Two Souls in Search of an Oasis

Umer O. Thasneem

Abstract

This paper studies the quest for self and identity in the works of Muhammad Asad and Kamala Das (known as Kamala Surayya after she embraced Islam) from a broadly comparative perspective. The first section discusses this theme in the context of Muhammad Asad's epochal *The Road to Mecca*, and the second section focuses on the poems of Kamala Das. I explore how these two authors, belonging to two disparate geographical and cultural milieus, found refuge in Islamic monotheism from the existential crisis that haunts modern humanity.

Introduction

Questions concerning self and existence have baffled humanity ever since people became conscious that each one of them has a self. Does life make any sense in or beyond itself? Does it have any definable aim or goal? What differentiates human beings from other animals, apart from their status as a "talking biped"? These questions, which arise from issues lying at the core of this concern, are treated with the utmost negativity and skepticism in the works of existentialist authors, who attribute no inherent value or significance to human destiny.

In his "Waiting for Godot" (1952), for example, Samuel Beckett represents this dilemma in the form of two clowns who, trapped in the web of existence, find themselves unable even to commit suicide to break free of the chains of existence. For atheists like Friedrich Nietzsche and George Bernard Shaw, the current human state was so disgusting that they awaited the arrival of a superman who, they assumed, would be free of all puerile human instincts. As Nietzsche himself put it in his famous statement:

Umer O. Thasneem is a teacher of English language and literature, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia. He has a Ph.D. from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay), and has published in various journals.

> What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to the superman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment.[1]

More than a century after Nietzsche predicted the coming of a superman, his prophesied "super species" remains a chimera. As for the visionary himself, he died an inglorious death in a mental asylum. On the other hand, humanity seems busier than ever plumbing even further depths of spiritual and ethical degeneration, as epitomized by the self-indulgent, exploitative, and Epicurean person of modern capitalist societies. American poet Robert Lowell compares this greedy, gluttonous person to a pack of stinky skunks foraging for crumbs in a junkyard. For him, nothing exemplifies the modern human condition better than these slimy, despicable creatures.[2]

We have to place the works of Muhammad Asad and Kamala Das, both of whom address questions of self and existence from a radically different perspective, against this intellectual background. They are not willing to wait for the birth of a superman, nor are they driven by despondency to nihilism. For them, self-fulfillment lies in spiritual elevation – a continual process of redemption to be attained through divine guidance as established by the Qur'an. For them, this redemption is more fulfilling than being a superman.

The Road Taken

The *New York Post* described Muhammad Asad's spiritual biography, *The Road to Mecca*, as "a very rare and powerful book raised completely above the ordinary by its candor and intelligence. … [that] should permanently affect our view of the world."[3]

Being an autobiographical narrative resembling Henri Charrière's *Papillon* (1969) and Axel Munthe's *The Story of San Michele* (1929), *The Road to Mecca* deserves a unique place as a literary masterpiece, for it encompasses a whole range of issues related to philosophy, religion, psychology, geography, and history. It also has a multilayered structure, with an autobiographical narrative fitted into the frame of a travelogue. Nevertheless, the central thread running through it is the quest for self and identity. The following passage illustrates how this quest formed an obsession for Asad right from his childhood days:

> Under the soles of my feet I can feel the thin trickle of water [Asad was taking a bath in a shallow desert well after a long journey] seep upward from the underground spring that feeds the well in a slow, unceasing stream of eternal renewal.

> Above me the wind hums over the rim of the well and makes its interior sound faintly like the inside of a sea shell held against the ear – a big humming sea shell such as I loved to listen to in my father's house many, many years ago, a child just big enough to look over the table top. I pressed the shell against my ear and wondered whether the sound was always there or only when I held it to my ear. Was it something independent of me or did only my listening call it forth? Many times did I try to outsmart the shell by holding it away from me, so that the humming ceased, and then suddenly clapping it back to my ear: but there it was again – and I never found out whether it was going on when I did not listen.
>
> I did not know then, of course, that I was being puzzled by a question that had puzzled much wiser heads than mine for countless ages: the question whether there is such a thing as "reality" apart from our minds, or whether our perception creates it. I did not know it then; but, looking back, it seems to me that this great riddle haunted me not only in my childhood but also in later years – as it probably has haunted at one time or another, consciously or unconsciously, every thinking human being: for, whatever the objective truth, to every one of us the world manifests only in the shape, and to the extent, of its reflection in our minds: and so each of us can perceive of "reality" only in conjunction with our own existence. Herein perhaps may be found a valid explanation for man's persistent belief, since the earliest stirrings of consciousness, in individual survival after death – a belief too deep, too widely spread through all races and times to be easily dismissed off as "wishful thinking." It would probably not be too much to say that it has been unavoidably necessitated by the very structure of the human mind. To think in abstract theoretical terms of one's own death as ultimate extinction may not be difficult; but to visualize it, impossible: for this would mean no less than to be able to visualize the extinction of all reality as such – in other words to imagine nothingness: something that no man's mind is able to do.[4]

