

**The Poetics of Mystical Desire:
A Lacanian Reading of Kamala Das's Early love Poems**

Mohamed E. Dawoud

Abstract

Kamala Das's early poetry has been a topic of discussion, debate and dissension since the publication of her first collection of poems in 1965. Although there has been a significant amount of critical works on Das' early poetry in the last few decades, most of these works have limited themselves to a narrow range of perspectives that tend to polarize Das's poetry as either degenerating in its moral values or potentially progressive because of its political and social concerns. But both of these views are, in themselves, too single-faceted to encompass the religious and mystical implications in Das's early love poetry. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to steer clear from such a reductive style by offering a more nuanced reading of Das's early love poetry through the psychoanalytical perspectives of Jacques Lacan. Emphasized throughout the paper is the means by which Lacan's insights and notions on "feminine sexuality", mysticism and hysteria can help establish a new critical path for the understanding of how Das's early poetry is enmeshed in a sensibility that leans towards the perennial question of the interconnection between mysticism and hysteria. Reading Das's early love poetry in the light of Lacan's psychoanalytic insights in his *Encore* underscores the ways in which Das portrays herself in the guise of her persona as a Bhakti whose desire for the divine is perceived and apprehended in terms of the ineffable union after which the Bhakti seeks with ardent intent. The paper also refers at its end to Luce Irigaray's revisionist reading of Lacan's insights on mysticism and hysteria, and suggests that Irigaray's notion of "La Mystérique" can be found running as leitmotif through much of Kamala Das's early love poetry.

الرغبة الصوفية: قصائد الحب الأولى لكامل داس من منظور التحليل النفسي لجاك لاكان

محمد السيد داوود

ملخص

يعني هذا البحث بدراسة شعر الحب في المؤلفات الشعرية الأولى للشاعرة الهندية كاملاً داس وذلك بقراءة هذا الشعر من منظور التحليل النفسي لجاك لاكان. تبدأ الدراسة بعرض شامل للأراء النقدية شديدة التباين والأختلاف والتي أخذت من مؤلفات كاملاً داس الشعرية وسيلة إما للهجوم الضاري عليها كشاعرة تدعو ظاهرياً إلى الأتحلال الخُلقي أو للدفاع عنها باستماتة كشاعرة تبنت ضمناً قضية حرية المرأة الهندية ودافعت عنها في كل كتاباتها. ويرى الباحث أن هناك قصورا واضحا في تصميم معظم النقاد علي تصنيف هذا الشعر في إطار إي من هاتين الروويتين فقط دون غيرهما. ولهذا فالمقترح الرئيسي للبحث يعتمد بالأساس علي ضرورة إيجاد مدخل نقدي جديد يعتمد بالأساس علي نقاط التشابه في النظرة الفلسفية لأشكالية الحب وعلاقة الرجل بالمرأة بين كل من كاملاً داس وچاك لاكان وخاصة في محاورته رقم (20) والتي خُصصت بالكامل لعرض وجهة نظر التحليل النفسي في تلك القضية. يفرّد البحث للأمثلة كثيرة متنوعة والتي تدعم هذا التشابه بوضوح والتي نخلصُ منها بأن قضية الحب عند كاملاً داس لم تكن بالأساس غريزية والتي تُعظم من شأن إرضاء الرغبات الجسدية وإنما هي تشبه هذا الحب الذي يتبناه المتصوفة والتي أسماها چاك لاكان بأنها حالة اللذة التي تعلو علي الجسد، إنها تلك الحالة التي تُعلي من مرتبة الروح كأساس لعلاقة المتصوف بما يراة إلهي. وكما يقترح چاك لاكان بأن كل من تعترية هذه الحالة فإن أسلوبه الخطابى لأبد وأن يكون فية مزجٌ ما بين الخطاب الهيستيري وأسلوب المتصوفة وكلاهما من الصعب فهم مضمون رسالته، فهذا هو من نراه بوضوح في شعر كاملاً داس. ويشير البحث أيضا الي الناقدة الفرنسية لوسي إريجري والتي تبنت تلك النظرية ونقحتها بعد چاك لاكان وأطلقت عليها أسم "المتصتيري" "La Mystérique" والتي أفرد البحث جزء خاص في نهايته لعرض مقوماتها الأساسية وتطبيقها علي بعض من قصائد كاملاً داس كمقترح لدراسة أشمل وأوسع. وينتهي البحث بخلاصة أن كاملاً داس يمكن وصفها بأنها من المتصوفة والمعروف مذهبهم الصوفي في الديانة الهندوسية باسم المذهب البهكتي.

“My affairs have not been sexual. I am frigid by nature. It was something else that I hungered for.”

(Kamala Das, in Sunanda Chavan, 143)

“[Some people] get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics.”

(Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, 76)

Ever since the publication of her first collection of poems in 1965, Kamala Das has remained a highly controversial figure in the Indo-Anglian literary scene. While she has been severely condemned by some critics as ‘adulteress’, ‘promiscuous’, a ‘nymphomaniac’, and a poet who unashamedly portrays herself as a woman with ‘a vast sexual hunger’, she has also been celebrated by others as a cultural catalyst whose works aim at subverting all prevalent myths that oppressed Indian women and suppressed their voices. ⁽¹⁾Immediately after the publication of *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, her third collection of poems in 1973, the debate was intensified, ranging between those who regarded Das’s poetry as mere “snippets of trivia” (quoted in Nair, 228), a near-worthless forms of explicit sexual representation, and those who hailed the same poetry on the basis of Das’s effort to stabilize her reputation as a confessional poet whose poetry could rightly be compared with the works of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and other canonical writers (Asnani; Singh; Surendra). With the publication of her autobiography *My Story* in 1975, Kamala Das’s private realm has been fully exposed to the public, revealing aspects of her lesbianism and her pre and extramarital affairs which resonate powerfully with the subjects of her poems. It is particularly from this point in her career onwards that Das’s reputation among contemporary literary scholars has become more sharply divided. Implied, for instance, in the critical views of M. Elias, Bijoy K. Das and Barinder Sharma is the belief that Kamala Das’s early poetry constitutes a public danger simply because it has the potential to corrupt readers and inspire imitators who might be unaware of the fact that her “sexual philosophy” has no source other than “her own

cultural heritage deriving from the South or Dravidian India”, a community in which women since the remote past have frequently chosen “to marry more than one husband” (M. Elias, 22). For some other critics such as Jayakrishnan Nair, Irshad Ahmed and Hongasha Phomrong, “over-exposure of lust and sex” in Kamala Das’s early poetry “is only a technique, a literary device” (Ahmed, 130) that seeks to intertwine pornography with political and social concerns and “arrestingly involve and engross the reading public into the kind of inhuman and wicked dimensions in which [Indian] women are held as mere usufruct, unfeeling objects meant to serve the carnal purposes of macho men” (Nair, 220).

Much of the critical reception of Kamala Das’s poetry can be broken down into a general dichotomy between moral condemnations on one hand, and on the other attempts at justification through downplaying the pornographic imagery in her poetry in order to emphasise its more serious social and political values. The problem with the critical readings of these two camps, I would argue, is the presiding of the prurient nature of Das’s poetry. For Das’s admirers, the downplaying of this prurient nature is important in order for them to highlight some social and political matters; while for her detractors, it is this same prurient nature that is fully highlighted for the sake of pinpointing its potential degenerating values. With critical discourse on Kamala Das so far stuck on this dichotomy, one has to turn elsewhere to engage with what seems to be her socially unacceptable brand of pornography. It is the contention of this paper to argue for the necessity of establishing a new critical path between these two extreme positions, a path that neither unjustifiably rebut the negative views of Kamala Das’s detractors nor uncritically accepts the improbable and exaggerated justifications of her admirers.

This paper will argue instead that a careful examination of some of the more radical pornographic elements in Das’s early poems through the lens provided by Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories will reveal an aesthetic entirely other than the one assumed by Das’s admirers and detractors. Kamala Das’s early love poetry provides a model for reading that has its parallel in and can be fully understood in terms of Jacques Lacan’s theoretical speculations on feminine sexuality epitomized by his *Seminar XX (Encore)*: aspects of Lacan’s

The Poetics of Mystical Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Kamala Das's Early love Poems

seminar share with particular poems from Kamala Das's early love poetry a tendency to evoke simultaneously spiritual/mystical enlightenment and sexual arousal. Put simply, Lacan's interpretation of the phallus as "the signifier of the signifiers [...] the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire" (*Écrits* 287)", is true of both his seminar and Das's early love poetry.

An encompassing example of the similarity between Lacan's seminar and Das's early love poetry can be seen quite clearly in Lacan's account of the distinction between male and female sexual pleasure. In Lacan's seminar, such a distinction is explained respectively in terms of "the *Jouissance* of the idiot" and the "*jouissance* beyond the phallus", while in Das's early poetry it has been repeatedly referred to in terms of various metonymies that carry sexual undertones, the most obvious example of which is in the following often quoted lines from "An Introduction"⁽²⁾:

..... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him the hungry
haste
Of rivers, in me the ocean's tireless
Waiting.

