindar's proposal despite the knowledge that his sister was very much looking forward to it. The poor woman could not react to her brother's authoritative command. Like Kamala Das'

Valiamma, she too turned quiet and morose afterwards losing all interest in life. It was only years after her death that Kamala Das realized the real reason for her aunt's sadness. It was because of the realization, says the writer, that "the freedom she had taken for granted was in actuality non-existent" (PC 50). There is also the instance recorded by her regarding the marriage of Govinda Mama and Sarojini Ammayi who had to wait for twenty long years to marry each other because of the objection raised by an old guardian (186).

Women like those mentioned here could of course have expressed their discontentment at the untimely and unwanted interference on the part of the Karanavars. But they did not do so because of their respect for the Karanavar's right to take decisions arbitrarily for the sake of the family. The women of the matriarchal family considered it their responsibility to promote a strong interpersonal relationship between the 'Karanavar' and the rest of the members in the family. For the sake of keeping the family united and intact it might be required of them to submit themselves to the circumstances without any protest.

The fact that matriarchal system had also its disadvantages with regards to the freedom of women proves that no man-made social system can be totally perfect. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, it has to be acknowledged that since women under matriarchy had a permanent place in their natal homes; it ensured the presence of lots of women belonging to different age groups at the ancestral home. This is one of the most rewarding benefits accorded by the joint family system. Tending to the old and the sick ones, looking after the children and so on would not pose any problem at all in such a family set up. Even the kitchen work found to be a great drudgery could be done with ease as everyone would be lending a helping hand besides the servants. The women could interact with one another, confide all their personal troubles be they grave ones or trivial and get all sorts of emotional sustenance and support from within the family itself. There would not be any reason for constraining oneself in letting out anything that one finds difficult to hold at heart any further. There would always be someone or other in whom one can confide one's most grave secrets. Women in such houses do not

have any chance of feeling lonely or isolated. Instead, a strong sense of comradeship and attachment is seen to develop among them. Such a kind of existence to women is not possible in a patriarchal set-up. This togetherness promotes “the sharing of an inner life”, “the bonding against male tyranny” etc. spoken of by feminists like Adrienne Rich. All the same, this need not develop lesbian sexual attitudes. The women of a matriarchal family cannot be branded as homosexuals. However, there is a qualitative difference in the outlook of a woman belonging to a matriarchal society and that of a woman belonging to a patriarchal society. The latter bears a psychological weight of a sense of inferiority imposed on her by centuries.

The matriarchal value imprinted in Kamala Das cherishes all the memories contributed by such a family set-up which makes her hold on to her life despite all its oddities. And nothing can act as a better symbol signifying the matriarchal set-up which she loves so much other than the Neermatala tree. It acts as a source of strength for her and represents family values, so that it makes her want to cling on to it rather than to the house itself. The house has now

almost come to be in a dilapidated condition weathered by time. But the tree remains in the precincts as majestic as ever. The urge to hold on to it happens to be so strong in her as if she feels that the death of the tree can mean the death of a cherished world.

CHAPTER IV

THE FEMININE CONTINUUM IN THE CONTEXT OF MATRILINY

Lesbianism is almost always considered to be the sexual relationship between women. But, feminists today give it an expanded meaning. One such feminist is Adrienne Rich. According to her it is,

“... a range... of woman identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. ... (But) embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (Kemp Sandra and Judith Squires 321)

Further, there is the definition formulated by Lillian Faderman according to which,

“Lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other”(Quoted in Greene, Gayle and Coppelia Kaha 185).

These definitions speak volumes on the various ways by which women come to develop strong associations with one another. Such associations always tend to become beneficial to them as they provide them with opportunities for maintaining a healthy mental make-up. Nalapat House where Kamala Das was born was a family where women reigned supreme. The grandmother there provided young Kamala with as much emotional nourishment as she could probably manage to. But Nalapat was not the only niche from where she received such an opulent supply of love. At the age of nine she was admitted to a boarding

school run by Roman Catholic nuns. She had a lot of friends there and she blended with the surroundings quite easily. Like Nalapat House, the convent school was also a women's world. There was the mother superior, the boarding sister named sister Philomene who had a serene and smiling face, the assistant boarding sister who had an unpleasant behaviour towards the children, sister Tecla etc. Then, there were friends like Raji, Sarada, Meenakshi and Annie, a fifteen year old girl who lived in a make - believe world of lovers and love-letters.

Life here however, was an extension of the world at her ancestral home. This convent school provided her with new and wider experience and knowledge. It gave her the first whiff of the realization that a world much different from the orthodox and conservative one at Nalapat existed beyond its precincts. She learnt quite a lot more from her associations with the young girls, her room-mates as well as many others which she would never have grasped from her old companions at her ancestral home. Vrinda Nabar finds the convent to have provided Kamala Das with positive features like "a sense of oneness, of community and of course the

experience of being with other girls” (6). It was from here that she began to become conscious of ‘stylishly cut dresses’, the use of chemise about which her grandmother had no knowledge of and many more such details. From the girls she became aware of her femininity and sexuality. With their affectionate coaxing these girls brought out the dormant craving in her to wear beautiful, brightly coloured frocks made of soft, smooth stuff in contrast to the rough, drab mill khaddar she was very much used to wear. She being the youngest among her friends was pestered and pampered by the girls gifting her with sweets, ice-creams and beautiful, expensive dresses. This sort of “affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other and co-mingle their sense of identity and well-being” amount to lesbianism according to Bonnie Zimmerman (Greene and Kahn 183).

The girls were all different in their attitudes and outlooks. While there were people like Sarada and Meenakshi who did not find any difficulty in confining their interests within the limits drawn by the convent authorities, there were also girls like Raji who would react with words and gestures at anything

amounting to a curbing of their freedom. There were serene, pleasant women like sister Philomene and also grumpy ones like the assistant Boarding sister. Apart from the reserved, studious girls like Sarada and Meenakshi and of course bold and daring ones like Raji, there were also girls like Annie who was conscious of bodily desires gnawing at her in that age. There was also a girl from Goa who had a lesbian inclination towards Sarada, the beautiful girl with long slender legs born and brought up in Singapore. This Goan girl out of her admiration for Sarada, who never reciprocated the feeling, came to their room one day when she was away taking her bath and kissed her pillow case and her underclothes hanging out to dry in the dressing room (MS 40). This might perhaps be Kamala Das' first encounter with lesbianism.

Later on, when she went to Calcutta and joined a school there, the atmosphere was no different. All the teachers she had were women. Nearly all of them were "old maids turned sour with rejection and showed vagaries in their character (MS 54). There was the principal, an old spinster with strong likes and dislikes on the basis of physical

allure and lack of it, the mathematics teacher with a perpetual scowl on her face; the English teacher who was an Austrian refugee. In this school too, Kamala Das met a classmate named Mamta who had fallen in love with the Mathematics teacher and used to gaze for long at the teacher while she took class. Her admiration for the teacher was so strong that when the teacher left the school when she got a better job, Mamta discontinued her studies. Apart from these teachers she had contact with a few tutors as well employed by her father to help her in her studies at home. One such tutor was a Syrian Christian spinster, short and aggressive in attitude. Her aggressiveness might have been due to the fear of being cheated by men as is evident from her behaviour on seeing the man in bush shirt, 'the most wicked man alive who had ruined the lives of several good girls and disgraced some of the best families in India' (MS 58). Her words held all the hatred any woman could ever exude from within. This is one of the many instances that made Kamala Das realise the harm men are likely to cause to women. Ironically enough, instead of feeling repulsion for such men, what she felt then was a desire to meet him personally later and

become his mistress. She confesses that it was the term 'wicked' that made her like him so much. The term she felt "compensated for his deficiencies" (59). Such a response has a deep psychological significance which will be dealt with later in the chapter. All her teachers had a background of frustration behind their quiet exterior. Instance like these must have stamped a kind of scepticism towards men and heterosexual relationships on her sensitive mind even without her being aware of it. This must have been what later came to result in frigidity towards her husband. She could never find any happiness or satisfaction with her husband and always carried the notion that he was rough with her even in their most intimate moments.

In quite a number of her poems, we find her mentioning the brutal ways in which men usually behave towards women in order to establish their superiority over them. To depict this, she uses the theme of love and sex, they being emotions requiring tenderness and warmth. The poem 'In Love' describes the discontented thoughts of a woman after love-making with her husband. She is very unhappy being conscious of the lack of love in their

relationship. The woman in “Stone Age” feels very much insulted to know that she was only a play thing in the hands of her husband for a short while. The lines,

You turn me into a bird of stone, a
granite
Dove, you build round me a
shabby drawing room
And stroke my pitted face absent
mindedly while
You read (OSK
67)

speaks of the disgust the woman feels at the mechanical matter-of-fact approach of her husband, “the old fat spider weaving webs of bewilderment”, who is not at all concerned about the presence of his wife beside him, whom he had squeezed dry of all emotions. What Kamala Das suggests through such poems is that physical love is not what women need but emotional identity. There may of course be women who want it otherwise. But she speaks for a greater majority of women who crave for emotional security and a feeling of being wanted through sexual relationship with the man

they love. In My Story she makes a reference to the relationship between her grand uncle and his second wife which as she describes it was “radically a sex-based one” (23). But unlike what was expected of it by everybody their relationship was a strong and deep one and not a shallow, insincere performance shown for the sake of pleasing others. This shows that there are also women who find happiness and contentment in their relationships with men. The supposedly aggressive behaviour of her husband, according to the writer made her go seeking for the kind of love that she desired for from other men. (MS 183). Here again, she confesses, she was wrong in taking it for granted that her husband was the only one who had no regard for her womanhood because she could not find in any of her lovers the good will and tender-heartedness she expected out of them. As a result, all her associations with lovers too began to turn distasteful like her marriage. In this connection it would not be wrong to assume that other than merely portraying herself as an adulteress and a promiscuous woman, she is trying to say that men regardless of their nationality, social status, financial position, family background and education

and carnivorous plants” suggesting the way he is ready to devour her in his grasp (89). Kamala Das emphasizes that “this skin - communicated thing” as she phrases such hollow relationships cannot be called love. On the contrary, what she yearns for is the sort of spiritual relationship which is said to have existed between the mythical Krishna and Radha. To quote her words, “sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his arms, the loneliness of my life.” (My Story 84). Instead, she finds to her dismay that her relationships with her husband can unleash “nothing more than the / skin’s lazy hungers” (“The Freaks” OSK 48). This accounts for the cold and passive bearing she used to have in the presence of her husband. Kamala’s attitude to her husband is not one shared by all matriarchal women towards their husbands. But the very fact that she could think of putting an end to her relationship with her husband is quite characteristic of a Kerala Nair woman. A woman belonging to a matriarchal family could easily do so because the social system to which she belonged was there to protect her. By the time of Kamala things were becoming less secure.

Still, Kamala's coldness to her husband cannot be fully explained by her matrilineal background. Perhaps, her husband could not have handled her properly. There was something rough and animal like about his lust. What she wanted from him was gentle care. She wanted to be loved, to be caressed fondled and petted. What she wanted was affection and attachment which encourages her responses to bloom and blossom.

The eighteen year old girl residing in the college hostel to which she makes reference in My Story had been able to fulfill Kamala's demands. She was drawn towards the girl instantly despite all the warnings she received about the girl being a lesbian. She was a tall and sturdy girl with tense masculine grace. "When her eyes held mine captive in a trance, for a reason that I could not fathom then, I felt excited" (78) is how she describes their first meeting. While on her return to Nalapat from Calcutta the girl was a fellow traveller in the train. She wanted to share Kamala Das' berth. Looking around if anyone was watching them, she lay near Kamala Das holding her body close to the young girl, her fingers tracing gently the outlines of her mouth and murmuring

sweet words into her ears. (79). Kamala Das confesses that it was the first kiss of its kind in her life. The girl's passionate kisses and her caresses kept haunting her thought. A week later when a relative of hers who was to be her husband later "pushed into a dark corner behind a door and kissed her sloppily near her mouth, crushed her breasts with his thick fingers", she affirms that she felt hurt and humiliated.