As Asad puts it, questions concerning reality's essential nature have exercised the minds of countless philosophers and intellectuals; their responses to it have often exhibited skepticism rather than certainty. For Plato, the physical world as we perceive it is merely the shadow/reflection of an ideal metaphysical world beyond. Secured and sealed off from each other, the shadow has no chance of becoming the ideal. For Hindu theologian Shankaracharya, Earth and the entire cosmos are mere delusion. Islam, on the other hand, as Asad saw it, recognizes the empirical world's contingent reality while asserting a supreme metaphysical reality having an incontestable nature. This supreme reality represents infinite power and absolute authority. Unlike Aristotle's passive "immovable mover," the supreme power is always active

and alert, accessible to all His servants, even to the humblest and the least tutored. He demands no corporal mortification or tortuous self-denial.

Asad made this discovery in the harshness of the Arabian desert. The resultant sense of self-fulfillment is evident in these lines:

> There are many more beautiful landscapes in the world, but none, I think, that can shape man's spirit in so sovereign a way. In its hardness and sparseness, the desert strips our desire to comprehend life of all its subterfuges, of all the manifold delusions with which a more beautiful nature may entrap man's mind and cause him to project his own imageries into the world around him. The desert is bare and clean and knows no compromise. It sweeps out of the heart of man all the lovely fantasies that could be used as a masquerade for wishful thinking, and thus makes him free to surrender himself to an Absolute that has no image: the farthest of all that is far and yet the nearest of all that is near.
>
> Ever since man began to think, the desert has been the cradle of all his beliefs in One God. True, even in softer environments and more favorable climes have men had, time and again, an inkling of His existence and oneness, as, for instance, in the ancient Greek concept of *Moira*, the indefinable Power behind and above the Olympian Gods: but such concepts were never more than the outcome of a vague feeling, a divining rather than certain knowledge – until the knowledge broke forth with dazzling certainty to men of the desert and from out of the desert. It was from a burning thorn bush from the desert of Midian that the voice of God rang out to Moses; it was in the wilderness of the Judean desert that Jesus received the message of the kingdom of God; and it was in the cave of Hira, in the desert hills near Mecca, that the first call came to Muhammad of Arabia.
>
> It came to him in that narrow, dry gorge between rocky hills, that naked valley burnt by the desert sun – an all embracing Yes to life, both of the spirit and of the flesh: the call that was destined to give form and purpose to a formless nation of tribes and through it, to spread within a few decades, like a flame and promise, westward as far as the Atlantic ocean and eastward to the great wall of China: destined to remain a great spiritual power to this day, more than thirteen centuries later, outliving all political decay, outlasting even the great civilization which it brought into being: the call that came to the prophet of Arabia …[5]

In its bewildering vastness and expansiveness, like the sea endless and fathomless, the desert makes people conscious of their infinite insignificance. In a universe strewn with millions of stars and planets, they perceive their place to be no more than that of tiny speck of sand blown around by the vagarious winds. This sense of insignificance prompts them to think of the

significance of God. In the chapter "Winds," Asad provides an engaging description of his reflections on God against the backdrop of a sea voyage in the company of a Christian priest. In that account of the sea, the same motif stands out: the quest for truth and the eventual nature of reality.