(*Only The Soul*, 97)

Perhaps because the trajectory of Das's attitude towards sexuality has often been read as the pursuit of sexual gratification, the distinction Das draws in the above lines and in several other poems has been interpreted by many critics as reflecting the commonplace belief that "while woman has the inherent physical potency to arrive at [orgasm] innumerable times during one session of love-play", man, on the other hand, "arrives at it at one jolt towards the end of the coitus" (Nair, 41, see also, Pandeya, 34). Not only does this type of interpretation undermine the position that Kamala Das tries to maintain in most of her early love poems, but it also underestimates the implications of Das's lines which, when read in relation to Das's own comment on the type of sexual pleasure she yearns for and in the

light of other poems from the same collection, attempt to portray the feminine sexual pleasure as if it can only be obtained through a mystical journey, itself the instrument through and from which the feminine erotic pleasure is initiated.

That the powerful and ambiguous 'vast sexual hunger' of the female in Das's poems is to a large extent grounded in her own understanding of a particular sect of Hindu mysticism is nowhere more explicit than in the mystical resonances of the following remarks:

I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child I used to regard him as my only friend. When I became an adult I thought of him as my lover. It was only by imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give pleasure. Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all women, for did she not have [Krishna's] incomparable beautiful body in her arms ... we do not have him physically to love us; we have to worship a bodiless one. How are we to get close to him without the secret entrances of the body which may have helped us in establishing a true contact? (*My Story*, quoted in Ahmed, 93-94).

Of all the stories of Indian Gods, the one about Krishna is probably the only one in which the "interplay of the human and the divine" is mediated through the sexual interaction between Krishna and Radha, and in which "the profound mystery of erotic pleasure" is invariably understood in mystical terms as a relationship between the soul and God. Krishna is "the Supreme self" whom the individual self longs "to unite with" in an "incessant" manner. "However, they unite only when it pleases the Supreme self" (Holcombe, 1-2). Radha's erotic love to Krishna is considered in the *Bhakti* tradition of Hinduism as a complementary aspect of their union which is equal to wholeness, or *Brahma*. It is, therefore, in seeking a relationship with Lord Krishna as the 'Supreme self' while lying with her husband that Das attempts to embrace the standard *Bhakti* tradition, thereby, creating sites of sublimation where desire defers its fulfilment to a time and space beyond the reach of her body.

Read in this light, the discrepancy between "the hungry haste

of rivers” and “the ocean’s tireless / Waiting” as metonymies of male and female sexual pleasure in Das’s poem corresponds directly to Lacan’s distinction between “the *Jouissance* of the idiot” and the “*jouissance* beyond the phallus”. While the first of these two types of *jouissance* seems relatively easily grasped, the second type is to some degree problematic as it accounts for the consequences resulting from investing love over and against the boundary dividing the human and the divine and which Lacan specifies as inherently peculiar, since “it doesn’t happen to all of them [women]” (*Encore*, 74). In the sexual intercourse, Lacan argues, the male partner is usually in haste because he believes his fantasy that he has a woman underneath him, therefore, what he entertains during the sexual intercourse is not the “woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the *jouissance* of the organ” (*Encore*, 7), the phallic *jouissance* or the *object a* to which he sticks as “a semblance of being” (*Encore*, 95). As for the woman, “something other than *object a* is at stake in what comes to make up for the sexual relationship” (*Encore*, 63), and here we have to differentiate between two types of female *jouissance*. The first is that which ‘happens’, Lacan would argue, to most women and which Lacan identifies as “supplementary *jouissance*” - supplementary “simply because it grounds woman’s status in the fact that she is not-whole ... it is precisely in the following respect: being not-whole, she has a supplementary *jouissance* compared to what the phallic function designates by way of *jouissance*” (*Encore*, 72-73).

It is, however, the “*jouissance* beyond the phallus” that pertains to our discussion. This type of *jouissance* Lacan equates with the ecstatic experience of the mystics who sometimes undergo through visionary erotic experiences without being able to accurately describe it. According to Lacan, the “*jouissance* beyond the phallus” is that “that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it - that much she knows. She knows it, of course, when it comes. It doesn’t happen to all of them [women]” (*Encore*, 74). In a gesture which is unusual in his writings, Lacan further refines our understanding of the distinction between “supplementary *jouissance*” and the “*jouissance* beyond the phallus” by presenting an elaborate reading of the latter in which he refers not only to female

mystics like Santa Teresa, but also to male ones who

can also situate [themselves] on the side of the not-whole [woman]. It happens. And who also feel just fine about it. Despite - I won't say their phallus - despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond [the body]. Those are the ones we call mystics. (*Encore*, 76)

According to Lacan, then, the identification of the individual as mystic is always tied to his experience of the *jouissance* beyond the body, an experience which usually involves a gendered polarity at the core of such a relationship and in which the spiritual Other is presented as male while the devotee is always assimilated to the female side. The ultimate intent, however, is transformative as the mystic attempts to deny the phallus as 'the signifier of the *jouissance*' and assumes a merging of the soul with the divine. Such transformations are precisely what Kamala Das pursues in most of her early love poems in which the poetic persona exploits all and every possible means to win Krishna's love while the reward, the consummation of the desire, remains afar off, impossible to reach through the 'phallic *jouissance*' the poetic persona shares/endures with her husband. In a vein quite similar to Lacan, then, Das conceives physical copulation as conducive to spiritual dissolution in which her sexual desire is subjected not to the phallic order but rather to what Lacan calls "something transcendent, truly transcendent" (*Encore*, 96) in which the meaning, the pleasure and the ecstasy of the sexual act itself can only be pursued through a religious quest.

