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If you imagine that my title¹ promises startling revelations concerning Matthew Arnold and his attire on the night at Dover Beach when to his bride he spoke soft words of rhyming verse, then I warn you that you are entirely wrong in entertaining such frivolous or salacious expectations. The source for the title is in fact the elder statesman of Indian Writing in English criticism, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, who quotes what Gordon Bottomley² is said to have said:

Matthew Arnold in a *sari* – so Gordon Bottomley is said to have described typical Indo-Anglian poetry; and who can stand so incongruous an apparition!³

The phrase 'Matthew Arnold in a sari,' like the honorific title 'The Indian Nightingale' bestowed on the Indian member of the Rhymers Club, the poet and nationalist Sarojini Naidu, expresses a sense of incongruity which is often seen as the hallmark of English poetry written by Indians. Some awareness of the literary past of this writing is inevitably a prelude to contemporary poets because they write in conscious or coincidental relation to the historical problems or challenges of cultural incongruity.

In this paper, I want to focus on two Indian women poets – Toru Dutt of the nineteenth century and the contemporary Kamala Das – and to suggest some ways in which a reader's sense of the Indian literary past enhances a reading of their work. This approach involves perceiving that the autobiographical currents and crises recorded in Kamala Das's poetry, and the poetic techniques she uses to present them, reflect certain problems or tendencies inherent in Indo-English poetry. I shall also suggest that Kamala Das's individuality or modernity as a poet is in part due to the way she responds, albeit perhaps unconsciously,⁴ to generic problems and cultural incongruity. Besides this relation to the poetic past, there is a further sense in which the past is an important element in Kamala Das's poetry because we find in many of her poems the insistent presence of her personal and ancestral histories.

¹ The present essay contains, slightly edited, a paper titled 'The Strange Case of Matthew Arnold in a Sari or the Past as Prelude to Kamala Das' which I read at the Southeast Asian and Australian Literature Seminar, *The Writer's Sense of the Past*, National University of Singapore, October 1984, as well as material from my paper 'The Trouble with Myth: Modern Indian-English Poetry' read at the 6th Triennial Conference of ACLALS, University of Guelph, Canada 10-17 August 1983 and published in *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1984, 117-28.

² A Georgian poet-dramatist.

³ K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1973, sec. ed.), 7.

⁴ In reply to a questionnaire Kamala Das wrote 'I have not read either Toru Dutt or Aurobindo.' See P. Lal, ed., *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1969), 102.

The origins of Indo-English poetry include two cultural events: (1) the successful political advocacy of an English Education system for select Indians, and (2) the poetry written by the Eurasian Henry Derozio (1809-1831) in the 1820s. (The same decade, incidentally, that the first Australian-born poets – W.C. Wentworth and Charles Thompson – were plucking ‘Wild Notes’ from the ‘Native Lyre.’) In the early years of the nineteenth century an impassioned debate was taking place, mainly in Calcutta, between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. The Orientalists wanted the British to continue the policy of exclusive support and funding for an Oriental education system, pedagogically based on Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic studies. The Anglicists wanted the British to establish an English system of education founded on European concepts of enlightenment, liberalism, science and technology.

The most famous Indian champion of the Anglicist cause was probably Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) who in 1823 wrote a letter to Lord Amherst on the need for Western education in India. Here, in a model of English prose decorum, is how the letter begins:

Humbly reluctant as the natives of India are to obtrude upon the notice of Government the sentiments they entertain on any public measure, there are circumstances when silence would be carrying this respectful feeling to culpable excess. The present Rulers of India, coming from a distance of many thousand miles to govern a people whose language, literature, manners, customs, and ideas are almost entirely new and strange to them, cannot easily become so almost entirely acquainted with their real circumstances, as the natives of the country are themselves. We should therefore be guilty of a gross dereliction of duty to ourselves, and afford our Rulers just ground of complaint at our apathy, did we omit occasions of importance like the present to supply them with such accurate information as might enable them to devise and adopt measures calculated to be beneficial to the country, and thus second by our local knowledge and experience their declared benevolent intentions for its improvement.⁵

This passage, I believe, can also be regarded as a rhetorical model for Indians who wanted to out-Westminster Westminster. In it, admirably demonstrated, is the native’s capacity to master the master’s language. Obviously, this was to have important literary as well as political consequences. Roy’s letter and its context also exemplify the complex cross-cultural environment in which Indian English was to develop. Roy’s language addresses his British audience with impeccable formality while, at the same time, embodying a hidden Indian agenda in an ironic tone of servitude.