The Islamic concept of human destiny is centered on the notion of a Supreme Creator with infinite and absolute power over His creation. The creatures, in turn, are powerless and imperfect and derive power only through the Supreme Authority's will and desire. With a poet's heart, Asad realizes this to be the message encoded in the soul of the desert. With a sense of déjà vu, he feels that his desert wanderings have been part of a preordained mission. As a member of an ancient Jewish family, he could trace his descent back to Abraham. Like his great ancestor, he found himself unable to resist the call of the desert:

> The clan of Abraham – whose original name according to the Book of Genesis, was *Ab-Ram*, which in ancient Arabic means "He of the High Desire," – was evidently one of those weaker tribes; ….
>
> "He of the High Desire," that early ancestor of mine whom God had driven toward unknown spaces and so to a discovery of his own "self," would have well understood why I am here – for he also had to wander through many lands before he could build his life into something that you might grasp with your hands, and had to be a guest at many strange hearths before he was allowed to strike root. To his awe commanding experience my puny perplexity would have been no riddle. He would have known as I know it now – that the meaning of all my wanderings lay in a hidden desire to meet myself by meeting a world whose approach to the innermost questions of life, to reality itself, was different from all I had been accustomed to in my childhood and youth.[6]

The young Jew from Europe called Leopold Weiss gained an insight into Islamic monotheism on his first journey through Arabia. But it took him a second journey from his European homeland to fully appreciate the Islamic ideal, an ideal that seeks to ennoble weak and imperfect human beings by conferring upon them the status of the Almighty's vicegerent on Earth and furnishing them with the means and wherewithal for ethical and spiritual fulfillment. On his return to Europe, Weiss' mind became ripe enough for a comparison between the two civilizations he had experienced at first hand. The two "tube" experiences narrated in *The Road to Mecca* bring out this contrast.

The first one is a dream experience that young Weiss had had years before he visited Arabia and embraced Islam. In the dream, Weiss sees himself traveling on the Berlin underground. The train, jam-packed with people

of all descriptions, is illuminated with only a tiny lamp. Suddenly, the train makes its way through a tunnel and, to the passengers' shock, emerges from the tunnel and gets stuck in a vast barren desert. The passengers stand perplexed, unable to move. Weiss, however, does not fret or panic. Spurred on by an indefinable urge, he gets off the train and marches along the sandy, desert tracks, not knowing "where" or "why." Before long, he finds himself in front of a camel decorated and rigged up for a festive ride. Being a European, he has never seen such a camel. Arranged in a typical Bedouin style, it resembles the kind of camels that he encounters during his later Arabian wanderings. On the camel sits a man dressed in white clothes, his face covered to stave off the harsh desert sun. Weiss instinctively mounts the camel and sits behind the man in white robes. The camel slowly picks its way through the desert and, after a brief ride, comes to a halt in front of an arched gateway flooded with light: bright and overflowing, sparkling.

Weiss had this dream when he was nineteen, a time when he was drawn to Freudian theories of psychoanalysis. Taking his cue from Freud's dream interpretations, he used to write down all his night visions in a diary. Going through the diary years later, after becoming a Muslim, he was struck by the prophetic import of this youthful vision, for it was the kind of dream that his great ancestor Prophet Joseph (Yusuf) had had.

Asad once narrated his dream to King Ibn Saud at a palace gathering. A religious scholar at the court interpreted it thus: the dimly lit overcrowded train signifies western civilization, its spiritual disorientation and aimlessness, its intellectual saturation. The arched gateway overflowing with light represents Islam and its spiritual prowess, wherein Weiss finds his refuge. The hooded man is none other than the Prophet of Islam, for it has been reported in reliable traditions that only pious believers can have a vision of the Prophet's face. At the time of this dream, Weiss was not yet a Muslim.

The second "tube" account is based on a real-life experience. Back from his long Arabian wanderings, Weiss was traveling on the Berlin underground with his new wife. His companions, who belonged to the *crème de la crème* of European society, exhibited greater sophistication and élan as compared with the desert Bedouins who had formed his circle during the Arabian years. Educated and prosperous, they also had the protective halo of bank accounts and insurance policies to boot. But Weiss could see a kind of desperation written large on their faces. For him, they represented a telling contrast to the poverty-stricken Bedouins who, despite their daily struggle for survival, exuded an enormous degree of self-confidence and die-hard optimism. Why has this state of mental peace and poise eluded western people, he wondered?

