KAMALA DAS:

A STUDY OF HER POETIC PILGRIMAGE

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DEDICATION

For My mother Akhteri Begam,

who,

braving myriad hardships,

led me to the threshold of learning,

Mrs. Dorothy Page Hamilton,

an eternal giver,

who

has illuminated the darkened lanes of many a life.

To her I owe the first ray of knowledge,

the birth of my mind.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das belongs to a poetic tradition of Indian women writing in English that dates back to the second half of the 19th century to its pioneers Toru Dutt and Aru Dutt. This tradition is only a part of a vast poetic tradition of Indian women. It stretches as far back as the tribal songs of ancient India, the Pali songs of the Buddhist nuns of the 6th Century BC, the Sangam poets of Tamil, the devotional poets of the Middle Ages, specially Akka Mahadevi and Jana Bai. Through the 17th and 18th centuries, it reaches up to the celebrated Malayali poet Balamani Amma, Kamala Das's mother, who is still living. Except for the use of the English language it is in these more distant poets that Das's poetic ancestry can be found. One more tradition that Das imbibes is her local tradition of the Malabar poets among whom are her own personal ancestors and ancestresses of the Nalapat House. The native roots of her English-Language poetry lend a unique quality to Das's poetic sensibility.

The first phase of Indo-Anglian poetry, represented by Aurobindo Ghose, ended around 1950. The poetry of this period was inspired by a spirit of nationalism, dealing in the main with extramundane subjects. Metaphysical issues preoccupied the poet so much that he was in a perpetual dialogue with eternity or with God. As I. K. Sharma rightly puts it:

> Subjects of higher altitude were adopted and enlivened in poetry. It was not unnatural too, since the writers were fed upon Indian philosophy and western and Indian classics at home and in colleges....
>
> ...Like a Himalayan bear, it was massive and heavy. In short, poetry written during this period was, by and large, a hymn to the glory that was India. (Bhatnagar, 1981, 74-75).

The spirit of modernism was almost alien to these poets who made little attempt to shake off the worn-out poetic conventions. Needless to say, independence to these poets meant only political independence and it was for this that the nationalist-poets struggled. This spirit of freedom could hardly manifest itself in the choice of an idiom which still belonged to their colonizers. It was still a kind of decadent romanticism that informed the literary ethos of the period. Indeed, there was little continuity between pre-independence and post-independence poetry. The new poets had to take upon themselves a new challenge and pioneer a new poetic tradition. They could not fall back upon their predecessors because, to quote Bruce King,

> Poetry of the pre-independence period was, the writers felt, a mass of sentiments, clichés, outdated language and conventions, the ossified remains of a colonial tradition badly in need of a new start through grafting

on a vital body of contemporary verse and contact with contemporary life and speech. (King, 1987, 11).

In other words, modern Indo-English poetry is a post-independence phenomenon but the first thirteen years can be seen only as a period of poetic preparation. It was only in the sixties that things began to settle down when a new generation of young poets took control of the literary scene and then one

Finds on a lucky day, a metaphor
Leaping from the sod
(1981, 38)

and this "new metaphor", as Sharma points out, was Kamala Das. She won the PEN's Asian Poetry Prize in 1963, and in 1965 brought out her path-breaking and trend-setting poetical collection *Summer In Calcutta.* It is a collection of fifty poems with a foreword by Sophia Wadia. As a landmark in Indo-Anglian poetry its impact was astounding "...The mentors of sham manners and peddlers of decadent morality wound up their shops and ran out by the backdoor. Her Power-packed poetry stunned many, transfixed a few, and struck others dumb...." (Sharma, 39).

Das was born in Punnayurkulam, a village in Malabar, South Kerala on 31 March 1934, when India was still a part of the British empire. Hers has been a family of literary luminaries and intellectuals. Her father V.M. Nair worked for a British automobile

firm of which he later became Managing Director. Afterwards he switched over to journalism and took over as the Managing Director of one of the oldest Malayali dailies: *Mathribhumi*. Her mother Balamani Amma is a poet of great distinction. Her maternal granduncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon, was a famous poet, theosophist and an outstanding scholar of Malabar. It was a large joint family, all of its members lived in the Edenic Nalapat House with idyllic surroundings.