Roy’s letter was the graft that in 1835 was to bear the fruit of Thomas Macaulay’s famous ‘Minute on Education.’ This master of English rhetoric produced a Minute which, like Roy’s letter, is written in the language of layered or multiple meaning. After a deluge of Anglicist cultural propaganda his audience is coaxed (or bullied) into perceiving the beauty of British pragmatism. Macaulay writes:

⁵ Sophia Dobson Collett, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. By Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Chandra Ganguli (Calcutta: Sadharah Brahmo Samaj, 1962), 457.

We must... do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.⁶

Here, if you like then, is the genesis of Matthew Arnold in a sari. Here, also, we have the cross-cultural situation into which Toru Dutt (1856-1877) was born. This situation has been effectively described by the novelist Raja Rao in his Preface to Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*.⁷ Rao opens his preface with the following paragraph:

Once upon a time there were two sisters, Aru and Toru. Toru was eighteen months the younger, being born on 4 March 1856 at Rambagan. The Dutt of Rambagan were a famous family of Bengal. They came, one branch, round the corner of the eighteenth century, to Calcutta, and their houses rose one beside the other at Manicktolla. Those were the days when people tore pages from books and distributed them severally so as to acquire, quick and full, this great learning from the west, and Calcutta discussed international politics and Raja Ram Mohun Roy broke his leg jumping high when he saw a French flag flying – the flag of liberty. Such was the passion for the new enlightenment that Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German were learnt eagerly, and many other scholars translated these alien texts into their own or other Oriental tongues, and into English. Raja Ram Mohun Roy learnt Hebrew and Greek to read the Bible in the original, and he wrote a treatise on Jesus in Persian with an Arabic introduction.

Toru's family, especially her father and uncles, were men of letters who published various literary works: books of poetry, essays, translations, etc. In 1870 their anthology of poems *The Dutt Family Album* was published in London by Longmans. Toru's parents, along with other members of the family, were Christian converts and she was therefore baptised and brought up as a Christian. Aru and Toru had a Christian Indian tutor who taught them English language and literature. Recalling this period of her childhood, Toru wrote: 'we read *Paradise Lost* over and over so many times that we had the first book and part of the second book by heart.'⁸ In 1896 Mr. Dutt took his wife and daughters on the 'grand tour.' According to Toru's biographer, 'They were... the first Bengali ladies to visit Europe.'⁹ Toru and her sister learnt French in Nice. In 1870 they left France for England where Toru, at the age of 14, attended Cambridge University. She also attended church. In one letter which the fourteen-year old pens to her cousin she writes with an eye that might be said to belong to an adolescent Jane Austen in a sari:

It is sure, as you say, that the Rev Mr --- has passed the noon of life. His new wife has long passed hers too. You ask if she is pretty. Well, she is what English people call sweet-looking, and what I consider plain enough. We did not go to church today,

⁶ G.N.S. Raghavan, *Understanding India* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1976), 54.

⁷ Toru Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1972). Page references for quotations from 'Savithri' are to this edition.

⁸ Harihar Das, *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

for the newly-married Reverend gent holds forth so long, that he realises what that hymn says:

Where congregations ne'er break up
And sermons never end.¹⁰

In 1873 the Dutts returned to Calcutta where Toru's mother planted English flowers in their garden. Toru comments: 'The hyacinths are just beginning to grow. I hope Mamma will succeed in her attempt to introduce English plants to India. Our tanks look very pretty with white water-lilies and blood-red lotus!'¹¹ This image of the garden, as we will see, may be aptly applied to the cultural mix of European and Indian conventions in Toru's poetry. In 1874 Aru died of consumption. Shortly afterwards Toru too developed the blood-speckled cough. She had been writing translations of French poets for her collection *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876). During the period of her fatal illness Toru studies Sanskrit with her father and wrote her English poems which retold some of the major stories in Hindu mythology; these were published posthumously in 1882 as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Toru had died of consumption in 1877, aged 21. Inevitably Aru and Toru came to be thought of as Brontë sisters in saris. Edmund Gosse reserved a place for Toru Dutt in English literature. 'When the history of the literature of our country comes to be written,' Gosse wrote, 'there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song.'¹²