Ever since the meeting with the girl she had been rather moody and confused. After her engagement, there were lots of occasions when she was left alone with her fiancée. This man would plead her to bare her breasts and resort to all sorts of rough acts on her much against her will. She admits that she used to feel rather lost and unhappy then. What she used to crave for then was "a more tranquil relationship with a hand on my hair and a voice in my ear telling me that everything was going to be all right for me" (84). Desperate to save herself from this man with crude behaviour she contacted her girlfriend on the 'phone and entreated her to take her away with her. But, it was of no use because she said she would be busy completing her studies for another

four years. Disappointed by her girl-friend's words, Kamala Das decided to resign herself to her fate. This is how she expresses her thoughts at the decision to succumb herself to her destiny: "My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the victim of a young man's carnal hunger..." (85)

According to the radical feminist perspective of 1970's hetero sexuality is an "oppressive socially constructed patriarchal institution forcibly imposed on women" (Kemp and squires 316) Kamala Das' attitude to sex may not be a theoretical construct. If these were the proper circumstances perhaps she would not have had to doubt her own position as she does in the poem "Composition",

Am I hetero
am I Lesbian
or am I just plain frigid ?"

(OSK 22)

The incident of meeting the lesbian girl later appeared as a story titled "The Sandal Trees" where she shows the tendency to posit lesbianism as

loving and satisfactory in contrast to the heterosexual relationship which in her viewpoint is dull, dominating and abusive. Here, she speaks about the infatuation felt for each other by two women. The two women, Dr. Sheela and Dr. Kalyanikkutty were childhood friends and without their being aware of it had taken a strong fascination for each other. Like what is expected as a normal course, the two get married and begin a family of their own. But, their attraction for each other continues so that they find no delight in the company of their respective husbands. Dr. Sheela is tired of the life with her husband and fails to find any charm or rapture in him. Whenever she sees his naked body or whenever he makes advances towards her she has a nauseated feeling. Dr. Kalyanikkutty goes beyond such things. She conducted an abortion on herself just because she was not prepared to carry in her body for ten months the child of an ordinary man like her husband. Instead, she finds herself fervently, desiring to conceive the child of her friend Sheela which of course is impossible.

Through the story Kamala Das says that women marry out of fear of the societal attitudes and

that they marry men all because heterosexual relationship is supposed to be the normal relationship. Whether marriage provides happiness and security is nobody's concern in her opinion. There are lots of critical observations made by her in the story about the relationship between two individuals who cannot adjust with each other or accommodate each other's likes and dislikes. There are occasions when the writer mocks at the hollowness of such relationships. There is an instance where Sheela and her husband decide to participate in an 'ideal couple' competition with the hope that they have a chance to win for, as Sheela says, "our marriage has lasted long. I haven't betrayed you and you haven't betrayed me. We have not slept apart for a single night. We can certainly win this contest" (The Sandal trees 17).

This was being spoken at a stage in their life when there appeared an enforced silence that crept up like a wall between the husband and wife. This however did not end in their separation even though her husband was to her "like a diseased limb... that had to be cut off and removed" from her (Sandal Trees 13).

In the story Sheela admits how much she used to enjoy the advances made by Kalyanikutty while they were young. She narrates an incident at the swimming pool when Kalyanikutty kissed all over her body which sent “a thrill down her spine” (4). During her honeymoon Sheela says, she could not enjoy her husband’s close presence at all as she was busy comparing Kalyanikutty and her husband. To her dismay, she found she liked Kalyanikutty more as is evident through the words,

When I compared his mouth that smelt of beer, cigarette and onion with hers that had the sweet smell of durva grass, he failed. However hard I tried, I could not forget the way she had caressed me, pressed her fingers hard into me and satisfied me with her lips, all with the intention of giving me pleasure (5).

While Sheela donned the garb of a traditional woman trying to conform to the expectations of society and pretended to be leading a happy life with her husband Kalyanikutty rebels against all conventional norms of marriage and motherhood. She divorces her husband Sudhakaran

on learning that she does not love him or like him, aborts his child in her womb without any scruples as she believes it is not worth the trouble to bear and rear the child of someone she hates. She rebels against the extant natural heterosexual relationship and chooses to adopt lesbian relationship with her old friend Sheela.

After Dr. Sheela's husband discloses an even greater secret that he had known it all along that Kalyanikutty, and Sheela were lovers, instead of feeling ashamed of herself, we find a great relief welling up inside Sheela. She gets elated and feels that she is once again "transformed into a young lass who embraced her girl friend and sought the blissful rapture of her kiss. A girl who found heavenly pleasures in the bodily touch of her beloved" (26). The relationship between these two women is in accordance with Zimmerman's observation, "It is not right to say that women have searched for emotional and sexual fulfillment only through men. (Greene Gayle and Coppelia Kahn 179)

It may not be wrong to assume that what is suggested through these fictional characters contain a little bit of autobiographical element in it. We find

her referring in My Story how she used to feel an indescribable longing to be with her girl-friend and nurture those ecstatic moments she had spent with her - a feeling she could never find towards her husband. A comparative analysis of her attitude towards her husband and the girl in this respect reveals that while she finds emotional contentment in the company of the girl it is found to be absent while she is with her husband. She refers to her husband's intimacy as "brutal" and "crude" (84) His was "rough hands" riding up her skirt or tearing up her brassiere" (84) His hands "bruised" her body and left blue and red marks on the skin (84). She was always "puzzled by his conduct" (81). But when such intimate advances were made by the girl-friend she feels it differently. The girl's eyes held her "captive in a trance" (78). Her fingers traced the outlines of her mouth "with a gentleness" that she had never dreamt of finding (79) and her kisses were all passionate ones. This attitude accounts for her husband's question why she was "cold and frigid" with him (84). Her performance during the wedding night and subsequent nights surprised her and made her wonder whether she was a normal woman or not

and she even doubted whether she might be a eunuch (90).

For the sake of social and economic protection and support, women have to mould themselves to men's desires. So it is why ultimately Kamala Das had to surrender to the demands of society and act like an ordinary heterosexual woman though deep within her, there was always the impulse to escape from its oppressive grasp. The words, "I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape' (MS 98) testifies to this. She also confesses that she could shed her shyness and surrender herself totally in bed only during her phase of nervous breakdown when she was only half-conscious being put on bromides (112). All these give us the impression that she is comfortable only in the presence of women. An even association with men other than her husband fails to satisfy her yearning for the sort of relationship she longs for. This failure to find fulfilment in her desires is due to the attitude or the impression that men are severe and cruel while women are loving and caring which is highly suggestive of her lesbian tendencies. This in turn

may have crept into her because of the special women centred atmosphere at Nalapat. She remembers each of the women there as having an affectionate disposition while it is not the same with regards to men, even her father who used to be very stern and strict while at home with the children.

In My Story she refers to a number of instances, she had fallen ill and how she was nursed back to health by the affectionate grandmother or the mother-in-law or else some other woman. One such instance was at the age of nineteen, when she conceived her second baby. She was then a victim of nervous break down because of the neglect from her husband (108). When she went to Nalapat, she says, her grandmother was so distressed by her looks and behaviour. In the course of nursing the granddaughter to health, the old woman was even ready to make arrangements to smuggle in alcoholic beverage for the sake of pleasing the young woman. The grandmother and mother-in-law gave her chicken broth, liver, soup, egg-nog etc., in order for recuperating her health. But her health did not remain in such a good condition for long. She fell ill once again. But this time it was not the grandmother

but a kind, good-natured lady-doctor who tended her to health. She was “the kindest woman” Kamala Das had ever come across and was adored by all her patients. The good demeanour of the lady doctor was extremely alluring to the sensitive mind of the writer so that she felt she was in love with the doctor. When she told about this to her husband, his remark was that, “it is all right, she is a woman she will not exploit you” (137). In yet another bout of illness while at Delhi, it was a friend named Shirley who did all the nursing at the hospital. She describes her as the ‘most loving of women in the country” (169). All these references to her severe illnesses and how she was brought back to life with the care and love of certain women reflects the confidence, she has in women’s capacity to tend to one’s physical and emotional wants. She does not hold this feeling with regard to men. She refers in My Story that women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex as they associated it with violence and blood shed (24). She says this in the context of speaking about the young servant girls at Nalapat who used to fall prey to the lust of the men in the family and were sent away by

the grandmother for their alleged misconduct towards the men.

In the matriarchal families there used to be lots of employed hands to tend to the various chores. These servants, especially the young maids would have to undergo lots of humiliating experiences from the men in the family. Most often, they would be victims of sexual exploitation. In case the girls conceive, they would either be sent away or else killed and thrown into an unused well or pond. This is what Kamala Das has in her mind when she speaks about Nair girls' phobia about men and sex. In her autobiography, she narrates the story of a kitchen maid and a cook at Nalapat who had decided to marry each other. But ill-fate came in their midst in the form of a rich relative. This man would coax the girl to part with her morals but it was of no use. One day the grandmother came across a letter he had written to the girl. She was immediately dismissed from service. The poor cook who loved the girl a lot was beaten up badly by the rich man's henchmen and nothing was heard about him after that. The sight of the dried up blood where the cook slept and the servants scraping away the stains with a knife

got stamped firmly in the mind of young Kamala Das. The plight of the kitchen maid was also rather unfortunate. Having thus literally come face to face with forced sex into which young girls were initiated must have created a fear of sexual dominance by men in the mind of Kamala Das. This feeling of fear appears to have got itself so deeply rooted in her mind at a very early age itself. Catherine Mackinnon observes that sexual dominance by men in the form of rape, sexual harassment, sexual abuse of children and so on may come to be construed as sex and would have far reaching consequences in shaping one's sexuality later on. In such situations, she says, sexuality throughout life would be "a re-enactment of", a response to, that back-drop" (Kemp and Squires 355). This shows that lesbianism need not necessarily be an attitude or character trait inherent in one but may also be due to social conditioning. Hans Bertens points out that lesbianism may be a natural quality programmed into an individual right at birth itself or else acquired by way of the experiences undergone by an individual. (Bertens 220). The individual's responses to the various experiences in connection with the cultural

framework in which one lives as well as the response to the personal experiences matters a lot in defining the sexuality one adopts in course of time.

Similarly, in the case of Kamala Das her experiences from different quarters must have contributed much in shaping her sexuality. The various instances of abuses and exploitations, which she had seen victimising at the poor maid-servants and other young dependents of matriarchal houses must have given shape to the thought that matters related to men and sex with them would definitely end in abuse and humiliation. This must have made her imagine that the true kind of love which she had always wanted could be provided only by women. But even while articulating strong leanings towards associations with women, she says she realized that she cannot afford to dream of a “different kind of life” (MS 85). She says so in the context of her having requested her eighteen year old lesbian friend to save her from her marriage by taking her away with her and when the latter refused to oblige. At this juncture she becomes willing enough to surrender herself to her fate and to the norms designed by

society and so says, “My life has been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives”.

But this kind of a yielding towards parental pressures does not wipe away the spirit of adventure that is innate in her. There is always a tendency in her to break all the conventional norms set by society. This is why she occasionally shows leanings towards relationships with women as a mark of rebellion against society and its stringent rules.