Kamala Das's early poetry is permeated with sexual tropes that engage with and respond to her own deployment of the Radha-Krishna relationship. It is, therefore, not so surprising that in her early love poetry Das uses many of the modes of pornographic representation. Many of the poetry's codes and conventions seem to be tremendously problematic if considered in isolation from the *Bhakti* tradition. In poems such as "The Maggots" and "Radha", the poetic persona, in the guise of Radha, posits Krishna as her earthly, physical lover in an analogy of spiritual intimacy and union that utilizes the language of

pornography. For most critics, however, the two poems seem intended to be read together as if reflecting two perspectives on the same experience. In "Radha", the poetic persona, when she was still virgin, marks an early collocation of the relationship with Krishna with the indwelling of the soul:

The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the
doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness of core
Krishna; I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You...

(Only The Soul, 63)

In "The Maggots", however, the poetic persona does claim a valedictory liaison with the divine, while later in 'her husband's arms' at the same night, she seems entirely uninterested in intercourse:

At sunset on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left.
That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, what is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

(Only The Soul, 42)

There is a wealth of writing about these two poems in particular, some of which are worth lingering over here because, while demonstrating some of the diverse vantage points from which the invocation of the Radha-Krishna relationship in the two poems is considered by Das's critics, they also point to a central limitation on the part of those critics. Nair, for instance, considers the invocation of the Radha-Krishna relationship in these poems as only metatextual, "a mere subterfuge to escape social criticism ... since talking of such

subjective desires as personal properties amounts to resorting to verbal expressions without en-situational gravity” (203). For Fritz Blackwell, the invocation in the two poems gives the impression that Das’s main “concern [is] literary and existential, not religious ... she is using a religious concept for a literary motif and metaphor” (quoted in Ahmed, 93). Irshad Ahmed, to cite a different opinion, passionately implores the reader of Kamala Das to read “the elaborately delineated infidelity of the speaker to her husband” in “The Maggots” as analogous to “the infidelity of Radha as she too was after all somebody else’s wife and hence an adulteress in a more literal sense”. Such a parallelism, in Ahmed’s view, while serving “an ostensible literary purpose” is also “in no way inconsistent with the strain of *Bhakti*” tradition (101).

Even though the reading of Ahmed seems to be quite compelling, a crucial element militates against its accuracy since it did not go far enough to consider the progressive nature of deploying the Radha-Krishna relationship in Das’s poems. The one and arguably most important reservation regarding such readings is their lack of attention to the issue of how in the two poems Das constructs the poetic persona’s mostly pre- self in contrast to her post-marital one. For the poetic persona of “Radha”, her virginal status seems to be the material condition best suited to her relation with the divine, the one most enabling for her soul to be merged with Krishna. The poetic persona of “The Maggots”, in contrast, articulates an emotional oscillation when she married: while embracing eroticism with Krishna which can be marked as virginal, the conjugal duty she has to perform late ‘that night’ reminded her of the broken virginal state of her body. Such a state of affairs, though creating a split between the poetic persona’s pre and post marital lives, nevertheless fosters the birth of the mystical experience at the end of the poem. It is the last line of the poem that implicitly hints at a startling contrast between the brevity of human sexual union with the permanent union with the divine that can be achieved by death: what is / It to the corpse if the maggots nip?”. In other words, the last line of the poem marks the moment of the poetic persona’s self-discovery, of the fact that while her body may no longer be that of a virgin, her soul remains virginally intact, a fact mediated in the poem by the dialectic between presence and absence,

or what Lacan calls the 'Real' and the 'Imaginary'.

Lacan's seminar on 'Feminine Sexuality' provides us with two interesting models to enhance our understanding of the distinction Das draws in the two poems between the poetic persona's pre and post-marital states of mind as related to her sexual relationship with both the divine and the human. The first model is that of Saint Teresa, the pragmatic feminine example of the Lacanian notion of 'a *jouissance* beyond the phallus'. The type of ecstasy which Saint Teresa experienced while penetrated by the phallic golden spear of one of God's angels is spectacularly iconized by Gain Lorenzo Bernini in his famous sculpture of the saint, to which Lacan refers in his *Encore*:

You need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's coming. There's no doubt about it. What is she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it.