Toru Dutt's poetry anticipates a crucial challenge which all new literatures in English have had to come to terms with. In the English-speaking cultures far removed from Britain, in lands with radically different climates and physical environments, the literary challenge to teachers and writers is the familiar one of hybridisation of influences. Metaphorically the problem is identified, as African poets for instance have argued, in the dubious (if not absurd) attempt to relocate Wordsworth's Daffodils in colonial settings. A sonnet by Toru Dutt, 'The Lotus,' addresses the issue with what one might call shrewd innocence, given the youthfulness of the poet:

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,
The lily and the rose, long, long had been
Rivals for that high honour. Bards of power
Had sung their claims. 'The rose can never tower
Like the pate lily with her Juno mien' –
'But is the lily lovelier?' Thus between
Flower-factions rang the strife in Psyche's bower.
'Give me a flower delicious as the rose
And stately as the lily of her pride' –
'But of what colour?' – 'rose-red,' Love first chose,
Then prayed, 'No, lily-white, - or, both provide;'

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹² Toru Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* with an Introductory Memoir by Edmund Gosse (London: Kegan Paul, 1906, 4th ed. [1st ed. 1882]), xxvii.

And Flora gave the lotus, 'rose red' dyed,
And 'lily-white,' - the queenliest flower that blows.¹³

Undoubtedly this poem reflects a common ambition in writers for whom English is a second-language, namely to write an English which displays an educated recognition of European literary tradition; in this case, classical deities, the pastoral genre, and flower symbolism. By the end of the poem, however, we suspect that the imitation of these foreign ideas and devices is not the real point. Instead, we realise that the poem is designed to celebrate the quintessential Indian symbol: the lotus. This carries implicitly with it a question as to the legitimacy of imposing European images on the Indian setting.

This kind of cultural and literary dualism is manifested as tension in Toru Dutt's best-known poem 'Our Casuarina Tree.'¹⁴ This time it's Keats's turn to don the sari. The ode form of the poem, as well as such lines as 'When first my casement is wide open thrown/At dawn, my eyes delighted on it rest,' suggest a Keatsian influence. At the same time, the poet's English is expected to register the Indian scene:

A gray baboon sits statue-like alone
Watching the sunrise...
And far and near Kokilas hail the day...

The personal situation which the poem recounts – the Indian girl in Europe finding solace in exile by remembering her Casuarina tree in her Bengal Garden – anticipates an ever-increasing tension in modern writing. The difficulty of adjusting to absence from the cultural home complements the difficulty of adapting the foreign literary form to the local context. During the last few years in Calcutta when Toru was reading Sanskrit and writing her own versions of Sanskrit masterpieces, she experiences the other side of the nostalgia expressed in 'Our Casuarina Tree.' She refers in her letters to her father's plans to sell-up his Indian properties so that the family can migrate to England to live permanently in an English village; and she constantly expresses the hope that this will happen. Toru identified the English way of life (by contrast with the restrictiveness of Indian life) as one which offered freedom and happiness.

Such an apparent commitment to Anglophilia may reflect the views of a young woman who perceived that women were treated differently in Europe, and who craved an independence she could have in England but would be denied her in Indian society. In her poem 'Savitri' (the first narrative in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*), we find the following note of cultural explanation which contrasts the situation of women in the favourable past with the – by implication – unfavourable present:

In those far-off primeval days
Fair India's daughters were not pent
In closed zenanas. (1)

¹³ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-9.

And there is perhaps one more contemporary note in the introductory section of the poem in which Savitri's relationship with her father probably, in the poet's mind, analogous to her relationship with her own father, Govind Chunder Dutt:

Her father let her have her way
In all things, whether high or low;
He feared no harm; he knew no ill
Could touch a nature pure as snow...