Heterosexual love too is associated in her mind with daring adventure and challenge. This feeling of adventure begins quite early itself as an infatuation for Govinda Kurup, a school fellow at the elementary school at Punnayurkulam and the feeling appears to have continued at various levels and stages of her life further. Govind Kurup was considered an outlaw by the teachers. He used to be so daring and mischievous that he often got punished. One day, he was sent out of class for having written some obscenities on the blackboard. The picture of the boy leaving the class undaunted, kilting his dhoti and murmuring jokes to his benchmate got imprinted in Kamala’s mind as that of a rebel who was daring enough to withstand the punishments as he is doing

something not for himself but for a greater majority of students who are fed up of the strict attitude of the teachers. This must be what made her feel like following him and telling him that “if he were wicked she was fond of such wickedness too. (MS 21). She had even felt like marrying him and revealed this to her grandmother. She did not appear to have appreciated this at all but all the same laughed and tried to look amused. Bred under the strict surveillance of the grandmother who was rather rigid and orthodox in her outlooks on culture and morality Kamala was forced very often to restrain her curiosity about ‘boys’ and ‘love’.

It was out of her ignorance about her classmate Devaki’s intentions that made her show the letter she had given to Kamala and seek her advice. But the reaction of the grandmother was not pleasant. She asked her grand daughter not to have any association with the girl “who had proved herself to be wicked (21). The term ‘wicked’ is attributed to Govinda Kurup too. It is this sort of an infatuation for the charm behind wickedness that draws her to her teacher’s tormentor, “the man in bush shirt”. “Wickedness” therefore stands for a kind of thrill or

daring exploits for her which cannot be derived from a settled married life. This is also the reason why she wants to become the mistress of the man in bush shirt rather than marry him and become his wife. It is the teacher's words, that "he is the most wicked man alive" that draws her to him. Had he lacked such a description perhaps, she might not have felt any particular interest in him at all. To quote her words about this man, "Except for a leonine grace, he had nothing to attract the passing eye. The adjective "wicked" compensated for her deficiencies" (59). This shows that it is her desire to go seeking for adventure that makes her form relationships with lots of men and women as she knows that such relationships lack societal sanction.

The grandmother represents traditions for her. Therefore, her death signified a 'new-found freedom' for her. It is the freedom to break conventions and all norms of moral codes dictated by society. This is why she steered herself into an extra-marital relationship just a week after her death. He was a grey-eyed man whom she met from the Khar Ghymkhana in Mumbai where she used to go in the evening to play tennis (113). His love for her

appeared to be so immature and silly as is revealed through his letter to her. When she showed the letter to her husband he too felt the man was rather stupid. When Kamala told about her husband's words to him, the man looked too eager to put an end to their relationship and leave her. This made her regard him as a coward who did not have the manliness in him to withstand competition in love.

Then it was the turn of Carlo, the pen-friend who called her Sita and treated her with awe as though she was a goddess (153). He was the only lover to whom she turns quite off and on to help her relieve herself from her unhappiness and miseries. He tallied well with the kind of a petting and doting lover she always wished to have. His presence reminded her of the pond at Nalapat where she used to sun her face and the ancient Neermathala tree in the courtyard of Nalapat (158). But no amount of coaxing from his part to leave her husband and marry him could become successful. Leaving her husband was an entirely different matter to her. Carlo was good as a lover but was not qualified in her eyes to be her husband's substitute. In Ente Katha, she states that her husband was the solid earth for

her feet to stand firmly on while Carlo was only a tree under whose shade she could rest when weary (94). This is what makes Carlo himself say that to her he was merely “a waiting room between trains” (158). She preferred to live with her husband, at the same time adventuring into a wider world than Nalapat family.

In all such relationships she was “seeking the cruelty that lies in the depth of a man’s heart” (MS 171). The adventure derived from such associations involves a lot of risks of which she was aware. She had no hesitation to welcome those hazards for the greater fulfilment of a total surrender to the lust of her husband. The phase of repulsive attitude which she used to feel earlier towards her husband left her mind. It was followed by a feeling to surrender herself totally to him. This happened soon after conceiving for the second time. Then she had shown traces of a nervous breakdown. It might have been caused by the effect of drugs on her or else it might also have been a metaphoric yielding towards the demands of a conventional society. Her desire to surrender may also be the desire to merge her with a more powerful personality.

Surrendering to the husband or lover is a symbol of the greater surrender to God just as the gopikas surrendered themselves to their favourite idol Sri Krishna, knowing fully well that they cannot expect him to be completely theirs at all. Her husband and all other lovers resembled Krishna the eternal lover to her, in that they all have lovers other than she herself.

Kamala Das herself sought to be with the beloved Sri Krishna.

“Your body is my prison Krishna,
I cannot see beyond it.
Your darkness blind me,
Your love words shut out the wise world’s
din”.

She says in the poem “Krishna” (OSK 67). It was similar to the kind of love between Krishna and Radha, a feeling for each other that transcends beyond the pleasures of the body that she had always been searching for in her husband and all other lovers of hers. There are poems in which she describes her idea of such a love. She knows only too well that such a relationship can exist only for a short

while. But she feels that it is sufficient enough to make a woman attain the heights of her happiness and live contentedly for the rest of her life. Every woman is a 'Radha' in her eyes eternally waiting for their Krishna to come. According to her, "vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind / and the flute luring her from home and her husband..." ("Vrindavan" OSK 101). She believes that every woman expects to find in her husband qualities possessed by Krishna. It is this Krishna in her husband that makes her as wife worships him, she says in Ente Katha (55).

Her faith in Krishna was there in her when she was in her childhood too. Then, she used to create a fanciful world for her little sister making her believe that Krishna had come to their homes. For this, she used to hide under the stairs and talk to the little girl. She had even let the little sister catch hold of her fingers smeared with ink to give it a blue tinge to make it appear to be more factual (NPK 97-98). She played such games with her children as well. It was in this way that her son Monoo "made friends" with all the major gods of Hindus (MS 108). Krishna and his love give her the space

“for our homeless
Souls to return someday
to hang like bats
from its pure physicality”.

(“Radha Krishna” OSK 104).

This higher dimension of her personality bordering on spirituality is not recognised and appreciated widely. The desire to give her up is to surrender to the care of a greater power. It adds a wider significance to her search for security discussed elsewhere in this thesis.

CHAPTER V

THE LAMP IN THE GRAND MOTHER'S ROOM

Kamala Das narrates in My Story an instance when her grandmother wanted her to stay at Nalapat just for a night when she came home from Calcutta. At that time Kamala was staying in a rent house with her parents constructed in the courtyard of the ancestral house. Kamala could not fulfill the old lady's wish as her father did not feel it safe for his daughter to sleep in the ancestral house any more as it was in a state of deterioration. Much against their wishes the grandmother was staying in the old house. Through out the night, the grandmother lay awake waiting for her grand daughter. Kamala still remembers the little lamp that remained burning all throughout the night at her grandmother's window as she waited till late in the night for her granddaughter's arrival. The old woman could not sleep with Kamala who had always slept with her in childhood.

The sorrow which the old woman felt when she realized that she and her old house are no more wanted cannot be imagined. The next day, Kamala was to depart. The grandmother came to the new house. She asked Kamala whether she would come for Vishu. Kamala who describes herself as an adept at lying told her that she would come but failed to keep her word. A few months later, the old lady died leaving no means for her grand daughter to make amends.

Life had taught the grandmother a lot. Could she have believed Kamala's words? Love and concern for the older generation are rare facts. Where was the grandmother who filled and fixed Kamala's imagination and where the unwanted old woman standing before her? Kamala Das says the lamp burning on the window sill symbolized for her the loneliness of old age (112). It also symbolizes the unrequited love which is the experience of all aged persons.

The aged happen to be just one category of individuals found to be quite unwanted and unnecessary by all and sundry without any gender discrimination. Kamala Das takes a very sympathetic

stance towards such people too as they are also a marginalized group. Old men and old women alike suffer neglect at the hands of the younger ones. This is because the modern generation accustomed to living in nuclear families has an insensitive and detached attitude towards old people. The traditional concept that it is the duty of the children to look after their aged parents does not appear to be followed by many these days. The old people are denied the care and attention they ought to get in their advanced age. Instead, they are deposited in some unwanted space in the house where nobody would have any hindrance due to their presence. To quote Kamala Das' words in this respect, "The old are destined to be dumped like unwanted luggage, bits of unfashionable junk, and left to perish" (MS 142). She says this while referring to her great grandmother's predicament in the wee end of her life. Due to a pressing official engagement Kamala Das' father and mother moved over to Calicut. The old lady also wanted to accompany them to town. But since Balamaniamma's sister requested to let the old lady stay with them she had to comply with it. In this new home of hers, the great grand mother was

“deposited in a dark room opposite the pantry where she lay curled up on a narrow cot, silent and morose till her death” (141). There was nobody to care to her likes and dislikes. Instead, she was expected to adjust to a new kind of life with delayed meals and that too with accompaniments like fried fish, chicken and biriyani, the smell of which used to make her feel nauseated as she was a strict vegetarian. Such a situation chanced to happen to a matriarchal woman because of the slow disintegration of matriarchal joint families into smaller, independent units where nobody has the time or the heart to tend to the old and the sick.

When the aged in the family are swept into a corner, and kept distanced from the rest of the family, they suffer a lot of psychological problems created due to loneliness. Kamala Das is of the opinion that the old people require the presence of the rest of the members in the family and always desperately yearn for their company. She speaks in such a manner from yet another experience in her family. She blames the young people who always neglected the aged ones and fail to discern the gnawing pain in them caused due to loneliness. She

feels that the young would definitely be able to realize this and experience it themselves when they reach their old age. She confesses that she herself had neglected her affectionate grandmother quite a lot especially when the old lady wanted her granddaughter's presence the most but was able to realize it only after the grandmother's death which caused a great vacuum in her life. (PC 38). Though the grandmother had never spoken about her disappointment, Kamala Das feels that it must have hurt her very much to realize that "the grand child who had once lain against her body at night to fall asleep had grown out of the need for the kind of love that only the old could give" (112). Now, when Kamala Das' grand daughter tells her that she is busy playing and has no time to spare she gets extremely pained which she equates with the pain her own grandmother would have felt long back. This is what makes her come out with a great observation. "For a child, a grandmother is not an absolute necessity. But for an aging widow a grandchild soon becomes the only reason for living on" (Path of the Columnist 38). All old people may not however be ready to accept the loneliness caused by their isolated

existence in the household in the quiet way in which Kamala Das' grandmother did. It is often in order to attract attention that old people usually interfere in the affairs of the other members in the family. They may butt in with uncalled for opinions at the most inopportune moments or make their ill-timed appearance, when the family do not want their presence among them or feign illness so that someone or the other would be beside them always. The young people used to the atmosphere in a nuclear family have only disrespect and disregard for the aged people and fail to understand that they too have their likes, dislikes and needs as well as lots of problems ranging from economic and psychological to physical ones. Having been brought up in an atmosphere where there used to be people of all ages living together under a single roof, Kamala Das feels that the young modern generation which has no consideration for the aged in the family will have to face lots of negative implications if they continue so. She strongly believes that the young people who fail to make any "emotional investments" would become disillusioned in their old age. It is such people, according to her who "run to places of worship,

touches the feet of holy men and holy women and goes on tortuous pilgrimages as they become reminded of their past sins committed towards the elders (PC 54-55). As has already been suggested earlier, it takes a long time for the young to realize the problems which the old people undergo.