Weiss found an answer to this question in Islamic philosophy, which presents a holistic view of the world and the individual self. Islamic ontology seeks to reconcile the binary dualisms inherent in the dichotomies of matter-spirit, body-mind, individual-society, fact-fantasy, and destiny-determination. Thus, it leads believers to an indefinable sense of self-fulfillment. Western people, on the other hand, follow a materialistic philosophy that presents a lopsided view of the world. Their continual striving after material comforts has deprived them of life's spiritual dimension. As Karen Armstrong puts it, there is a "God-shaped hole" in the consciousness of western people.[7]

The church, long ago reduced to the margins of social existence, offers people little solace. For Asad, the spiritually blind western civilization is an embodiment of what the Prophet described as the *dajjal*, the monstrous, one-eyed demonic being expected to manifest itself as a sign of Doomsday. The western ideals of boundless individual freedom and the endless pursuit of pleasure lead to emotional saturation and nihilism.

The desperation that Weiss saw on the faces of his companions in the tube reflected this sense of saturation. In fact, it forms the theme of many modern and post-modern works produced in the West, from John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" (1956) to J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). "Look Back in Anger" tells the story of a bunch of young men angry with everything, including themselves. Emotionally saturated and creatively stunted, they are endowed with a boundless physical energy that is disproportionate to their spiritual resources and so feel themselves to be mere prisoners of time. Osborne presents their experience as symptomatic of the modern western malady.

The people that Weiss met during his long Arabian journeys represented a different facet of humanity. The Arabs had found self-fulfillment in their religion. Perfectly at ease with themselves and the harsh world around them, they reacted to life with poise and equanimity. Weiss' first encounter with Bedouin Arabs was on a train journey (the journey of the soul and the spirit forms the focal theme of *The Road to Mecca*) through the Sinai desert. During the journey, he found himself being greeted by perfect strangers, invited to eat and drink, and offered a kind of camaraderie unimaginable in the West.

Once he and his companion reached a tiny wind-swept hamlet in the middle of a fierce desert. The village chief received them with warmth and treated them to the customary Arabian coffee and dates, remarking:

> May God give you life; this house is your house, eat in the name of God. This is all we have ... but the dates are not bad. Eat, O wayfarers, of what we can offer you … the wind it makes our life hard; but this is God's will. The wind destroys our plantations. We must always struggle to keep them

from being covered by sand. It has not always been thus. In earlier times there was not so much wind here, and the village was big and rich. Now it has grown small; many of our young men are going away … The sands are closing in on us day by day. Soon there will be no room left for the palms. This wind … But we do not complain … As you know, the Prophet – may God bless him – told us "God says, *Revile not destiny, for, behold – I am destiny…*"[8]

Europe and Weiss' own native Austria, smothering from the impact of a ruinous world war, were at this time sunk in deep pessimism. It was not much different from the later western world of which Lowell wrote: "I myself am hell, / Nobody's here – / Only skunks that search / In the moonlight for a bite to eat."[9] Coming from such a nihilistic and sadistic background, Weiss found the village chief's words positively provoking. What a contrast they formed to the words that Shakespeare put into Macbeth's mouth: "Life … it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing."[10] Asad observes:

"…behold, *I* am destiny" – and the nod with which he accompanies his words lies a proud silent acceptance of his own place in life; and never have I seen even in happy people, a YES to reality expressed with so much quiet and sureness. With a wide, vague almost sensual turn of his arm he draws a circle in the air – a circle which encompasses everything that belongs to his life: the poor, dusky room, the wind and its eternal roar, the relentless advance of the sands; longing for happiness, and the resignation to what cannot be changed; the platter full of dates; … the fire on the hearth; a young woman's laughter in the courtyard beyond; and in all these things and in the gesture that has brought them out together I seem to hear the song of a strong spirit which knows no barriers of circumstance and is at peace with itself.[11]

During his wanderings, Weiss came across several people like this who could attune themselves so meaningfully to life and its manifold challenges. One of them was an ordinary merchant in the Jerusalem cattle market, whom Weiss observed leading the five obligatory prayers in a corner of the market. He was surprised to see the physical postures accompanying the prayers. Without hiding his curiosity, he quizzed the trader on the significance of showing one's respect to God through such ritualistic movements. The trader's answer was a great lesson in Islamic philosophy for the young Weiss:

How else then should we worship God? Did he not create both, soul and body, together? And this being so, should man not pray with his body as well as with his soul? Listen, I will tell you why we Muslims pray as we

