

CHAPTER ONE

Tradition and Innovation

My Story is all of Kamala Das. This candid autobiography testifies that her brush with the muse was no accident: "My mother vague and indifferent spent her time lying on her belly on a large fourpost bed composing poems in Malayalam"¹. (*Kamala Das, My Story, p-2*) She was born with this love of poetry in her blood. It was rooted deep into her nature. She derived her inspiration first of all from among her own relations. She has put it on record that she was hailed as a poet by her grand uncle. Indeed, it boosted her spirits and she admits in her article "*Leaves of Grass on the Kerala Coast*" that "It was a great moment in my life". (*Span January 1985 Vol.-XXVI No. 1*) (*Reprinted from Span October 1975*) This appreciation and recognition fuelled her poetic impulse. Of this she says that this was a nice beginning for a child poet to start with. She was immersed in love of poetry and literature. In childhood she had a go at acting in plays. The first one they staged was a Malayalam adaptation of a part of Victor Hugo's classic **Les Miserables**. Of course, in her opinion her best performance "was in the role of the Mughal Queen Nurjehan". She had appeared in many other Malayalam plays adapted from Dwijendralal Roy. Her histrionic talent reached its culmination in acting in Kalidasa's **Swapna Basavadattam**.

She was something of a child prodigy; her literary talent was nurtured in her early life. She got all the impetus as well as admiration from her superiors, her brothers and all. This may bring to our mind a similar backdrop in the life of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore also drew his primary inspiration from the cultural atmosphere of his family. Nalapat House helped to nourish and nurture Das's mind as did the Thakurbari Tagore's. The cultural as well as intellectual environment they were born into helped both Das and Tagore immensely.

It would be unfair to say that the young Das was concerned with art and literature alone. Even when still young, she betrayed fervent faith in our

rites and rituals, a Hindu as she is. She also “learned to light the temple lamps and the many oiled wicks which had to be placed every evening at several spots around the house to honour the gods of directions.” (*My Story*, p.27) It inspired in her a love of the Hindu scriptures. Consequently she became familiar with the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. They included among others Brahma, Indra, Baruna, Shiva, Vayu, Kubera, Agni, Ratri, Yama, etc. What is still more striking, she came under the spell of Gayatri Mantra which she loved to recite. This was no passing fancy of a young girl. She came to acquire a great knowledge of 'Divine Love' and 'Nirvana'. In this context her study of the great epics — **The Ramayana** and **The Mahabharata** should also be mentioned. Like other devout Hindu girls, she used to worship Lord Ganesh every morning. Of course, Lord Krishna was the supreme God to her. She was thus initiated into the Hindu religious practices, which influenced her poetic personality. All these point that her root was in tradition. Nevertheless she was not a traditional poet. She forged a poetic path of her own testifying to the spark of revolt in her character. Had she remained confined to traditions alone, she would not have become the poet she is. These traditions would have fettered her mind and determined her mode of expression.

In this context, however, we cannot but refer to two Indian women poets of great merit. They are Sorojini Naidu and Taru Dutta, who wrote about social awareness as well as patriotic fervour. But nowhere do we find in their poetry any reflection of their personal feelings and sensibilities. They lack poetic individuality. But Das, always with a streak of revolt in her, gave expression to her personal aches and joys, her thrills and delights. Her expressions do always ring true and sincere. So bold, so frank she is, that she candidly lays bare her heart, her personal grievances against social customs. She comes out luminously as a new poet with a new voice and with a new sense of urgency. As a creative person, she brings in new innovations and thus ushers in a new era.

Repression, as we all know, is one of the facets of life in early childhood. It was very acute around her time in the lives of young Indian girls. Das did not meekly submit to any repression or imposition on her sensitive mind. Sharply she reacted to any such attempt to curb her spirit. She says :

My desires

Were many, if granted freedom I knew they would burn
Down like tongues of flame, the monastic peace of my home.
The ancient lusts are blinded in the mind, they stagger
Through the light of day as mad men stumble on sidewalks
At noon. (*Kamala Das, "A Souvenir of Bone" Collected Poems,*
Vol. 1, p.32.)

Tamed she is not, nor is she subdued by the forces at work to restrain her ebullient spirit. So we find her shaking her frail but firm fist against all such demons of restraints and also against social taboos and inhibitions. An Indian woman has to fight against so many odds for the full flowering of her natural self.

After the anguished phase of puberty is over, a girl blooms into a mature young woman for love, marriage and motherhood.

Of course in India a girl is not allowed to have her way on most vital matters. In her school days Das felt attracted to an unruly and boisterous young boy. Before this fascination could turn into a sweet and romantic experience, her grandmother put her foot down and told her to banish the thought of the boy from her mind. Her marriage which came up a bit early at the age of sixteen, proved to be a real trial for her. In spite of her disgust, she had to yield to the lust of her husband. It was a traumatic experience for her. In this brutal consummation lust drove out all love. She pours out her bitter and anguished feelings in these lines not only at her husband's forced sex with her but also at his self-confessed lechery :

he folded

Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
Pleasures that had come in his way, richer harvests of
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine.¹ (*"Of Calcutta",*
Collected Poems, Vol.-1, p.59).

Marriage at the age of sixteen brings in its wake a string of unsavoury experiences, not any romantic splendour. She was brutally and savagely initiated

into sex. This traumatic experience lingers with her till she attends to the glory of motherhood. This seems to be a soothing salve on the pestering sore in her heart. She writes about motherhood in glowing terms :

Out of the mire of a moonless night was
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of
The wrong is born the right and out of night
The sun - drenched golden day. (*Kamala Das, "Jaisuriya",
The Descendants, p. 28*).

Kamala Das came in for bitter attack for the free, frank and unabashed pot — pourri of her emotions in respect of love and sex. I want to emphasize the fact that she was no woman hungry for sex. In fact she had to offer herself passively to the demands of her husband's lust. Further it would be wrong to equate her with any western woman claiming and clamouring for her share of physical enjoyment. She is no Madame Bovary itching for a tumble in the hayrick. On the other hand, she is no prudish Mrs Grundy in any sense of the term. But it does not mean that she has cast aside the ideals of Indian womanhood. She remains true to the modes of Indian culture and tradition. At the same time, she exhibits her awareness of the changing social scenarios. What is striking about her is her inquisitiveness about life and its manifold problems. This is a gift of her westernized education and western lifestyle as she had quite a few family friends like Ross, Menon, etc. This unique poetic mind moulded by both Indian tradition and Western culture, unfolds itself petal by petal in whatever she writes with an intense feeling and a delicate sensibility.