Apart from the problems created by loneliness the aged people also suffer because of their financial dependence on others. The aged are always expected to grow out of needs. So when they express even a slight wish either it is grudgingly gratified or else asked to keep quiet. A great majority of old people do not have any means of subsistence in their old age. This necessitates them to live as the dependents of their sons or daughters. When this happens they meet with lots of disapprovals from their own children. Other than the problem regarding an extra mouth to feed, there is also the added expense caused by their medical treatments. In such circumstances they cannot afford to show any melodramatic sense of dejection or show any kind of misgivings even though the children's neglect create a lot of pain in their minds. All they can do therefore is to willingly live in subservience and servility to

those who look after them. In the case of those old people who are not dependent on the children financially, it so happens that the children turn rather greedy and forget their responsibilities towards the parents. The son in Kamala Das' story "The Tattered Blanket" is keen on selling the family property including the house where his mother lives so that he can "carry the money back to Delhi to put of in the fixed deposit" (64). He has no plans to take his old mother with him to Delhi as it may cause a lot of inconvenience to him and his family. He also does not have any idea in his mind as to where his mother and widowed sister are to live after the sale of the ancestral house. It may be that his idea was to send the old mother and sister to Home for the Aged, since it has come to be a mark of sophistication and modernity to let the old live in such institutions which flourish not just in cities but in small towns as well. In Kamala Das' opinion such institutions are far better places for the old to live rather than live a censured life with the young who bully them with sharp words. According to her, "such schemes will probably make old age seem pleasant". She feels that it is better for both the aged and the young because, "In the eyes

of the young age will seem like an incurable disease. The skin wrinkles, the hair greys and the muscles sag. Unsolicited advice is ladled out by the old. The old turn critical and pass judgment on the young getting on their nerves naturally” (PC 183). This observation tallies well with the times because in the joint family system of the earlier times such a problem was unheard of. The old people were always respected and their words given much importance. The presence of venerable old members in a family was always regarded as a blessing to guide the next generation forward in the right way. No one ever used to feel their presence an inconvenience at all.

In the story “Grandfather”, Kamala Das sketches the feeling of loss and loneliness of an eighty two year old man. He is totally under the mercy of his daughter-in-law who finds him to be a “burden” and “difficult” to manage (108). He expects his daughter to take care of him for the rest of his life, but she refuses because their flat in the city was very small and also since she feared her husband disapproved the idea of taking her father there. The questions the old man shoots at his daughter, “Have you stopped needing me, Thankam?... Doesn’t

anyone want old people? Have I become unwanted?" (108) irritates the daughter because she fears that all the excuses which she had made in order not to take her father with him have been revealed. It is very plain from the daughter's words that she does not actually want to take the responsibility of looking after her father but would like to make an occasional visit to his house to prove to the world that she cares for him. Such an attitude is not limited to one or two families but pervades generally everywhere which is what makes newer and newer Homes for the Aged crop up almost daily. The way in which both the daughter and the daughter-in-law toss away the responsibility of looking after the old man combined with the warning of consequences of looking after someone in such an old age clearly shows how much unwanted a category old people are.

While the old people are unwanted in the house, there is a group of people who are very much wanted but not related to the members of the household by blood or kinship. They are the maid - servant class forming an inevitable part of the old matriarchal households. There would be a considerable number of such women in a rich house

whose presence was a must to carry out the different household chores like cooking, washing, sweeping and wiping the floor, sweeping clean the courtyard and such other work. Most often, the women from the lower classes will be entrusted the menial jobs which require physical labour while the poor and dependent relatives would be given tasks like helping in the kitchen, tending to the old and the sick etc. All these women belong to families which may be in dire distress. They would either be in extreme poverty, or would be deserted women or widows or else may be unmarried girls who are the only wage earners in the family and hence shouldering huge responsibility of looking after the other members with what little they earn. Such women would be made victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Maid servants in huge matriarchal houses are supposed to be handy always in order to please the men as they wish. It appears as though this is also an authorised part of their work. In My Story Kamala Das states how young girls are molested by pinching, poking or touching them on the sly by men from within the dark interiors of the house or from stairways and so on. Mr. Das himself is described as

having had clandestine relationship with many young maids in the prime of his youth.

Due to the circumstances from which they come, they would be bereft of all means of showing any protest. If they try to show their protest the outcome will be that they will be fired from service and someone else who does not care much for their chastity and morality would replace them. As they are poor and helpless and not part of the family, their words would fail to hold any value before anyone there. Many women therefore have to succumb to the will of the more powerful as they have no choice before them. Such was the condition in which poor women lived in matriarchal families during the time of feudalism.

Kamala Das has high acclaim for the matriarchal system which accorded women scope for maintaining their self-respect and poise (PC 172). She even holds the belief that the system can help a lot in reducing the abuses against women to a noteworthy extent. But she is not indifferent to the reality that all matriarchal women do not enjoy freedom or hold a respectable position; and also that the situation of poor women is worse still. Having

been brought up in a matriarchal household where there used to be lots of women working as domestic helpers she had been able to personally observe the condition under which these women used to work in such families. Being a champion of the cause of the poor and the downtrodden she had profound sympathy for such individuals. This concern and understanding on her part is not common. One of the reasons why she takes such a sympathetic stance may be because of a deep attachment she holds towards the servant class occasioned by the fact that she was brought up under the affectionate care of the various servants at home since her parents had very little time to spare for the children as recorded in My Story. She refers to how the children used to feel that they were unwanted elements at home and always used to hide in the vicinity of the kitchen where they could hold together “the tatters of our self-respect and talk to the scavenger or the gardener” (5).

On reading the autobiography and Memoirs of Kamala Das we cannot help but think about the influence the servants have had on her. She refers to a number of instances when they had done quite

much in shaping her imagination as a small child. It was from their small talk that she used to learn about a different kind of life that existed outside the bounds of Nalapat House. Theirs was a world that had no resemblance whatsoever to the one she was used to there. This had done much to distend the limits of her imagination and instill into her a deep compassion and fellow feeling for the poor and the marginalized at a very early age itself. The account of her enthusiasm to give Velu, the son of a poor field hand, who was yellow with malnutrition more gruel and pickle and curry etc at the feasts given to the poor on the occasion of celebrating the birthday of any member of Nalapat house illustrates this.

Perhaps, the best example to prove her concern for the poor and oppressed is the poem "Nani" which speaks of the sexual exploitation meted out to young maids from huge matriarchal houses during the feudal times. After having sexually harassed the girls the family disowns them. The grandmother in the poem pretends that she could not recall who the child was referring to when the latter asks about her. Vrinda Nabar finds the grandmother's attitude to be one of the "evasion"

rather than “forgetfulness” (70). But, the thought of the affectionate maid does not leave the child’s mind even after a span of a year or two though it is different in the case of the elders in the family. To them, the death of the maid is a relief as it saves them a lot of trouble for had she not chosen to kill herself the honour of the family would have been at stake. Then, they would have to take much effort to do away with her in the cruelest manner. In Kamala Das’ observation, when feudal system was prevalent the rich Zamindars made life a virtual hell for poor women belonging to the lower classes. They used to rape these poor girls and kill them if they came to know that they had become pregnant. Quite frequently the bodies of young pregnant girls used to be discovered floating in ponds and disused wells (PC 104). In Nani’s case’ this was not what happened. On the contrary, it was she herself who decided to put an end to her life for fear of continuing a life bearing the stamp of being an immoral girl. Most girls belonging to the maid-servant category were always looked at by society as fallen women and ostracised from society. Once the stamp of being immoral falls on them, they would find it extremely hard to find

employment easily in any other households. Afraid of the attitude of society and frightened of the consequences that may follow girls who are betrayed most often turn for solace in the arms of death as was done by Nani.

The situation of the maid in the poem "Nani" is not an isolated occurrence in huge aristocratic matriarchal households. The tragic story of the cook and the maid who wanted to marry each other has already been mentioned. Kamala Das also narrates the tale of another maid named Kunhukkutty who had to be sent away soon after her arrival at Nalapat because she was already showing traces of having conceived from the house where she has been working earlier. The fate similar to that of Nani is falls on another character of the same name in a short story titled "Gods". Here too, Kamala Das portrays the distress of a young maid in a household who was thoroughly exploited by the master of the house and was sent away from service for the crime of having conceived by the master. She has nowhere to go for she is no longer acceptable to her mother and uncle and to everyone else for having "ruined

the family's good name" (The Sandal Trees and other Stories 61).

Girls in circumstances like this would be charged with all kinds of misconduct and the whole family would begin attacking them with verbal tortures for corrupting the minds of men. In the story, even the cook joins in abusing the entire family of the girl saying, "I'd warned Devamma not to employ this girl. None of these come from respectable families. Don't I know? Shameless, disrespectful lot" (63) when such untoward incidents happen in the family, all the matriarchal women would start harassing the maids because, to them, it is the honour of the family that matters and not that of the exploited maid. So they are always inclined to be careful not to speak about the misdeeds of the men concerned who indulge in such activities for the sheer fun and adventure of the matter. Instead, they point their accusing finger at the girls and even render their silent support to what may be termed as character assassination. Even the other domestic helpers would join in the attack because they may all be dependants of the matriarchal family and so unless they adjust to the whims of the ones whom they

depend on, their survival would be in a precarious condition. Therefore they echo the will of the family they serve and choose not to speak for the maids.

It isn't young unmarried girls alone who used to face such problems. Poor widows, deserted women etc. who are dependants of the matriarchs also used to meet with the same fate. These women were also viewed as sexual objects. Whether they succumb to the pressures or not they are also made to bear the ill-reputation of being "immoral". Ammalukkutty in the story after her name is never given any chance to earn a livelihood working as a maid, because of the odd stories that were circulating around about her character. Women like Ammalukkutty, belonging to matriarchal families which are not economically sound rely on the mercy of the aristocratic women belonging to rich families. When they are refused employment they have no other way of survival. It is in circumstances like this that most poor women are forced either to kill themselves or get driven into prostitution.

Having come across the suffocating situations under which poor women lived there is in the mind of the writer an abiding sympathy and

concern for these women. Circumstances like those suggested above may no longer exist. Still the conditions in which maid servants work in the modern times are very much disheartening. As observed by Kamala Das, a domestic help in the present circumstances meets with a lot of distresses very much different from what they used to be earlier. Speaking of the disadvantages of being a domestic servant in India, she says, "they have to be in constant contact with the kitchen sink, the bucket of diluted phenyl and the dirty mops. There are no leisure hours. You have to restrain your tongue when abused" (PC 58). She elucidates the topic further saying, " The poor always seem to have a raw deal, they are not trusted, they are suspected of greed and occasional bouts of Kleptomania" (59). It is a paradox that modern society should take such an attitude towards these women because in comparison to the earlier times the modern households depend more on their presence to carry out the different domestic requirements. Many women belonging to the middle class who are working women find it impossible to cope with the domestic work and the employment all by themselves. In such circumstances the domestic

helpers becomes imperative. In this sense, they have become an indispensable part of almost all households. In spite of this, they are still regarded as an inferior lot and their services are never considered to be of much worth.

Kamala Das, however, fails to accept the common notion that all servant women are ignorant and illiterate as they used to be earlier. From what she has been able to grasp from the servants she had with her at her home in Kochi she is of the opinion that they are very much alive to all that happens in the world and have their own point of view on everything. She notes that “in Kerala, even the servants invariably read one or two newspapers everyday not to mention the popular weeklies that serialize love stories” (Path of the Columnist 81). So it is that Chirutheyi Amma, an old servant in her seventies described by the writer as the wisest among the servants has her comments to contribute for bettering the relationship between India and Pakistan (61). The chief cook Visalakshi Amma who is an old matriculate for capable of speaking “impassable English” (186). Viji, the girl who sweeps

and dusts her house, is aware of the scandal related to Bill Clinton (81).