Despite the highly intellectual family set-up, Das received only a negligible amount of formal education. She was not allowed to complete even her matriculation. By contrast other Indo-English poets have been scholars of English literature, or at least associated in some way with the English curriculum. Most of these poets are bilingual with English as a second language, acquired at a later stage. However, Das got exposed to the English language from a very early age because of her father's job in Calcutta in a British company. She was admitted to a Catholic English school, meant mainly for the "white" children. But most unfortunately, marriage was forced on her before her sixteenth birthday by her "autocratic father" simply because she "slipped in arithmetic". He refused to concede to her supplications to continue her studies. It was the first crushing blow of patriarchy to an extraordinarily sensitive girl, just on the threshold of womanhood. She hardly had the maturity to comprehend the consequences of marriage as reflected in the following observation:

> Obedience was not one of my strong points. It was a great relief when my relatives suggested marriage as a chastener, and before my sixteenth birthday I slipped out of my parents' home and its uneasy calm. ("Of Mother, Childhood And All". Kamala Das. Reminiscences, from Indian-English, 113).

Das started writing poetry at the age of six. Her first poem was, as we gather from *My Story*, about a doll that had lost its head and had to remain headless for eternity: "I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. As Das recalls, "Each poem of mine made me cry. My brother illustrated the verses and wrote faintly political articles." (*MS* 8).

The excerpt evidences commendable precocity of an embryonic poet. The fact that the child-poet wrote "sad poems" and that each poem of hers made her cry also foreshadows the fact that her poetry was going to be the poetry of anguish. And, as she was to remark later on in an answer to my questionnaire of 3 February, 1988, suffering was going to be her raw material if not her creative inspiration:

> Pain and turbulence seem like grand gifts to a real writer. After the heartache and turmoil the first thing that the writer does is to chronicle the event. If joy is the warp of writing, grief is certainly its woof.

With the trauma of a forced marriage as her stimulus, she wrote her first serious poem while still in her teens:

> Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay;
> Let nothing remain of that yesterday....

The bruised woman in Das all the more activates the poet. It is as if she dies to her human self only to be reborn as an artist. Hence her claim that: "Like the phoenix I rose from the ashes of my past" (*MS 177*). To reinforce the point she emphasizes the absolute incompatibility between living and creating: "There is some discovery which I made recently that while I live I cannot write and while I write I cannot live. Either live or write poetry. I cannot do both at the same time." (*Indian Literature*, No 155, 146).

If the poet is busy creating, she cannot possibly live those created experiences. Her protean creative self is capable of speaking in million different voices—"I am a million million people/ talking all at once" ("Someone Else's Song"). These "million million people", representing the myriad poetic personae inhabit the polyphonic monosyllabic "I". The first person singular pronoun becomes the microcosm of the poet's universe. These personae can also be seen as different forms of the dynamic poetic self. This robust self can devour every kind of experience, be it ugly or beautiful, painful or happy. Indeed, most often it is not real experience at all that the poet handles but only an imaginative

representation of a human situation, perhaps a common reality that the poet, due to artistic necessity, internalizes. This happens mainly, but not exclusively, in *My Story*. Fact and fiction, imagination and experience, fantasy and reality are blended inseparably, thereby creating what is known as Magic Realism. The truth in Das is, as a critic calls it, the truth of mood, and so inexhaustible. The poetic mind continues to generate truths of mood incessantly, making poetic creation an infinite possibility.

Das believes that just as God leaves a "potent fragment" of himself in His creation so does the poet. This potent fragment of the poet represents his personality. This is why Das asserts that: "A poet's raw material is not stone or clay but her own personality," (*MS* 139). It is the escape from the personality of the creator into the personality of the created which in turn becomes a kind of "Objective Correlative" for the emotions and experiences of the poet. Das's attempt to achieve a sense of completeness through writing which in its turn entails reliving life implies that for her art is inseparable from life. The poet cannot accept Eliot's divorcing of the man who suffers from the mind that creates. To her poetic creation has its roots in the poet's personality that becomes its raw material. Very often it is this poetic personality that mediates between the reader and her poetry and the result is sometime disappointing as reflected in the stances taken by her critics. She makes a clear distinction between poets and other human beings and affirms the vital role of the poet's personality in one of her oft-quoted passages from *My Story:*

> Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. (*MS* 36).