And so she wandered where she pleased
In boyish freedom. (2)

One does not have to be a feminist in order to appreciate the implications of that telling adjective, 'boyish.' Presumably in England Toru felt that her own freedom could at least be 'girlish.'

In 'Savitri' the modern girl poet is recounting the story of an ideal heroine who marries an ideal hero in a world in which ideal conditions ultimately prevail. Savitri is traditionally a symbol of perfect wifely love and devotion. She wins her husband Prince Satyaram back from the God of Death, Yama, when Yama is so overwhelmed by Savitri's constancy and virtue that he decided to reverse his decision. Three aspects of the love story obviously appealed to Toru: (1) it was a case of love at first sight; (2) Savitri's choice of partner was her own, and her father agreed to this even though Satyaram was fated to die one year after the marriage ceremony; and (3) Savitri chose to leave her father's court and live in poverty with Satyaram whose father had lost his kingdom.

Despite Toru Dutt's Anglophile yearnings, she was at the same time intensely immersed in her own country's literary tradition. Moreover, her 'Ballads and Legends' are by no means ludicrously Christianised versions; she is faithful to the Hindu world view, as we see in the stanza from 'Savitri' in which Savitri argues the truthfulness of the non-dualist metaphysic:

'I know that in this transient world
All is delusion, - nothing true;
I know its shows are mists unfurled
To please and vanish. To renew
Its bubble toys, be magic bound
In *Maya's* network frail and fair,
Is not my aim!' (19)

In *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* English poetry is the medium through which Toru Dutt re-enters her ancient Sanskrit past. Her main endeavour is to make the English language mediate modern and ancient, contemporary poetic idiom and old mythology. To bring to India a new Western poetic and to English literature a new old mythology. These aspirations have been realised by modern Indo-English poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, P. Lal, and A.K. Ramanujan, but the case can be made for claiming that they are indebted to the girl poet from Calcutta for some of their poetic prerogatives.

Turning now to Kamala Das following the preceding visionary sequence of English poets adorned in Indian silk, the sari is well and truly taken off; and not only the sari, I might add, as we see in a characteristically candid poem 'The Looking Glass' which begins:

Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier... Admit your
Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. (D, 25)

This poem introduces us immediately, directly and without decoration to Kamala Das's myth-exploding themes concerning the difficulty of being a woman in Indian society and of finding love, instead of male lust and indifference, in the institution of the arranged marriage. In the poems dealing with these subjects she subverts and inverts the classical-religious ideals of Indian womanhood, as enshrined in the devotion and sacrifice of Savithri and Sita, by opposing a fiction of idealised and contented femininity with brute facts of sexual experience and female suffering. By choosing to write these poems in English, she is writing in a language of India sufficiently detached or distanced from cultural conventions to emancipate her into a mode of utterance in which she can be forthright, frank, critical, and ethically unconventional. We notice in 'The Looking Glass' how she confidently speaks in tones of dramatic irony, portraying the expectations of Indian male egoism, while being ironically bitter about the sexual politics of female submissiveness. These conditions lead, inexorably it would seem, to loneliness, suffering and destitution of the feminine spirit. Many of Kamala Das's poems epitomise the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who attempts to free herself, sexually and domestically, from role bondage sanctioned by the past.

For her pains, she has had to put up with anger, ostracism, and notoriety which reached their zenith of ferocity with the publication of her autobiography *My Story* (1976), and depictions of herself under such headlines as 'Literary Striptease' and 'The Kama Sutra of Kamala Das' which were used for a feature on her in *Time Magazine*.¹⁵ This journalism also provided a photo of her, as the caption put it, 'relaxing in the bedroom of her Bombay apartment.' She is not wearing a sari in this photograph, but is attired in a respectable dress. On the same page extracts from an interview indicate her line of thinking:

Love is a happy thing. I hate it when love is made evil and furtive... We make our girls guilt-ridden... Every middle-class bed is a cross on which the woman is crucified. I fling arrows at the uncivilised, brutal norms of life for women in Kerala.