The fascination for employing such people seems to be retained in Kamala Das as a remnant of her matriarchal background. There are about half a dozen of them in her home at Kochi, their ages ranging from 72 to 20. Chirutheyi Amma, the oldest in the lot is incapable of doing anything much except smear lime on a betel leaf and crush the areca nut to make occasional paan. Then there are people like Visalakshi Amma, the chief cook, Saroja who prepares the supper, Shaila, the 20 year old home nurse, Viji, the lovely young girl who sweeps and dusts the house and Asokan, the driver who is the only male servant (61). Kamala describes her house in Kochi thus, "In a sense, this is like a joint family and I its Matriarch" (84). This statement clearly evinces her appreciation for the joint family and the matriarchal system. The company of so many people at home saves her from the loneliness she is sure to have felt after the demise of her husband particularly because the children too are not with her. There is also the added advantage of being cared for by so many people which would instil a sense of belonging

and the feeling of being wanted. This is one of the most fundamental advantages accorded by the joint family system under matriarchy. An individual like Kamala Das hailing from a matriarchal family cannot afford not to be alive to such benefits conferred by the system. However being aware of the atrocities committed against poor maid servants within the matriarchal houses long back, we find her to be glad beyond description to note that the present day; domestic helpers have the strength of mind to defend themselves against any kind of abuses and assaults they may have to confront from the houses where they work. Like those of the earlier times, the present day maids do not submit helplessly to the caprice of anybody in the house where they work, says the writer. She recounts an incident narrated to her by her young sweeper Viji, to substantiate her observations in this regard. According to what has been told to her by Viji, she had once a master who would sit wearing sun-glasses and watch her work. One day when the mistress was out shopping, he took off his glasses and grabbed her. In anger, she socked him on the nose and wounded him and ran out of the house never to return again (PC 81). This

proves that the old concept of exploiting maids sexually is not possible anymore with the vibrant young maids of the present day. Despite being a marginalized unorganized group still, with no fixed pay, necessitated to work by the poverty at home, the present day servant maids are capable of looking after themselves and their safety, so that they refuse to give in to the kind of ill-fate that befell on Nani, Kunhukutty and many other nameless, faceless individuals in various matriarchal houses long back.

While most women writers attempt to speak for those women who have everything that they can expect from life and asks for more, we find Kamala Das writing about the unfortunate experiences of women from the deprived classes. She writes about the sufferings they undergo by way of poverty, sexual exploitation, physical violence etc. It is because she is a writer with social consciousness that she is able to comprehend the sighs and sorrows undergone by women belonging to such classes and makes her see things which many fail to see. She portrays the trials and tribulations of these women through her works, so that those who are not conscious about it may be made conscious. This is

why we find her speaking for the cause of poor maid-servants who are always regarded as lesser beings and are expected to be subservient to their employers as well as suffer abuses in silence.

Another category of such unfortunate women who are often sidelined to the farthest edge of society and who catch her sympathy are the sexual workers. She is very sympathetic towards such women and is much conscious about their woes and frustrations. To an extent, this concern for such women may have been due to the fact that she had been able to come face to face with the helpless situations of the certain maid servants at Nalapat and various other such matriarchal houses who may have had to enter into the profession as they were left with no other alternative to choose from. Therefore we find her refusing to accept the common societal notion that all such women are fallen women. She cannot find any woman who ventures into the profession to be there just for the fun of it. On the contrary, in her observation it is the circumstances that drag them into it. Thus many women happen to be there because of their having been made victims of incest, rape, abduction and of course starvation.

Society looks scornfully at these women conveniently forgetting the vile circumstances that land them into the profession.

Kamala Das mentions in My Story that she was able to see for the first time a prostitute during her stay at Calcutta, “gaudily painted like a cheap bazaar toy” (157). Such instances and experiences from Calcutta, in her opinion, gifted her with subject matters for the “sad poems” which she used to write in her diary then. The very reference to the poems jotted down in her diary as “sad” itself makes it very obvious that she was able to discern that beneath the tough, don’t-care exterior and gaudy painted faces there lies a heart that pleads for a little recognition, love and sympathy. Kamala Das has always found sexual relationship without love as a repulsive and humiliating experience for a woman she often reveals through her poems that it is emotional fulfilment that a woman expects to get from sexual relationships. Since prostitutes are women who indulge in sexual acts as part of the requirement of their profession and not because of any emotional attachment to their partners, we find

Kamala Das particularly sensitive to the anguish and agony undergone by these women.

Through the story "A Doll for the Child Prostitute" she draws the pathetic picture of a little girl Rugmini who is initiated into prostitution because of the insecure life with her step father who used to harass her sexually. The poor girl meets with a lot of humiliating experiences from this man who was nothing less than a "monster" in her eyes so that the mother, herself in the profession, takes her to the Ayee running the brothel for safe keeping. But no woman, whether a little child or an elderly woman can find any safety or protection in a brothel. Knowing this only too well, the mother takes her there perhaps because she has no other options before her to see to the well-being of her little daughter. The morality conscious society would only laugh mockingly at the fact that a sex worker wants her daughter to grow up like any other girl without being molested by anyone. But it is true that most women in the profession do not want their daughters to carry on in the same way. But unfortunately, since they have no alternative means of sustenance, the young girls get caught up in its snares. Once they get

trapped in it, they cannot find any route of escape. The fact that the mother in the story does not want her daughter to be in the trade is made obvious by the fact that she had never let out to her daughter the kind of work she was doing, for had she done that her little child would never have found it funny to see at Ayee's house grown up women sleeping during the day in a "shameless posture". She was also rather astonished to hear her friend explain that in that house everyone sleeps during the day since at night they will have visitors whom they will have to entertain till late at night or else suffer punishments from Ayee. Such information would not have been surprising had the mother disclosed everything to her. This shows that her mother did not want Rugmini to enter into the trade but instead she may have desired to give her daughter a better life unlike the wretched one she herself was undergoing.

Through the story Kamala Das protests against children being molested frequently by those professing to be the pillars of society. The man who eyes the little girl Rugmini and books her solely for himself happens to be a police officer "old enough to be her grandfather". Similarly, another regular visitor

was a man working in a school who always selected nobody else but Sita, the little girl who was Rugmini's playmate. The pathetic situation of these girls make us wonder what abnormal frame of mind would have lead such men of position to approach little girls younger than their own daughter with base inclinations.

Kamala Das makes an appalling revelation in one of her articles that sixty one percent of the inmates at Indian brothels are children. It is with great sarcasm that she comments, "Will prostitution become a children's sport ultimately?" (PC 37). She cannot keep herself away from reacting to the cold passive attitude of people towards such crimes against children. She observes in one of her articles how angry the people were when the film on child prostitution was shown on television as a Sunday evening film. "They wanted entertainment. They did not want to be reminded that eighty percent of the inmates of Indian brothels consisted of girls below eighteen. They did not like to think that their daughters might get kidnapped and might get sold to brothel keepers. See no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil. Give evil the chance to grow so that at some

later date it might swallow you”, observes the writer (PC 169).

Through the story of Rugmini and Sita in the house of Ayee, Kamala Das brings out the deplorable situations in which the child prostitutes live. The girls would still be in their playful age like Sita who calls out to Rugmini not to remove the piece of stone from her column until she comes back after serving the man who had come asking for her while she was playing hopscotch with Rugmini. Apart from this, Kamala Das also brings forth the truth that all young girls in the brothels ardently aspire to escape from the atmosphere there in order to lead a normal family life just like any other young girls. This desire to lead a good family life, combined with the insecurity they feel at the brothels result in many girls falling in love with the customers who visit them. Such an experience would definitely drive into them the bitter truth that they have caught themselves in a vocation from which they have no escape because prostitutes are not acceptable to the mainstream society as they are not chaste women. They therefore have no options before them but to succumb to social will and come to accept the ill-fate

that is their lot. When a young prostitute named Mira in the story eloped with a young student believing his words and flippant promises about their marriage to be sincere she must have had great expectations about a good, decent 'family life. All such expectations were ruthlessly shattered when the student abandoned her after having used her while holidaying which was the very purpose why he wanted her to accompany him. Her desires and feelings are totally disregarded as everyone mocks at her. The words of the police inspector, a regular visitor at the brothel and a well-wisher of the Ayee "Why would a decent boy marry a prostitute? He will set up practice as a pimp and earn money from her..." convey the attitude of society in whose eyes such women do not have any feelings or emotions (88). They are merely to be there for the pleasure of whoever wants them and have no right to have a life of their own. They are simply "sexual slaves" as Andrea Dworkin terms it (Kemp and Squires 125).

Societal attitude of considering them as a curse and a blemish on society is what makes them so bitter towards everyone. Basically, like the rest of the women, they too are endowed with all the sweet

and tender womanly attitudes and emotions. Kamala Das illustrates this through the prostitute in the story "Lock-up". This woman had three children about whose well-being she was extremely concerned. This concern for the starving children makes her shed her inhibitions and accept the profession as she is not left with any chance of earning money honourably. The good-will in the woman who is failed for prostitution is highlighted when she affectionately strokes a fellow inmate in the cell, which she learned is the mother of a breast-feeding baby. The gesture speaks a lot in favour of the fact that the tough attitude of most such women are only masks to hide from the world the intense anguish that life has presented them with.

Due to the lack of any kind of support from society these women are often forced to continue working without any rest even when they no longer appear to be healthy and have reached their old age. They are vulnerable to various diseases which cripple them totally, because of their being an under privileged class such women face a lot of health problems due to exploitation, oppression, denial of social and economic justice etc. according to

A.D.Mishra (77). They have to stretch themselves as far as they can because they cannot expect to get any help from any quarters. This makes their life even a greater hell than it used to be earlier, observes Kamala Das as she describes the plight of such an old woman in the story "Sonagachi". Society looks at all prostitutes in a negative perspective and is always eager to wash its hands off them on the pretext that they are immoral women. So it can very well be imagined what its attitude will be like towards these women when they become old and are not useful to anybody anymore. This societal attitude however, is the same with regards to every aged individual as they have all outlived use and are worthy of nothing other than be rejected and discarded.

Prostitution is no honourable career but the women who follows 'honourable careers' are unfavourably placed compared to men. While men are free from domestic duties women can never be so even if their official responsibilities are very heavy. This makes it difficult for them sometimes to do justice to both the roles. Kamala Das records how she used to feel neglected when her mother was very

busy composing poems in Malayalam. This feeling of neglect in children nursed against their mothers is one of the greatest problems faced by a working woman. In the modern nuclear families where the children are left to themselves for a long time till their parents reach home from work, the absence of the parents or some other responsible persons to care for them is seen to have serious consequences, Kamala Das narrates the story of a household where two boys, twins as they were, began showing neglect to their studies since the parents, both working, had neither the time nor the patience to deal with them. The writer says, "The twins' mother gave up her coaxing and cajoling accepting them as drop outs. She left for office with a tortured expression on her face. All through the night she and her husband called each other names. Each blamed the other for the children's downfall. The father felt that his wife should have resigned her job to devote herself to bringing up of the twins. The mother blamed the man for not having earned enough money to support the sons in the way they desired to be supported" (PC 34).

Since a major share of the responsibility of parenting rests on the mothers regardless of whether they are employed or not they get blamed in case the children do not rise up to the standard of expectation. This is what makes the father find fault with his wife for the children neglecting their studies. This sheds light on the fact that a woman holding a responsible position outside her home is not of much concern to anybody. Society always expects a woman to be first and foremost a wife and mother. Her competence in her career gets acknowledged only if she is successful as a home-maker. This creates in a career woman much mental tension as she has to try balancing her role as an efficient worker and an efficient housewife. In order to take the family and her profession together, a woman has to resort to a lot of adjustments in her routine and undergo a lot of sufferings. Due to their excessive care and anxiety for the family, most women have little time to care about their health and appearance. When Kamala Das speaks about the vitality of modern working women getting squandered in sorting out files and pushing their way into buses she is rendering a factual picture of a majority of working

women who care least about their appearance and neglect minor ailments (86). In most homes, frayed tempers are not unusual because of the household worries weighing heavily on them. The 'tortured expression' which Kamala Das noticed on the twins' mother is definitely not an uncommon sight these days.