These mystical ejaculations are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage; they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find ... I believe in the *jouissance* of woman insofar as it is extra, as long as you put a screen in front of this "extra" until I have been able to properly explain it. (76)

It is because of the ambiguously transcendental nature of Saint Teresa's ecstasy that her mystical experience is taken by Lacan as an instance of the impossibility of narrating its ineffability simply because it is the signified without a word, without a signifier to represent it. For Lacan, then, Bernini's sculpture of saint Teresa should be read as an erotic text in so far as it maintains its effect by keeping gratification beyond its actual presentation, something 'extra' which suggests but not quite intermingle the 'Imaginary' with the 'Real'. Similarly, it is within this type of overlapping between the 'Imaginary' and the 'Real' that the sublime mystical experience comes into play in Das's "Radha". The incessant desire of the poetic persona who offers herself, like saint Teresa, as a 'virgin' 'crying' to be penetrated and subsumed by the divine speaks of a longing for union

and confirmation. Her ‘mystical ejaculations’, like those of saint Teresa, should be read as ‘neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage’ but, as a sign marking the highest tonality of the soul, a supreme moment of bliss resulting from a miraculous feeling of union with the divine that manifests itself within the individual mystic as ‘*a jouissance* beyond the phallus’.

The second model in Lacan’s seminar that also bears strong resonances with the situation experienced by the poetic persona of “The Maggots” is that of Achilles and Briseis who is a royal Trojan priestess of the god Apollo. During the Trojan war, Briseis was taken as a war trophy by Achilles to whom he offered restoration of her liberty in return for sexual favours, an offer which she accepted out of her love for Apollo to whom she yearned to return to his temple. Attempting to explain the significance of this story in terms of Zeno’s famous paradox of ‘Achilles and the tortoise’, Lacan visualizes the sexual exchange between Achilles and Briseis thus,

When Achilles has taken his step, gotten it on with Briseis, the latter, like the tortoise, has advanced a bit, because she is ‘not whole’, not wholly his. Some remains. And Achilles must take a second step, and so on and so forth. [...] the tortoise does not escape the destiny that weighs upon Achilles - its step too gets shorter and shorter and it never arrives at the limit either. It is quite clear that Achilles can only pass the tortoise - he cannot catch up with it. He only catches up with it at infinity (infinitude). (*Encore*, 8)

It is precisely this experience which is metaphorically produced by the poetic persona of “The Maggots”. Like Briseis, she also inhabits a space in which her feeling is torn between her master/husband and the Other, therefore, her *jouissance* is “the sign with which an avowal dresses itself up, the avowal that *jouissance* of the Other, of the body of the Other, ... promoted only on the basis of infinity” (*Encore*, 6). The most obvious analogy between Das’s poem and the Achilles/Briseis parable, however, is the de-eroticised pathos of the sexual intercourse which in the two narratives is promoted, not by the woman’s own desire, but rather by what Lacan would define as the Law of the Father. Hence, the failure of mutuality and of the sexual

The Poetics of Mystical Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Kamala Das's Early love Poems

act itself to embody what Lacan calls 'the desire to be One', the union-of-the-two-in-One fantasy which Lacan considers as the ultimate target of the phallic *jouissance*. The parallelism between the poem and the Achilles/ Briseis story is so compelling as to suggest that it also brings the poetic persona's husband in a strikingly analogous situation with that of Achilles: both of whom have failed 'to catch-up' with their female partner's desire; both of whom have never managed even to arrive at the phallic *jouissance* with that 'not whole', 'not wholly' theirs. The disparity between the male and female partners in the two sexual intercourses can then only be explained in terms of that Other (Apollo/Krishna) whose presence/absence is installed in the very process of pursuing sexual enjoyment. In other words, it is this Other who bounds the female partners in the two stories to search for their *jouissance* not within the finitudes of the phallic function to which both Achilles and the husband are inscribed, but within the 'infinitude' of the absent Other.

In addition to these parallels between the two narratives, there are additional reasons to suggest that the story of Achilles and Briseis would evoke a series of analogies for a reader who is familiar with both Das's autobiographical work *My Story* and the poems in her early collections which correspond to certain events in her life. Beside the fact that, like Briseis', Kamala Das's ancestry also bears the mark of royal lineage (she is an upper-caste Nayar whose great-grandmother was the Raja of Punnathore), the two women also seem to share (and to endure) what might be called royal slavery. Both also mistakenly believed that they can attain freedom by yielding and giving up their bodies to the desire of an intrusive authority figure who disturbs and unsettles their peaceful lives. In "Composition", for instance, Kamala Das juxtaposes two different worlds, that of the persona's virginal existence symbolized by the family's "red house that had / stood for innocence", and that in which she naively "replaced love with guilt", deluding herself when she "got married" into trusting her husband's words when he says,

you may have freedom
as much as you want.
My soul balked at this diet of ash,
Freedom became my dancing shoe,

How will I danced,
and dance without rest,
until the shoes turned grimy in my feet,
and I began to have doubts.