¹⁵ *Time Magazine*, December 27, 1976, 7.

I tweak the noses of puritans... A woman can get at a man's heart only through his loins.

Kamala Das expresses these ideas and feelings in her poetry. She has formulated her own version of Yeats' poetic dictum 'there's more enterprise/In walking naked.'¹⁶ In *My Story* she admits to a polemical desire to communicate her experiences to her readers so that they can benefit from them, and employs a surreal metaphor to define her notion of herself as a confessional poet:

I have often wished to take myself apart and stick all the bits, the heart, the intestines, the liver, the reproductive organs, the skin, the hair and all the rest on a large canvas to form a collage which could then be donated to my readers. (*MS*, 217)

In Kamala Das's poem 'An introduction,' we are given an explanation of herself as a person and a poet. It is a poem about identities, in which by explaining herself to her family, friends and readers, she therapeutically explains herself to herself. Her literary identity is complicated by the fact that she is a bilingual writer, who uses English mainly for her poetry and Malayalam (her mother tongue) mainly for her fiction. This is alluded to in the poem when she refers to her Malayalam pseudonym, Madhavikutty. The opening of the poem makes clear that, because she uses English, she sees herself as addressing a diverse audience ranging from foreigners and Indians who do not know her to those who know her well; she defines her speech as Indian-English in defence of a natural poetic, or a verse voice or language which is a natural, uninhibited expression of her personality:

Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? (*SC*, 59)

On reading Kamala Das perhaps the main initial impression one has is of the writer's engagement with her readers through the medium of her personality, or of her literary presentation of it. 'A poet's raw material,' she asserts in *My Story*, 'is her personality' (165). The medium of her literary form, whether verse or prose – of its themes, imagery, tone, style, cultural content – seems peculiarly indistinguishable from the medium of authorial voice and personality. Thus the characteristics of Das's art and personality (spontaneity, unindebtedness, confession, self-analysis; a poetry of declaration and essences rather than nurtured elegance or urbanity) appear to be identical. Invested with 'personality,' Das's forms are direct expressions of an

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'A Coat,' *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 142.

autobiographical voice. But that individual voice also asks to be read representatively or symbolically. As such, and in relation to what may be generalised as the female voice in Indian literature, Indo-English poetry has with Kamala Das's work become a cultural cause, the historical origins of which may well have been the youthful endeavours of Toru Dutt in lyrical autobiography, on the one hand, and celebration (albeit in a Victorian poetic idiom) of a collective ideal of Indian womanhood, on the other hand.

In stressing the personal tenor and texture of Kamala Das's poetic voice the extra-personal elements in her idiom should not be overlooked. (I have in mind such qualities as her Indian English, the use of the personal voice to speak on behalf of others, and of course her capacity to express gender concerns and emotions of women generally.) This dual vocalism, a kind of fusion of autobiographical 'I' and archetypal 'I,' is exemplified in the last section of 'An Introduction,' and is implicit in the poem's concluding statement 'I too call myself I' (SC, 60) with its stress on the connecting principle 'too.'

Probably the primary impulse governing narrative voice in Kamala Das's poetry is autobiographical veracity. Some readers of her work may find themselves respecting its honesty and candour while suspecting that Kamala Das's accompanying claim, 'I have no secrets at all' (MS, 217), is an *ingenue* posture. This may account for the allegedly blurred line in her poetry between powerful emotive statement and self-indulgent sentiment, between passionate conviction and what one critic terms 'Her manner [that] is nothing if not obsessional.'¹⁷

[...]

To be true to the inner self, the life-force, the fire in the hereditary blood and in the sun, to be 'ablaze with life,' as kamala Das implies in 'Spoiling the Name' (SC, 28), is a positive, healthy process of self-realisation. Identity is not to be found in the 'medal' of a name, but in inner commitment to living. Kamala Das is a poet of polar intensities rather than a spokesperson for the rationality of the mean. She cannot for long be content with the 'average/Identity' to which she refers in 'The Siesta' (SC, 54). If she is unable to be herself by being 'ablaze with life,' then it is from a position of personality dissolution in which she finds herself ('de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded') that she is most likely to initiate a new identity quest. Such indeed is the case in 'Composition' (the most comprehensive of her own life-history poems) and 'Suicide.'