Women who go out to work have to face a lot of abuses. They are prone to be victims of an assault at their work places, public places and even in conveyances. As a result of this they still remain to be marginalized since conditions in the present social set-up are averse for providing security to such women who have to go out from their homes to work. Of course, there are lots of laws at present to prevent violence against women. In spite of this the situation remains the same. This is illustrated by Kamala Das through the story "Bhayam" (Fear), where a tuition teacher is pestered by a young man who follows her to her home late in the evening passing obscene remarks about her body (Chekerunna Pakshigal 62).

Not only women but all oppressed groups have a share of Kamala Das' sympathy. This is illustrated by her, concern for the Sikhs and the

Tamilians, who were made targets of public wrath in recent times. The use of the word sub “altern” by feminists is done to include all the marginalized (Gandhi). Kamala Das finds there to be a denial of justice to innocent people the marginalised, when terror and violence get unleashed. Her first encounter with violence of this kind happened in 1947 when she was able to witness communal riots in Calcutta. All the scenes related to it etched in her mind still are gruesome ones: Dr. Ahmed to whom she was to go to in order to test her eyes was found dead in a dust bin, his body mutilated; she saw a lorry, filled with laughing people mostly Sikhs carrying aloft the yellow body of an old woman impaled on a spear; the scare which everyone in the street where they lived underwent when a mob of rioters advanced towards the area leaving everyone morbid with fear (MS 67). Such instances would perhaps have made her think deeply on the futility of following any religion, because religion is meant to instil love in our minds and not hatred. When the rioters left the area, she says, she went to sleep thinking about religion and bloodshed. The very fact that she began equating religion with bloodshed itself

proves the impact the communal riots of Calcutta made on her sensitive mind even while so young. It may be that she was able to notice that the friction between the different religious sects are only there at a superficial level, for other than a few rioters all the rest of the citizens got on very well together. This observation on her part could have been what she wanted to highlight through the story "Moongphali" where a Hindu man saves the life of a young Sikh girl and her daughter during the rioting in different parts of India against the Sikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The poem "Delhi-1984" also deals with the theme of rioting in Delhi in the context of Indira Gandhi's assassination. If in the story, "Moongphali" the writer wanted to celebrate the brotherhood that existed among all communities, in the poem, she gives a true picture of the kind of atrocities committed against the Sikhs for no fault of theirs. The pain caused in her at the knowledge of such an unjust and inhumane act towards innocent people makes her exclaim,

"any god worth his name would
hasten

to disown these dry eyed adherents
of the newest cult” (OSK 36)

She finds it all the more disheartening to note that in the terror pervaded suburbs of the capital even the poor Sikh women were not left unattacked for,

“No breast was left
unfondled, no ripe pubis overlooked.”

(36)

The excessive hurt and unhappiness caused by such instances finds expression in another poem on communal riots titled, “The Inheritance”. In this poem, she finds hatred, the “ancient Virus” to be the only inheritance everyone appears to have nurtured in their soul (63).

In a similar way she also writes about the genocide of Tamilians in Sri Lanka in poems like ‘The Sea at Galle Face Green’, “Smoke in Colombo”, “After July” etc. The Sinhalese have a strong dislike for Tamilians in Sri Lanka. In the communal riots between them Tamilians are the hunted people. Fear and security are the all pervading emotion among them. The innocent Tamilians, in the riot described in

“After July” were afraid to come out from the murky twilight of their rooms’ and were contented to hide like “rodents... holed up in fear” (75). Normal life was totally disrupted. The streets were empty, as is obvious from the lines,

No arrange trams

were held in the halls, no flower-seller
came again to the door with strings
of Jasmine to perfume the ladies’ hair. (75)

It is very evident from the lines “Gunmen Ordered to Hate” (59) that Kamala Das is sure even those who were stamping the streets in boots armed with guns were just carrying out orders. She cannot find any reason why all the Tamils should be hunted down and killed for some crimes committed by perverts belonging to the race. The atrocities against them were so horrible that even little children “who knew not their ethnic/inferiority” (“The Sea At Galle Face Green” OSK 59) were not spared from the attacks as if they wanted the entire Tamil race to be wiped away for ever. Kamala Das feels that the problem between the Sinhalese and the Tamils is an emotional one and so requires an emotional solution and not a political one (PC 28).

Other than the violence aimed at minority group by the hegemonic groups to exhibit their dominant position over them like the assaults on Tamils and Sikhs etc., with whom she sympathises strongly, Kamala Das also expresses the anguish she feels at the ill-treatment shown to the poorest of the poor like the rag-pickers who are not even given the status of human beings. The eleven year old rag-picker who sleeps on the pavement “curled to foetus-shape” described in the poem “The Dalit Panther” shows how sensitive Kamala Das is to the poor, homeless beings that are never regarded as part of society and are always kept at a distance. Yet, these people, she finds, have no complaints to make at all as they are “fatalists” in her viewpoint always ready to accept life as it comes before them. The title of this poem is derived from a Movement that originated in Maharashtra in 1970 called Dalit Panther Movement. According to Dr. Vinitha Kaul, “the term Dalit is a constant reminder of their age - old oppression denoting both their state of deprivation and people who are oppressed” (384). The oppression of these people is not a recent phenomenon. They were always regarded as a

degraded lot as all the menial jobs like scavenging, sweeping the streets and many more such work were all made to be done by them. Having been in the oppressed state for so long, it is often seen that they themselves have come to accept their downtrodden state as their lot and tries to make no effort to free themselves from such a situation. Dr. Vinitha Kaul observes that “Caste System has the ability to reduce or transform a person into such a pitiable state of self-captivity and slavery” (405). It is from such a state that Kamala Das wants these people to elevate them from.

As a writer it is perhaps not possible for her to be the provider of justice to all. But by bringing public consciousness to these problems she sharpens the sensitivity of people to them. She herself was helpless in giving comfort to her grandmother by sleeping with her, answering the call of the lamp in the latter’s window. The lamp was no more to burn there. This is the way the nostalgic wishes of aged people die away. The aged are only one among the oppressed groups. The symbol of the lamp in the room of the grandmother waiting for Kamala to come to her in the night is a powerful one representing the

undying but flickering hope in the minds of all the marginalized.

CHAPTER VI

THE CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM AND SECURITY AND THE MATRIARCHAL FAMILY

Mridul Eapen and Praveena Kodoth in their study on the status of women in Kerala refers to the sociological studies made using kinship systems across India as having found that south India including Kerala represented “greater freedom for women”. (Family Structure, Women’s Education and Work: Re-examining the High Status of women in Kerala - 10). They attribute this greater female autonomy to be due to the prevalence of matrilineal kinship among certain sections of people in Kerala. The matrilineal system had certain positive aspects in it envisaged with the idea of providing freedom and security to the women.

The women in the matrilineal families were not marginalized. They had their freedom in taking all the major decisions related to family matters in which men never interfered. They were not excluded

from wielding authority over property and persons. It is alleged most often that under the colonial rule matriliney was “unabashedly patriarchal” since the right to manage or regulate property was vested in the senior male in the family. (Eapen and Kodoth 13). There are also people who believe that even though the karanavar, as the senior male is called, had the authority to manage the family property and control other members in the family, he had only limited powers vested in him and was more like a manager. This was because he could carry things as he liked but was not entitled to sell the property or make decisions all by himself without consulting the matriarch (Saradamoni 77). It was his duty to ensure that at least a decent minimum of clothing and food was provided even to the most unfortunate female member in the family.

Apart from economic freedom the matriarchal women enjoyed a certain degree of sexual freedom too. They had the freedom to decide whether or not to continue their relationship with the husband. If a woman decides not to live with her husband any more there was no ignominy attached to it. It would be considered as an ordinary practice.

Kamala Das says in My Story that when her great grand mother, who was the wife of Raja of Chiralayam returned to Nalapat with an infant in her arms and declared that she had left her husband nobody thought of her behaviour to be extra ordinary at all. They did not want to know why she left her husband and till her death the reason remained unknown. This reveals the freedom a matrilineal woman had for making decisions on her marriage.

This kind of a freedom was possible to be exercised by a matriarchal woman only because she had the security of being a permanent member at her natal home and she could come and stay there anytime she wants to with all the privileges and rights she had before her marriage. The security a girl child gets in the matriarchal family can be taken as one of its greatest positive aspects. The birth of a girl child in a matriarchal family gives cause for celebration. It is considered to be a great blessing as it means enlarging the family further and continuing the family name and property to another generation. Only through the girl can the family tradition be kept up. The tradition of Nalapat family is kept up from the great grandmother, through the grandmother

Nalapat Balamani Amma, the mother and Kamala Das. Since Kamala Das does not have a daughter, the tradition has to be kept through the daughters of her sister. The women in a matriarchal family therefore held a very honourable position. Their words were always respected and their opinions were sought whenever there were any issues related to family of property. Although they enjoyed a privileged space in the family they never misappropriated their freedom or superiority so as to show any kind of disrespect towards the men. They had great reverence towards the men. As Kamala Das observes, “women ate after the men of the family had had their repast. Women stood round while the men sat talking to them” (PC 23). The boundary of their world was very limited. The activities in which they used to engage in were those that were strictly confined to the house and its surroundings. All that they had to do according to Kamala Das’ observation is to beautify themselves for the pleasure of those who look at them, haggle over the prices of commodities like wares, bangles, reed mats etc., which vendors and pedlars brought at the doorstep and of course tend to various chores at home. The pattern of life styles in those days for

women was “to preserve their loveliness while their men continued to be the providers”(PC 86). Moreover, these women were expected to lead a very cloistered life in the security of their homes and were denied access to see the world beyond. Women belonging to families like Nalapat did not go out much except to visit the temple, says Kamala Das. And that too, she says further, happened only once or twice a year (PC 49). Admission to schools and jobs was not denied to women in Kerala then, according Saradmoni (40). But the trend then, she notes, was to educate girls in Sanskrit, music, both instrumental and vocal as well as fine arts like paintings. This was done by bringing teachers who were experts in these subjects to the house. Therefore, there arose no necessity for the women belonging to matriarchal houses to go out under any pretext. This kind of an access to education was not enjoyed by women outside the system.

Though the activities of matriarchal women were limited to the domestic sphere, there was no feeling of their being inferior at all. Also, there were many chances for those women who really had the talent in them to do something more like Kamala Das

and her mother Balamani Amma. Other than women belonging to Nalapat, those hailing from well-known matriarchal families like Kuttimalu Amma, Lakshmi. N. Menon, Captain Lakshmi and many more like, they had their freedom to come up with the kind of life they wanted to. But generally, women belonging to matriarchal houses rarely went out. It was not because of any denial or lack of freedom but simply because they were not required to leave home in pursuit of a career. But gradually the situation began to change as a consequence of the transformation of matriarchy.

In the transitional phase of matriarchy it was impossible for the families to earn their resources for subsistence from the landed property due to the disputes regarding partition and inheritance of family property. Then it became imperative for most families to let their women also earn. Under such a circumstance women had to find employment as dance teachers, music teachers and the like. When women began venturing out in this way they used to meet with lots of embarrassing looks and comments sufficient enough to damage their resolve. This was not a situation experienced by

matriarchal women alone. Women belonging to all social set ups that had to go out from their homes to earn wages had to face such problems.