> pray. We turn toward the Kaaba, God's holy temple in Mecca, knowing that the faces of all Muslims, wherever they may be, are turned to it in prayer, and that we are like one body, with Him as the centre of our thoughts. First we stand upright and recite from the holy Quran, remembering that it is His Word, given to man that he may be upright and steadfast in life. Then we say, "God is the Greatest," reminding ourselves that no one deserves to be worshipped but Him and bow down deep because we honour Him above all, and praise His power and glory. Thereafter we prostrate ourselves on our foreheads because we feel that we are but dust and nothingness before Him, and that He is our creator and sustainer on high. Then we lift our faces from the ground and remain sitting, praying that He forgive us our sins and bestow His grace upon us, and guide us aright, and give us health and sustenance. Then we again prostrate ourselves on the ground and touch the dust with our foreheads before the might and the glory of the One. After that, we remain sitting and pray that He bless the Prophet Muhammad who brought His message to us, just as He blessed the earlier prophets; and that He bless us as well, and all those who follow the right guidance; and we ask Him to give us of the good of this world and of the good of the world to come. In the end we turn our heads to the right and to the left, saying, "Peace and the grace of God be upon you" – and thus greet all who are righteous, wherever they may be.
>
> It was thus that our Prophet used to pray and taught us to pray for all times, so they might willingly surrender themselves to God – which is what Islam means – and so be at peace with Him and with their own destiny.[12]

This memorable conversation remained etched in Weiss' mind. In clear terms, it contained the answer to the mystery concerning the self. As the trader explained it, Islam's view of the universe presupposes the existence of a Supreme Power free of all wants and needs. By fully surrendering before and submitting to this Supreme Power, and by severing all other bonds, people are freed to seek self-fulfillment and spiritual enhancement. This sense of self-fulfillment that Asad could achieve through Islam is evident in the following lines, which describe his hajj experience:

> We ride on, rushing, flying over the plain, and to me it seems that we are flying with the wind, abandoned to a happiness that knows neither end nor limit ... and the wind shouts a loud paean of joy into my ears: "Never again, never again, never again will you be a stranger!"
>
> My brethren on the right and my brethren on the left, all of them unknown to me but none a stranger: in the tumultuous joy of our chase, we are one body in pursuit of one goal. Wide is the world before us, and in our heart glimmers a spark of the flame that burned in the heart of the Prophet's com-

> panions … Someone in the surging host abandons his tribal cry for a cry of faith: "We are brethren of him who gives himself up to God – and others join in – *Allahu Akbar* – 'God is the greatest – God alone is great …"
>
> It flows in mighty waves over the heads of the thousands of galloping men, over the wide plain, to all end earth: *Allahu Akbar*.[13]

Kamala Das' Existential Crisis

Like the young Leopold Weiss, Kamala Das too was tormented by perennial questions concerning self and existence. She expressed this in her poem "The Old Playhouse":

> … I came to you but to learn
> what I was and by learning; to learn to grow, but every
> lesson you gave was about yourself.[14]

The question concerning "I" lies at the core of the existential crisis. Das makes this clearer in her poem "An Introduction":

> The weight of my breast and womb crushed me. I shrank
> Pitifully. Then I wore a shirt and my
> Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
> My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
> Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook,
> Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
> Belong, cried the categorizers…
> It's time to choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
> Don't play at schizophrenia or be a Nympho.
> … I am sinner,
> I am saint. I am the beloved and the
> Betrayed.[15]

The conflict felt here between saint and sinner is the same as the conflict between body and spirit that Weiss describes. Both western Christian thought and Indian Hindu mysticism posit an inherent dualism between the two and advocate the systematic annihilation of the former for the fulfillment of the latter. Das represents this conflict by the repeated presentation of the "doubles" theme in her poems. In her poem "Feline," she gives vent to this:

> Another lives within me, I fear, a twin left unborn,
> unnamed, unacknowledged, bitter with defeat,
> and she with her new-moon eyes stabs my face.
> and turns me so often, half human,
> half feline.[16]

This crisis of identity, a complex dimension that also has to do with the problem of "doubles," forms a major concern for writers like Fyodor Dostoyevsky and James Joyce. The four brothers in *The Brothers Karamazov* represent this conflict, which, according to critics, is symptomatic of the identity problems that Dostoyevsky himself faced. In *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce describes the same conflict through the figure of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, whose visits to a church and a brothel form two of the novel's focal points. The conflict is again symptomatic of the one that Das and Weiss feel: the perennial conflict between flesh and spirit.