(*Only The Soul*, 22)

As with Achilles' promise to Briseis, the relationship between the persona and her husband also began with the promise of unlimited freedom in exchange for complete submission of her body to his sexual desire. Having achieved a temporary feeling of freedom, the 'doubts' that began to creep in the mind of the persona started to manifest themselves so quickly in almost every other poem in which there is a reference to the husband. In each instance, however, these doubts appear to stem from the abject obedience the poetic persona has to pay to her husband's carnal desire, and are expressed in a form of a lament voiced as if it is of a captive mistress, not of a wife.

What we encounter in "The Old Playhouse", for instance, is not the same poetic persona who danced in celebration of 'freedom' until her 'shoes turned grimy', but a figure who "cowered" beneath "the monstrous ego" of her master who was only "pleased with [her] body's response / Its weather, its usual shallow / convulsions" (*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, 1). Just as Briseis could not truly attain the type of freedom she dreamed of when she surrendered to Achilles desire, so too Das's persona in "The Stone Age" who sees her oppressive lustful husband as an "Old fat spider. Weaving webs of bewilderment," turning her "into a bird of stone, a granite/ Dove" (*Only The Soul*, 67).

The only and arguably the most crucial difference between Briseis and Das's persona is that, while the submission of the female body to the male authority in the first case is deceitfully understood by Briseis as a means to regain her freedom and royal dignity, in the second it has been illusory understood by Das's persona as a means to enlarge the domain of freedom she has already been entertaining with Krishna before marriage. In other words, it is with what is known in Hinduism as Krishna's promise to his devotee "of utter freedom and instinctual exhilaration" (quoted in Rao, 61), that we can understand how Das's persona's perceives her husband's promise of unreserved freedom as a means to cultivate her relationship with Krishna. But

since the promise is ultimately proved to be false, the persona begins to hide herself in the protective shell of her peaceful past, nostalgically trying to maintain a degree of her former freedom while nervously presenting herself in poem after poem as the most glaring instance of what Lacan has designated the mystic-hysterical subject.

One of the more brilliant turns in the history of the overlapping between mysticism and hysteria is probably Lacan's brief but subtle hint in his *Encore* which many revisionist feminists have theoretically reconfigured as a relationship between the mystic and the hysteric. In his discussion of Saint Teresa's mystical ecstasy, Lacan referred to both Charcot and Freud whom he criticised for their reductionist stance in explaining the mystical ecstasy. According to Lacan,

[w]hat was attempted at the end of the last century, in Freud's time, what all sorts of decent souls around Charcot and others were trying to do, was to reduce mysticism to questions of cum. If you look closely, that's not it at all. Doesn't this *jouissance* one experiences and yet knows nothing about put us on the path of ex-sistence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as based on feminine *jouissance*? (77)

The thrust of Lacan's critique, argues Cristina Mazzoni, is directed towards the narrow scope of both Freud and Charcot who "interpreted the mystical joys of religious ecstasy [only] in terms of sexual activity, discounting the mystic's message as a self-deluded one, barely veiling her hysteria" (47). For Lacan, Mazzoni continues, hysteria and mysticism represent analogous domains in which an analogy between the transcendental quality of the mystical ecstasy and the enigma of the hysterical subject can be drawn so that the two can be explained into mutually explanatory propositions. It is the importance Lacan accorded to the intertwining between the mystic and the hysteric that comes to the fore in the works of many feminists, particularly in those of Luce Irigaray for whom Lacan's discussion of the ecstasy of saint Teresa is taken as a framework within which to open up new ways of thinking through and beyond Lacan.

In "*La Mystérique*" (a phrase she coined in order to denote that state which Lacan referred to in his critique of Freud and Charcot),

Irigaray addresses from the start the intertwining between mysticism and hysteria. Critically attempting to undercut Lacan's claim that woman is 'not whole', Irigaray starts her essay by identifying the place in which we can find traces of the 'mysterique' as ultimately a female place: it "is the place where consciousness is no longer master.... the place where 'she' – and in some cases he, if he follows 'her' lead – speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about 'subject' and 'Other' [,]" It is from such a valorisation not only of the unconscious but also of the possible representation of the unspeakable in the encounter between the feminine 'subject' and the 'Other' that Irigaray proceeds to point out further similarities inherent in the paradoxical interplay between the discourse of the mystic and that of the hysteric. However, most of the issues with which Irigaray grapples throughout the essay seem to be gathered together in the passage where she indirectly alludes to saint Teresa's mystical experience as an instance of the mysterique. It is this passage, however, that is pertinent to the present discussion:

But the path she follows to bring together and revive this wide, wild [*jouissance*] will be more savage and cruel than if she could simply fall back right now upon a 'soul' that was a kind of cocoon, swathing the most secret self and folded over the specula(riza)tion of its source. But she is still darkness to herself through and through, nor does she understand the world surrounding her. In this undifferentiated blindness she will be able to achieve distinctness only by a certain numbers of cuts, severing. She gives herself up to 'others' only after she has affected [a] separation from everyone and from her habits, in which pain enables her to feel herself again and to gather her strength. This strength soon becomes exalted in such a flood of potency that she is taken to be possessed. Therefore, she is condemned by confessors or inexperienced voyeurs.....(198)

While the passage is permeated by allusions to the life of saint Teresa, it also posits that every mystical experience, in its ultimate end, involves not only the superimposition of the unconscious over consciousness but also a marked division between the mystic's body

as both spirit and flesh. Irigaray consistently understands this division as the effective means by which the mystic can achieve distinctness, creating the private soul space as distinct from the material bodily one which enables the mystic to embrace the sensibility of *imitatio christi* as the central metaphor in Christian mysticism. The implicit reference in the above passage is undoubtedly to the story of Eucharist, used here as both a backdrop and a justification for the giving up of the mystic body to others, demonstrating that the desire of (sacrificing) her body does not in fact originate in her; she is after all only an agent to God's will. It is here at the moment when the mystic achieves this sort of 'effective separation' from the material world that she incorporates the discourse of the hysteric into her behaviour, becoming the target of condemnation and of accusations including that of madness. But as Irigaray puts it, "[w]hat does it matter that all judge her mad if [God] has noticed her and if henceforward He will be her companion in solitude" (199).

If in the above passage Irigaray delineates the parameters of the mystique's discourse, there is a perfectly sound reason to suggest that it is precisely such a discourse that runs as leitmotif through much of Kamala Das's early love poetry. However, rather than offering sprawling and exhaustive illustrations of the mystique in Das's early poetry (a task that would definitely need an independent paper in itself), it seems sufficient here to refer only to certain examples from Das's early love poetry in which the central tenets of Irigaray's argument manifest themselves clearly. To begin with, it is interesting to note that while the early poetry of Kamala Das is infused with a persona who in most cases is desperate enough in her pursuit of sexual gratification, it is rare to find a case in these poems in which the sexual encounter is rendered without confusion about the demarcation of the boundary between virtue and sinfulness. Examples include the poems "An Introduction" and "Substitute", in both of which the boundary between virtue and sinfulness is perceived as illusory in a manner that can be interpreted as primarily hysteric:

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayal. Have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

(*Only The Soul*, 97)

Unable to get a glimpse of who her lover is in bed with, the poetic persona in “Substitute” hysterically confesses her inability to “count, for always in [her] arms / Was a substitute for a substitute” (*Only The Soul*, 53). As Mina Singh argues, the poem reflects a “schism” in the identity of the persona who swerves between guilt and virtue, “the guilt wrangles, yet the need to carry on regardless, seems compulsive”. The persona’s inability to demarcate virtue from sinfulness reflects in fact her “search for spiritual consummation as well as a longing to recover a lost state of childhood innocence” that was fragmented with the entrance of a male authority in her life (93).

Such a hysterical performance, while setting up the basic tension of what in Irigaray’s essay is referred to as ‘undifferentiated blindness’, it also sheds some light on the ‘distinctness’ and ‘effective separation’ the persona has successfully maintained in poems such as “The Cobweb”, “Radha-Krishna”, “Krishna” and “Virndavan” (which is another name of Krishna). In all of these poems, the Radha-Krishna relationship is again deployed in order to portray an impeccable *Bhakti* whose self is nothing but Krishna’s love. As the persona annuls and defiles her body in some poems or at least expresses her disgust at its physicality, she in turn eroticises Krishna and makes her soul instead the captive of his body in “Radha-Krishna”:

This becomes from this hour
Our river and the this old Kadamba
Three, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure
Physicality...