This system of women going out for work as wage earners brought in risks as their security began to get threatened. Kamala Das describes the plight of a middle-aged tuition teacher who was harassed by a young man, following her all the way to her home, passing lewd comments about her physical allure at such an age through the story "Bhayam" (Fear) (Chekerunna Pakshigal 59). As it was due to sheer necessity at home that she had to go out to work, the teacher has no option before her other than continue working whatever humiliations she may have to undergo. There may have been lots of such women then who found it hard to live, afraid to come out of their homes for fear of such experiences. This is not a condition prevalent only during the transitional phase of matriarchy. Even today women regardless of patriarchal or matriarchal systems which they follow face abuses and humiliations of various sorts.

The transformation which the matriarchal system was undergoing helped Kamala to move out

to her school and then later to Mumbai and Kolkata with her husband. This gave her chances for exercising her liberty which she would not have been able to exercise had she remained at Nalapat. Life in cities helped her to get a close look at a society much different from the one she was used to at Punnayurkulam. Life at Mumbai and Calcutta made her realize the insecurity and loneliness felt in a nuclear family. Even the maid-servant there lacked the loyalty which those at her ancestral home had towards the members in the family. This is hinted at by her when she states of how the old maid let a man enter into Kamala's bedroom when her husband was away on official tour (MS 106). Her experiences in the cities made her understand that women belonging to all social set ups do not enjoy the same kind of a privileged position as those belonging to the matriarchal families. Patrilineal marriage, according to her, result in loss of liberty for women in a number of ways. She finds that woman's individuality gets ruthlessly suppressed in such situations. Her disillusionment at the knowledge of women being denied individuality and freedom is expressed through her poems and short stories.

Moreover, her observations of the poor matriarchal women also brought forth the truth to her that even among matriarchal women themselves, there are inequalities. The knowledge that the social security enjoyed by a rich aristocratic matriarchal woman is not enjoyed by a poor matriarchal woman makes her become very sensitive to the issue of freedom and security concerning women.

Women everywhere today have the freedom to pursue education as much as they prefer and can study any subject that they like. They have also got the freedom to enter any profession they want to. The present day women have proved that they are capable of doing any job which was considered to be exclusively that of men's sphere. But these achievements are entitled to hold risks too. Abuses of woman and womanhood are on the increase every day. Violence against women reaching down to sexual assaults like rape is not rare.

Educational empowerment or economic empowerment has not done much to free the Indian woman from her traditional domestic duties. The attitude that it is her duty to see to all the domestic

work is still retained even by those women who are professionals. No matter whether they hold a career or not the aspiration of an average Indian woman is rooted in her family. To them, like all other women, her husband and children happen to be the major concern. This attitude in women is said to be there because of their suffering from mental slavery for centuries (Singh Bharat 309). Kamala Das records in her autobiography how she used to pursue her literary interests late in the night long after her husband and children have slept so that her career may not be a nuisance to them (138). Trying to carryout both the domestic and professional responsibilities gives most women very little rest and leisure. This makes them undergo psychological stress which manifests in the form of short-temperedness and edgy attitudes at trivial matters.

Employment of wives can even destroy smooth family relations. The children may not be properly looked after which causes a feeling of neglect in them. This can back lash on the women causing in them a sense of guilt. The woman may also be blamed at for the lapse on her part in looking after the children and guiding them properly. The

case of the twins' mother narrated by Kamala Das which has been stated earlier illustrates this. Sometimes the wife's economic independence may not be appreciated by the husband and he may start pestering her with taunts. There may also arise occasions when the husband may start suspecting his wife of having relationships on the sly in case she mingles freely with her male colleagues. Problems such as these can cause harm to the mental make up of the wife so that she may even be forced to put a check on her natural character. Even more risky is the life of those women who hold jobs that require them to stay over at the workplace till late in the evening. When this is not tolerated by husbands and in-laws the situation can be something close to hell for the woman. To add to this, there is also the problem of built-in-prejudice on the part of certain sections of society who are ignorant of the modern professional requirements and conveniently begin spreading scandals about the woman.

All these bring home the truth that holding a career does not bring freedom and security to women as such. To tackle the domestic sphere and the professional sphere equally well, requires skill

and planning and the strength of mind to overcome all hazards.

Apart from the tensions accorded by the atmosphere at home, there are also the problems associated with every profession which all responsible individuals have to face be they men or women. But women's role being a dual one makes it a little more hazardous for them. But no matter whatever disadvantages there may be women these days prefer to follow a career for the sake of economic independence and personal gratification. In the case of women involved in public activities, the risks are even greater as they are susceptible to criticism even for their slightest actions. But nothing deters women these days from assuming different roles other than the traditionally ordained ones. Those individuals who are daring enough to overcome all the ordeals are the ones who emerge successful in life.

Social systems are however changing at a fast pace and attitudes of people have also started changing. Working women are no longer looked at with frowning for heads and their contribution to society is not underestimated or devalued. Husbands

giving support and encouragement to working wives are also not negligible in number at present.

Despite our constitution envisaging equal opportunities for men and women alike, there are very few women in active politics. And even among those women who actively take part in political administration, only a handful have been able to stamp a mark of their own by asserting their individuality in the decision-making process like Indira Gandhi, Mamta Banerjee, Mayawati, Jayalalitha, Sonia Gandhi etc. The rest merely act according to the dictates of someone else. The same is the case with literary personalities too. There are ever so many women writers who are conscious of the problems of women and try to create awareness on the need for bettering their situations through their writings. But only a few of these writers have been able to act as path-finders or trend setters in breaking the barriers that obstruct the opportunities of developing the personalities of women and those obstacles hindering women from widening their horizon. To become a trend-setter one has got to have a lot of courage to withstand all the oppressive forces around that try to damage one's resolve. This

courage is evolved out of one's strong sense of freedom to exercise one's individuality knowing fully well that freedom is something which has to be fought for and not something which every individual naturally gets. Taslima Nazrin and Kamala Das are notable names in this respect that proved to the world that they have the mettle to face any risks or threats to life for having exercised their freedom of expression. They have also made it very plain that no amount of criticism or coercion can stop them from saying what they deem fit to say. Taslima was attacked by the fundamentalists for having openly declared her observations on Islam which hurt their religious feelings. Similarly Kamala Das was also involved in a lot of controversies right from the beginning of her career for having written in a frank and open manner at a time when women were not expected to be so out spoken. What Taslima and Kamala have tried to do is to show the world that freedom does not mean merely breaking external constraints on individuals but to utilize one's right to self expression devoid of any restraints.

Kamala Das was a pioneer in this respect since no woman-writers in India had been till then

daring enough to describe a woman's body or reveal details of her sexual relations in their literary works. Stretching her individual freedom to a great extent, she began a new cult in literature by women. This is what aided her in gaining wide acclamation and recognition from around the world. She is hailed as "one of the most aggressively individualistic" writers (Iyengar 677). She also took her liberty in breaking conventions and traditions in a different way other than through her literary works. The conversion to Islam is such a breaking of traditions as well as a means of letting the world know that it is up to an individual to decide what he/she wants to do with life. It is this obsession for freedom that is echoed in her words, "If my parents had talked to me and pointed out the wrong path and the right, I would still have led the life I led. I sincerely believe that knowledge is exposure to life" (MS 209). To expose one requires freedom - Kamala Das was able to assert her independence through her works because of the spirit of adventure present in her character.

While recounting her adventure of almost being caught by bootleggers when they were staying at Dhunasthra, she says. " I yearned for adventure. I

wanted to fling myself into danger” (MS 117). She had then felt it to be “a delicious moment of uncertainty.” The same yearning for adventure is what makes her defy conventions set by society and follow lesbian relations and extramarital relations with the perfect knowledge that society does not sanction such relationships. But fighting against authorities or the larger authority of society requires a lot of guts as it amounts to facing great risks. Therefore, the choice left before an individual is either freedom which is risky or else a quiet, inactive life confined within social limits which is easier and involves no risks. Kamala Das cannot live contentedly, leading a quiet life. She is made for a life of adventure. It is this spirit of adventure that made her write a book like My Story which brought a lot of antagonism from her own relatives for having written about the unpleasant incidents in the family which would otherwise have remained a secret for ever. But their antagonism did not deter her from her determination to write in the same frank, aggressive manner. To quote her words, “I could never bring myself to hang my life on the peg of quotations for safety. I never did play safe. I compromised myself

with every sentence I wrote and thus I burnt all the boat that would have reached me to security” (209). Because of her unconcealed revelation in her writings, she says, her enemies also increased in number day by day and attempts on her life were made on several occasions (200).

All these happened because she dared to use her freedom of expression as a writer. In using such a freedom she had to compromise with her sense of security. This proves that freedom has its own security risks. The various incidents that happen around daily bring home the uncomfortable truth that freedom and security are inter-related. They stand at opposite poles. One can be achieved only at the expense of the other. If one wants quiet life, good name etc., it is better not to strive forward towards anything out of the ordinary. Freedom can be achieved only if one is ready to shed all inhibitions and fears and come out with his/her prejudices and preferences in the open. Many great writers have done it. Boris Pasternak, the Russian poet and prose writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist and historian were victims of government repression for criticising the authorities; Taslima Nazrin and

Salman Rushdie have been attacked by fundamentalists for speaking openly about their opinions on Islam. Freedom, therefore, appears to hold a lot of risks. But it has to be taken as part of one's life so that one can complete the mission one has already undertaken.

Writers with social commitments cannot afford to confine their opinions within the limits of the boundary drawn by society with the hope of leading a safe, uneventful life. It is up to them to enlighten the readers about the realities around whatever the consequences may be. The responsibility of a writer is significant in that he/she ought to be a warrior of light and cannot afford to hide behind the shadow of obscurity in the name of security. To mention what Kamala Das herself has got to say about the responsibilities shouldered by a writer, "Poets, even the most insignificant of them are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shop men and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments" (MS 151). She wants to lead a life according to what she is made, unless she features her real self she cannot feel comfortable.

When she wrote about the experiences and observations from Nalapat frankly, she was misunderstood not just by her relatives but by the readers as well. She was branded as a shameless woman and a nymphomaniac and everything written were said to be mere histrionics on her part for the sake of name and fame. Whatever it may be, nothing can take away the insights she has expressed in her various works. The readiness for a daring flight as she has done in her earlier works like My Story would have done her and the background from which she come great good. All that she has done are not insignificant. Her idea to lead a life for which she was made is welcome as it means leading a life giving full expression to her individuality confined within the higher values of morality. Like a true writer committed to a cause she still continues writing exercising her will and freedom to write the way she has always done.

Around her conversion to Islam in 1999 she had made several statements implying that she has had enough of freedom. That she has had an excess of freedom and that because she was fed up of such a lot of freedom she has decided to follow a

conservative religion like Islam and live in the solace of its security. In a recent article of hers published in a Malayalam weekly after her shifting to Pune, she re-affirms her statement that she cares more for her security than for her independence and all that she requires now is security (Samakalika Malayalam Varika, 13 April 2007). To the majority of people such a statement from an enthusiast of feminine cause is hard to swallow. An individual like Kamala Das is expected to show the mettle to face all the disadvantages and challenges that come her way rather than flee from them. All her admirers and well-wishers wish to see her face like Taslima and Rushdie the consequences of her independence and fearlessness. They do not expect a woman like her to give in to external pressures and stoop to the level of ordinary common-place women, the majority, who are willing enough to forfeit their freedom in a certain measure because of their desire for security. Her appeal for security and her disparaging remarks on freedom have created misgiving in her admirers who adore her for her fire-brand stories and her independent, outspoken nature. Her words have hurt the feelings of lots of young, enthusiastic women

writers from Kerala and else where in the world who idolized her for her daring exploits for the women's cause. But they do not realize that even these utterances of Kamala Das are exercises in liberty. No other person riding on a crest of popular enthusiasm will dare to make such shocking remarks. A woman like Kamala Das does not require anybody's help to be herself. All her creative works are individualistic. And she herself is a full and independent individual.