This inner struggle between saint and sinner takes the form of an eternal conflict between body and soul in Das' poems:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.
Which would you rather have,
O kind sea?[17]

Neither Das nor Weiss could find ways to reconcile this body-spirit dualism, for their traditional faiths offered them no help. There was, however, a crucial difference between them: Weiss grew up in a secular and largely agnostic western society, whereas Das was born to a Hindu Indian family steeped in traditional beliefs and bound by pantheistic cults. India might rank somewhere at the bottom when you calculate its per capita income; but when it comes to the per capita availability of gods and goddesses, no other society can match it. These divinities and godheads have played a definitive role in formulating the Indian psyche and its conceptions of self and destiny. Das' attempts to picture herself as the bride and companion of Krishna, the divinity of Hindu mythology, were part of her effort to find a definable sense of self and identity. Nevertheless, the futility of trying to identify oneself as the bride and devotee of a macho divinity, and bound to the cycles of birth and death, was a realization that she had even before embracing Islam. In "Ghanshyam," she notes:

Ghanshyam
You have like a koel built your
Nest in the arbour of my heart.
…
You lead me along a route
I have never known before.
But at each turn when I near you,
Like a spectral flame you vanish.

The flame of my prayer lamp
Holds captive my future.
I gaze into the red eye of death.[18]

These lines betray her disillusionment with her traditional faith and its divinities; they offer no solutions to the riddles of life and death. It is worth remembering that Ghanshyam is another name for Krishna. To Das' dismay, she discovers her personal god to be elusive, insubstantial, and chimerical. This awareness prompts her to seek sources of spiritual sustenance outside her traditional moorings, and so she turns to Allah, the symbol of absolute perfection, free of all human flaws and frailties. Das' journey to Islam was not, however, as long and arduous as Weiss' journey. Born in Kerala, Islam was not a strange or exotic creed for her as it was for the young Weiss. It had made inroads into this region during the first century of its birth through successive waves of traders and travelers. In a different scenario, Das would have ended up a nihilist like some of her famous contemporaries in the West, such as Sylvia Plath, with whose artistic activity she displayed an extraordinary resemblance before embracing Islam.[19] In a personal conversation at her residence, she told me that had the light of Islam reached Plath, she would not have committed suicide.

My beloved is body-less.
When the body and the soul fade away,
He will remain the Reality.
Oh Wayfarer, do you want to partake of
My joy?[20]

The *Ya Allah* poems represent a true turning point in Das' poetic career. Her pre-*Ya Allah* poems are filled with images of death and horror. While her Ya Allah poems inhabit a world of light and sunshine, her earlier ones sprang from a sense of utter despair and gloom. Death is an all-pervading presence in them, as the following lines signify:

My boat can no more go fishing …
In the shallows of my future,
I see the death-bleached fish lie floating.[21]

Like Weiss' dream ride on the camel that took him to the gates of Islam overflowing with light, Das' discovery of Islam takes her to a world suffused with warmth and optimism. This is not to deny the vital social factors that prompted Kamala Das to become Kamala Surayya. Her resentment of the hierarchical classification of people into castes and subcastes and the dehumanizing effect that it has on those shoved to the margins of existence is evi-

dent in poems like "Honour" and "Nani." In "Honour," she lambastes upper-caste hypocrisy in no uncertain terms:

… Honour was a plant my ancestors watered
In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres. At night their serfs
Let them take to bed their little nieces, and pregnancy,
A puzzle to the young toys, later thrown into wells and ponds
A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge below her navel, yes,
The dead confess their brutal games and they guffaw through
my mouth
Today they laugh at the laws that punished no rich, only the poor
Were ravished, strangled, drowned, buried at midnight behind
snake shrines.[22]

In "Nani," the fate of a woman who fell a helpless victim to upper-caste "lust" is lamented:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself
In the privy one day. For three long hours
Until the police came, she was hanging there,
A clumsy puppet and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us, a comic
Dance … The shrubs grew fast before summer's end
The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway
And the walls. The privy, so abandoned then,
Became an altar then, a sunny shrine
For a Goddess who was dead. Another
Year or two and I asked my grandmother
One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark
Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?[23]

Against such a decadent and regressive background, Das posits Islam's egalitarian ideology, in which she finds a safe anchorage. The consequent sense of self-fulfillment is evident in the following lines:

Ya Allah! Ever since the dawn of memory
Till this moment, life had been
A barren boiling desert.
…
Now through my veins
Blood flows.
I am shedding all that cumbrous
Baggage. I smile.