(*Only The Soul*, 104)

By undergoing the female *Bhakti* submission to the divine, Krishna seizes control over the persona’s soul. According to the *Bhakti* tradition, once the soul enters into the economy of the divine, there is no way out simply because of the ineffable bliss the mystic experiences in union with the divine. What is most salient in the “Cobweb”, however, is that in maintaining what Irigaray calls an ‘effective separation’, the persona as mystique is not averse to publicly surrendering her body to Krishna if such a surrender would please him. In fostering such transcendental bliss

The Poetics of Mystical Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Kamala Das's Early love Poems

and sublime fulfilment in Krishna, several accusations are normally levelled against the persona including that of the female marital infidelity, as the poem on "Radha" suggests. Undaunted, the persona in "Krishna" assuages herself by displaying another instance of 'effective separation', finding in her interest in being dominated and controlled by Krishna a grace and a means by which she can endure people's slander and accusations:

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

(*Only The Soul*, 67)

Obviously, the 'love words' of Krishna reveal just how intimate the persona can be with the divine, an intimacy that is of a *Bhakti* whose desire for Krishna is perceived and apprehended in terms of the ineffable union after which the *Bhakti* seeks with ardent intent.

Given that Das's early poetry is enmeshed in a sensibility that leans towards the perennial question of the interconnection between mysticism and the hysteria, it is surprising how rarely this poetry has been analyzed in terms of psychoanalysis. It is, therefore, by attending to Lacan's theory on 'Feminine Sexuality' and to his subtle hint on the overlapping between the mystic discourse and that of the hysteric which is further developed and enhanced by Irigaray that this paper has attempted to steer clear of the reductive methods common to both Das's detractors and her admirers. In particular, the paper has thought to go beyond the limited approaches to her love poetry which are polarized between seeing it as either dangerously pornographic or as a verse which uses female sexuality as a vehicle for political and social purposes. In contrast to these views, this paper has attempted by drawing on Lacan's theories to open up an alternative way of reading Das's early love poetry as the instance *par excellence* of a poetics of mystical desire.

Works Cited

¹ A useful overview of the morass of Kamala Das's criticism is given by Iqbal Kaur in the "Prefatory Note" to his editorial book *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*. See, in particular, p. ix.

² All of the poems either referred to or cited in this paper have appeared in Kamala Das's first three collections of poems. The bibliographical details of these collections are given in the Works Cited. However, for the sake of convenience and consistency, I have used one of Das's latest collections of the best of her early poems as the main reference. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of the poems in this paper will be from Kamala Das, *Only The Soul Knows How To Sing, Selections from Kamala Das*. Subsequent citations of the poems will be included parenthetically as *Only The Soul* followed by page number.

- Ahmed, Irshad Gulam. *Kamala Das: The Poetic Pilgrimage*. New Delhi. Creative Books. 2005.
- Asnani, Shaym. "Kamala Das, Judith Wright and Margart Atwood as Poets of Love: A Comparative Study." *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. 69-88.
- Chavan, Sunanda. "The Unity of Vision in the Poetry of Kamala Das." *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. 142-149.
- Das, Kamala. *Collected Poems*. Vol. I. Trivandrum, India: Navakerala Printers, 1984.
- . *The Descendents*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1967.
- . *My Story*. 3rd ed. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publisher, 2009.
- . *Only The Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das*. Kottayam, India: D. C. Books, 1996.
- . *Summer in Calcutta, Fifty Poems*. New Delhi: Everest Press, 1965.
- . *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973.
- Elias, Mohamed. "Kamala Das and Nayar Heritage." *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*. 6. (July 1978). 15-24.
- Holcome, Colin John. Introduction. *Gita Govinda*. 3rd ed. By Jayadeva. Santiago, Chile: Ocaso Press Ltda., 2011.
- Irigaray, Luce. "La Mysterique." *Speculum of The Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. 191-201. *Google Books*. Web. 10 December, 2011.
- Kaur, Iqbal. Ed. *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*. New Delhi. Intellectual Book Corner. 2005.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton & Co., 1977.
- . *On Feminine Sexuality and The Limits of Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore. 1972 -1973*. rans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton & Co., 1998.
- Mazzoni, Cristina. *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, mysticism and Gender in Europe*

The Poetics of Mystical Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Kamala Das's Early love Poems

- Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. *Google Books*. Web. 5 December, 2011.
- Nair. Jayakrishnan. *Cutting Edges: Biology of Experience in the Poetry of kamala Das*. New Delhi. Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors. 2009.
- Pandeya, Prabhat Kumar. "The Pink Pulsating Words: The Woman's Voice in Kamala Das's Poetry." *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. 33-44.
- Rao, P. Mallikarjuna. "Body and Beyond: Love Poetry of Kamala Das." *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum*. Ed. Rajeshwar Mittapalli, Pier Paolo Piciucco. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2007. 58-64. *Google Books*. Web. 25 November, 2011.
- Singh, Mina Surjit. "The Confessional Voice of Kamala Das." *Perspectives on Kamala Das's Poetry*. Ed. Iqbal Kaur. 89-98.
- Surendra, S. Khandekar. "The Theme of Love and Sex in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das." *The Criterion*. 2.3 (Sept., 2011). 1-6.