She believes that "of all the freedom prevailing in this world, the freedom to be oneself is the most gratifying of all" (PC 157). She is a true matriarch. She has her complaints, contradictions and inconsistencies of viewpoints. She can do a rebellious act like getting converted. She is quite capable of a re conversion too. She raises her voice for the deprived people especially for the 'second sex' simply because they are considered as "the second". But she does not want to be pigeon holed into an exclusive sect as it draws a curb on her individual freedom to see the other side of the picture too. She is also much conscious that the world is larger than the perspective afforded by an ideology. Moreover, if a creative writer is bound by a

perspective, he or she cannot rise to the full power of her calling. And so, she refuses like every other creative writer to confine her viewpoints within the four walls of any particular ideology and saves herself from being branded as a propagandist.

Whether she is concerned with her own security or not, it is obvious that she is concerned about the security of the woman kind in the challenging circumstances of the modern age. The feminist movement requires special mention with regard to the autonomy achieved by women today. It has done much to bring awareness to women regarding their situation and endowed them with the courage to stand up for their rights. There is hardly any field of activity where women have not asserted their identity and found a berth for themselves. Apart from fighting against sexual harassments, abuses, female foeticide and a lot more, the feminists have also been successful in their attempt to get the UNO pass the charter for women's commission in most of the countries of the world. In our own country, the various court orders and legislative measures like reservation for women in constitutional bodies have their salutary effect on the status and position of

women in society. Despite all these achievements problems persist. Women who have to come out from the security of their homes for various reasons undergo humiliating experiences. Woman and womanhood are abused and exploited in different ways. There are also lots of families where women do not get any protection due to domestic violence like wife-beating, harassments related to dowry, incest etc. It is because there is concern over women's security that the government has passed laws to prevent the abuses against them and to ensure security for them at home, at the workplace and from public places. The fact that the government has passed the Prevention of Domestic violence Act to ensure protection for women at home by itself gives ample proof that even at home women's security is under threat. This is very much in contrast to the matriarchal times when women used to get immense protection economically and otherwise from within the family itself.

Hailing from a background which gave due importance to women's security Kamala Das cannot come to terms with the present subjugated and subordinated status of women at present in their

families. She is a woman who endows much significance to family values like mutual respect, love and understanding among all the members in the family. Freedom and security can arise only out of such values. To an extent, it is this faith in family values that expects all the members in the family to hold respect for one another that makes her speak against the Feminist Movement. She cannot make herself to agree with the separatist stance taken by certain feminists and agree to their view-point of considering men as the enemies of women. Her words to Eunice D'Souza "others see me as a feminist. I see myself as a feminine creature who loves the company of brilliant men and women illustrates this (D'Souza 32). She firmly believes that women require men to give them security and to love them. Love is also synonymous of security for her. There are lots of poems through which she reveals that fine relationships in the family can provide domestic security for women. She views sexual relationships as a means of providing emotional security to women. When relationships decline to the level of mere physical exercise, a woman gets

frustrated because of her failure to find the emotional nourishment she seeks.

In the poem, "A Widow's Lament," she describes the loneliness and insecurity felt by a woman after the loss of her husband. When her husband was alive, she had immense sense of security. She substantiates this through the line, "He was a sunshade, he was my home." But after the death of the husband, she realizes the sense of insecurity that gnaws at her everyday. She also recognises the truth that those people who poses to be her friends and pretend to share her grief at her loss are not sincere but only "packs of wolves" waiting for a chance to take advantage of her helplessness (OSK 125). The poem "Love" paints the picture of a wife contentedly "curled like a mongrel" beside her husband basking happily in the security of his love for her (101). Similarly in the poem "Larger Than Life was He", though the husband censors her mail and screens the phone calls which might appear to be a sort of restriction imposed on her freedom what matters more to the wife is the warmth, comfort and security provided by the "insulation of his care' (112). All these provide sufficient proof of her faith in

the ability of men to give security to women. She does not find it wrong that women should accommodate their interests according to men's wishes for the sake of social security and protection. This is why she says in My Story the efforts taken by her to merge herself with the picture of a conventional life, sewing buttons, darning old garments, making tea and snacks in the evening and doing all other matters related to housekeeping. This surrender to conventions is also associated with the longing for security. But all the while, though she kept herself busy with dreary house work, her spirit kept protesting and cried, "get out of this trap, escape..." (98). It is instances like this that make critics like A.N. Dwivedi find in her, a dual combination "of a need for domestic security and the in born desire to be liberated" (Dwivedi 116).

The security that she yearns for is the security provided by human love. And this security is represented for her by her grandmother who gave her a love which evens her parents could not give. It is something which has the taste of her matriarchal family. She had always felt that Nalapat would be able to provide her security. It did too. But

unfortunately, she could never enjoy its comforts to her heart's content for circumstances would demand her to leave the ancestral home and move over to Kolkata or Mumbai. On such occasions, she says, she used to curse her fate that always banished her from the world of love. What she used to yearn for was a permanent and secure relationship that would give her a strong footing on firm foundation (Ente Katha 51). In My Story she hints that even the disgust and frustration she used to feel towards her husband and his rough ways during the initial days of their marriage was because she expected him to give her security in a visible form as "strong arms thrown around my shoulder and soft voice in my ears" (117). What she hoped for was the kind of protection she received from her grandmother. All her lesbian associations and extramarital relationships were thus activities performed in the course of her quest for the security of love.

The kind of security she got from Nalapat is no more. All the people there to whom she felt close attachment in her childhood are also not alive. Even the house is in a state of deterioration. The love and protection she got from her husband is also lost. But

there is more than enough to compensate. She has the love of an entire block of her fans. She has recognition. Her whimsical acts create furore in the Malayali reading public. Her love-hate relationship with Kerala creates strong mixed reactions among a large number of people. Even then she wants to continue with her unpredictable behaviour. How dull it would have been otherwise! Her unpredictability is her charm.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The attempt in this thesis is to examine, the feminine expression of Kamala Das in the context of her matrilineal socio-cultural environment. This is an environment which could be, with certain corrections, the dream of all feminists. Matriliney has not been confined to Kerala in India but found in places like Nagaland and the tribal belts of Madhya Pradesh. This had been the natural system in the whole world until the institution of marriage was developed in human history. Even after that it continued to be there for sometime as we find in the anthropological studies of Peter Grave, Margaret Atwood has fictionalised the situation in her novel, The Penelopiad.

According to her version of the story of Odysseus and Penelope the former marries the latter from her native country. As was the custom then, Odysseus is expected to live at Penelope's house after their marriage. But he breaks the convention and takes his wife to his home in Ithaca. A few days after the marriage, he had to leave home to take part in a war. He returns after about twenty years or so. When he reaches home he finds lots of suitors of Penelope in the house. He also understands that the twelve maids of Penelope have had sex with these suitors. He kills all the twelve as their sexual relationship with the suitors lacked the sanction by the patriarchal society in which everything requires the permission of the master of the house. He spares his wife as he fails to have sufficient proof of her infidelity. The action on the part of Odysseus and men like him are described thus by Atwood: "Men

like Odysseus greedy for power and life found substitute and usurped power from women” (Atwood 132).

The planning of the thesis and my findings can be briefly stated as follows:

Kamala Das holds a high opinion of the matriarchal system. Her words, “Introducing the system of matriarchy all over the world may be the only solution to the growing problem of exploitation of women and in particular the young girls face today” echoes the idealized concept of matriarchy which provided great advantages for women. The greatest benefit it accords, according to Kamala Das is security for women. She was born into such a family but was not fortunate enough to enjoy its blessings fully as a major part of her life was spent in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi. Even after settling down in Kerala she did not stay at

Nalapat, her ancestral home but at Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi. When Kamala Das refers to the matriarchal system she is not speaking merely about the marriage conventions and property rights.

Matriarchy is rooted in her personality and her outlooks are fashioned according to its dictates. The freedom she wields in her writings as well as in her personal life is an inheritance from her matriarchal lineage.

In order to examine the influence matriarchal social and cultural environment has had on her, the thesis is divided into six chapters. Since she is bi-lingual writer, writing in Malayalam and English, I have also utilized a few of her books in Malayalam, especially her autobiography in Malayalam titled Ente Katha and her memoir Neermathalam Pootha Kalam.

The first chapter is an introduction to the particular background from which Kamala Das hails and the different things in it that must have had a sway on her. The second chapter is an endeavour to see how far Nalapat house typifies the matriarchal system. Special emphasis has been given to the Neermathala tree taking into consideration the significance the writer attributes to it. From her own account it is found that nobody else at Nalapat or in its neighbourhood appears to hold much fascination for the tree and its flowers as much as she does. In her memoir, she recalls how little girls from the neighbourhood used to come to the Nalapat courtyard to pick the elanji flowers for making garlands, ignoring the neermathala flowers (39). This is why the tree has been given the status of a symbol representing matriarchy for her in the thesis.

The next chapter titled 'Feminine Continuum' probes into the concept of sisterhood derived from the matriarchal family which is a world of women where men come and go like shadows. This sisterhood is a unique feature of a family following the system. Kamala Das is found to have had much attachment to such an atmosphere which extends further to her school days in the convent run by Roman Catholic nuns. Lesbianism is not viewed in this chapter as a sexual association among women.

The fourth chapter deals with Kamala's concern for the marginalized and the oppressed. Her sympathy for the maid-servants, the sex-workers, her perception of the trials faced by career women of the present times, the disadvantages faced by the aged have all been dealt with. Her sympathies for the oppressed extend beyond the concern for the second sex. Here again, the lamp kept burning in the

grandmother's room as she waited for Kamala to come has been taken as a symbol representing the flickering hope of all the oppressed and the marginalized.

The chapter succeeding this examines the extent of freedom and security capable of being enjoyed by matriarchal women and the influence it has had on Kamala Das. It has been found that she credits these two benefits derived from matriarchy as the best advantages offered by it. She has exercised her freedom to the maximum level an individual can ever do. But all the same she values the security granted by the system as the most treasured blessing.

Matriarchy is her roots. No matter wherever she stays and whatever new innovations be brought into social set ups, she can never sever her ties from it. A social set up can be abolished with the

help of legislations perhaps. But, no legislation can wipe it away from the minds of those who cherish its values. In My Story she gives an account of an instance when she had to return to Nalapat due to certain official problems which her husband had with his superiors. She had then asked her husband to resign from the job and stay with her and the children at Nalapat. When she reached there, the house was inhabited not by her beloved ancestors but by a variety of living creatures like Civets, bats, scorpions, etc., which frightened her little son. She soothes his fear saying, "This is our home... This is where we belong... ". Staying over there, she begins regretting her years spent in cities neglecting her roots. This return was a sentimental journey to her childhood home.

It is during this visit the realization that she can never break links from her roots dawned on her.

“I belong to the serenity of Nalapat. Nalapat belonged to me. By abandoning it to the care of vulgar caretakers and managers I had hurt the spirit of the house” (MS 198). Even now after uprooting herself from Kerala to stay with her son at Pune, she writes in a Malayalam weekly her regret at having stated in a harsh tone that she would not write in Malayalam anymore as she is fed up of Malayalam and Malayalees. A few days of stay at Pune enlightened her with the truth that she was mistaken in saying so. So far she confesses, she had been living under the impression that she could only think in English and translate the same into Malayalam. She is astounded now to know that things are contrary to it. Today, she thinks in pure Malayalam and is even more surprised to realise that it is easy for her to write in Malayalam rather than English. (Samakalika Malayalam Weekly April 13, 2007) This

is Kamala Das. Wherever she may be she cannot abandon her roots for she is a matriarch to the core. The various expressions of feminineself which she portrays through her works travelling across the social and cultural environments of Kerala have the marks of a matriarch stamped in them.

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