In both poems the dominant symbol is the Sea (instead of the Sun which is the major symbol in *Summer in Calcutta*); the attitude to experience is no longer the joyously innocent one of drinking life to the full, but of coming to terms with the conviction expressed in 'Composition' that 'The tragedy of life/is not death but growth' (D, 30), and there is a tension between involvement in the imperfections of the personal life and a need to surrender to some innate spiritual will or *Dharma*.

A comparison of these two poems with those about love and lust discussed in the preceding commentary reveals a pattern of evolution from iconoclastic challenge of idealised symbols and metaphors to a point of reintegration of self or a synthesis of individual self and mythical self. The cultural symbols she challenges are of two main kinds, conventions of Hindu marriage and of the female role. Kamala Das's love poems, as we have seen, attack certainly popularly held

¹⁷ Adil Jussawalla, 'The New Poetry' in William Walsh, ed., *Readings in Commonwealth Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 86.

cultural beliefs, but they can be interpreted as retaining an Indianness of sensibility when it is appreciated that it is through implicit comparison with the Krishna-Radha tradition that she is best able to protest her alternative account of Indian love making. She inverts the Krishna-Radha tradition in two main ways: first her poems speak from the female not the male point of view, and second her experience tells her that erotic love represses rather than releases the finer sensual-spiritual feelings embodied in the idealised lovers of popular myth. She therefore inverts the conventional idea of beauty, the conventional terminology, presenting Radha and Krishna as perfect, fulfilled embodiments of their sex; thereby she exposes the conventional hypocrisy which dresses lust up as love. Her short, bitter, pessimistic poem 'A Losing Battle' (*TSR*, 12) depicts the realities of the erotic relationship in sharp contrast to the popular, mythical version of Indian love:

How can my love hold him when the other
Flaunts a gaudy lust and is lioness
To his beast? Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood.

In poems like this and 'The Old Playhouse' the male lover – the lingam figure – and love itself are each negative because of the monstrosity of their egoism and the condition of bondage they impose.

This realisation however is the threshold of a new development in the autobiographical self. Having established a reputation for being a rebel who has defied the mores of Hinduism, Kamala Das proceeds to achieve a positive concept of selfhood in fundamentally Hindu terms. In 'Composition' she has returned metaphorically to the place where life and myth originated: the sea-bed.

Greater hungers lurk
at the basement of the sea.
Ultimately
I will feed only the hunger
to feed other hungers,
the basic one.
To crumble,
to dissolve
and to retain in other things
the potent fragments
of oneself.
The ultimate discovery will be
that we are immortal...
Even
oft-repeated moves
of every scattered cell

will give no power
to escape
from cages of involvement.
I must linger on,
trapped in immortality,
my only freedom being
the freedom
to discompose. (*D*, 35)

This resignation is paradoxical: it negates to affirm. But it is conceived philosophically in Hindu terms, in implicit reference to concepts like reincarnation, *moksha*, and the doctrine of selfhood expounded in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Compare Kamala Das's statement with the following assertions from the *Gita*:

bodies are the perishable, the self is the imperishable...

An eternal fragment of myself became an Atman in the worldly cycle,
and pulls the Prakriti-bound mind and sense to itself...

There is another Unmanifested, the undying reality,
which does not dissolve though all beings dissolve.

This Indestructable and Unmanifested is the supreme goal: this is
Brahman¹⁸

In 'Composition' Kamala Das has gone a considerable way along the path leading to this Hindu view of the world. In mythopoeic terms, the Narcissus has shattered the mirror of egotism to discover the Atman of selfhood.

It would seem, finally, that Matthew Arnold in a sari has journeyed far in space and time through poetic worlds, an ancient one yet alive and the other too powerful not to be born. These are worlds that Arnold, dressed only as an English gentleman, could never enter.

¹⁸ P. Lal, ed. and tr., *The Bhagavadgita* (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1965), 90, 89, 54.