My voyage is to
An oasis
Fringed with palms
And laced with streamlets sweet.
...
Isn't it the abode of Allah
Where love has its lofty mansion?
There the thirsty quench their thirst.[24]

These lines offer a striking comparison to Weiss' dream experience. In his dream, Weiss finds himself on a train stranded in a lifeless desert. It is his spiritual quest that spurs him to move on. In both of these descriptions, the desert symbolizes spiritual barrenness.

In the oasis of Islam, Weiss and Das finally quench their thirst for spiritual sustenance, which forms an important motif for both of them. The title of one of the chapters in *The Road to Mecca* is, in fact, "Thirst." Once inside the oasis, they feel no existential dilemma or any soul-body dualism; what dwells there is perfect peace and harmony:

You need not walk for miles.
You have reached the eternal home,
To a heart filled with love to the brim.
Surayya, this is the end of the road,
You wayfarer …[25]

All of the poems in the *Ya Allah* volume attest to this tranquility of mind that Das achieves after embracing Islam. Critics complain that her recent poems lack the violent energy that characterized her early poems.[26] Indeed, a mind that has achieved a high degree of peace and equanimity may not be capable of producing the kind of volcanic eruptions reflected in her youthful poems. This does not, however, signify a "deadening of spirit," as one critic has pointed out, but rather a reawakening of it.[27] Nevertheless, no perceptive reader can ever miss the heavenly radiance exuded by these poems. This was the same light that Weiss found in Islam, the light about which the Qur'an says:

> Allah is the Light of the heavens and Earth. The parable of His light is that of a lamp lodged in a niche; the lamp enclosed within a crystal; a crystal resembling a resplendent star lit by (the flames of) a blessed tree; an olive, neither of the East nor the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous though hardly touched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides whom He wills to His light. Allah sets forth parables for humanity and knows all things. (24:35)

Endnotes

1. Laurence Gane, *Introducing Nietzsche* (Piero, UK: Icon Books, 2002), 80. To be sure, Nietzsche was such a complicated figure that one can nearly always find one quotation that contradicts another. Yet his concept of the "superman" was key to his varying perspectives.
2. Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), 103.
3. See www.sufism.org/books/asad.html.
4. Muhammad Asad, *Road to Mecca* (Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 1992), 44-45. (First Indian edition).
5. Ibid., 144-45.
6. Ibid., 50.
7. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Vintage, 1999), 10.
8. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 86.
9. Lowell, *Life Studies*, 103.
10. William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," act 5, scene 5, lines 26-28.
11. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 86.
12. Ibid., 88-89.
13. Ibid., 374.
14. Kamala Das, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, 2d ed. (Kottayam, India: D.C. Books, 1999), 30.
15. Ibid., 96.
16. Ibid., 35.
17. Ibid., 86.
18. Kamala Das with Pritish Nandy, *Tonight This Savage Rite and Other Poems: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1979).
19. Thasneem, "Portraits of Artists as Women: A Comparative Study of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das" (Ph.D. diss., Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, 2004), 10-200.
20. Kamala Das (written under the name Kamala Surayya), *Ya Allah* (Calicut, India: Islamic Publishing House, 2002), 25. All excerpts from *Ya Allah* in this study are the author's translations from Malayalam.
21. Das, *Only the Soul Knows*, 46.
22. Kamala Das, *Kamala Das's Best* (Kozhikode, India: Bodhi Publishers, 1995), 56-57.
23. Das, *Only the Soul Knows*, 76.
24. *Ya Allah*, 34-35.
25. Ibid., 51.
26. Madai Taha, "Thudaru Kamale A Thuranna Bhashanam" (Kamala Carry on with Your Straight-Talk), *Mathrbhumi Weekly* (Kerala, India) (18 Jan. 2004), book 81, vol. 48.
27. Ibid.