However, it must be borne in mind that the poet's personality is only the "raw material" of "her" poetry and by implication, not the final product. Hence, in the process of the aesthetic transformation the depicted experiences and emotions can hardly match those of the poet. It is the escape from the personality of the creator into the personality of the persona which brings the argument once again to Eliot's distinction and its partial modification to suit the psychodynamics of Das's creativity.

As an untutored genius Das derives the notion of rhythm and sonorous cadence from the sounds of marine waves, moaning winds, pattering rain, thumping of blood and beating of heart. She creates a language to suit her dynamic sensibility; ever fresh and untarnished by influences. To quote her own words: "For years I lived beside the sea. I loved the deep sough of the westerlies and the rhythmic thump of the sea. I have an ear for rhythm. I rely on instinct as if it were my only teacher." (Answer to questionnaire, 2 Feb 1988). This is what may be called the natural poetics of Das which can best explain her poetic process. Thus unaware of the intricacies of technique and form, Das relies on the spontaneous

flow of poetry. It comes to her effortlessly and naturally. She can recognize good poetry instinctively as she herself tells her readers: "Like an infant recognising its mother by instinct, I recognise poetry when I read it. I sense it immediately. I cannot perhaps give reasons for my choice" (1979, 3). She presents a Romantic view of creativity when she says that: "I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons" (*MS* 211).

Hers is the poetry of self-discovery. This is the poetry of process, of becoming more than of being. Indeed, her poetry has the freshness of a dew-drop. Without any background of literary scholarship a reader can walk into her poetic world and respond to every poem the way s/he responds to a rainbow or a flower. All that is needed is a sensitive "heart that watches and receives", to echo Wordsworth. Indeed a lack of formal education often seems to be a boon in the case of Das. Her creativity has been spared the tyranny of scholarship. Perhaps this is also the secret of her powerful bond with her readers.

A writer is never the same. Every new experience effects some kind of change in the creative psyche or even transforms it. As Das writes in one of her articles: "Each completed book changes her (a woman-writer) as each childbirth undergone effects a change in her. She rediscovers, and she reshapes herself. She knows that as she writes on and on she picks up different *avatars*, perfecting her mind and her emotional climate." (*Savvy*, Dec 1990, 26). And out of

this multiplicity of personality new characters are born. Thus every character is none but the "I"—"the sinner" and "the saint", "the betrayer" and "the betrayed", the autobiographical "self", the creator says:

...I too call myself I. ("An Introduction").

When I asked Das in my questionnaire (quoted above) to name her most powerful character, she said, "It is KAMALA". Kamala Das becomes her own creation. This brings us to the fundamental relationship between Das's autobiographical self and her poetic self, or, to use Eliot's distinction once again, the woman who suffers and her mind that creates. It must be stated in very clear terms that Das does not stand in a fixed relationship to her poetic self. Her relationship with her poetic self reveals two phases. The first phase is represented by the love poems, published in the first three collections of her poems as well as the second half of *My story*. This phase of her poetic development reveals a separation of the experiencing woman from her creative mind. The two selves are more or less divorced from each other. The second phase of the relationship is exemplified by the poems about her personal ancestry and nonviolence, published in these collections and elsewhere, the first half of *My story*, the Colombo poems, the Anamalai Poems and several others which Das wrote after 1980. This phase evinces a total fusion of the autobiographical self with the poetic self. Herein lies Das's true autobiography. These are the two major dimensions of her creative process. They are contradictory in nature and hence

defy any single method of interpretation. The embedded contradiction may be reflected in the choice of theories and critical tools that may otherwise be at variance with each other. This is also an aspect of the double in Das and testifies to her complexity as a poet.

When the fictitious Kamala stalks the world, perplexing, amusing, shocking, titillating, satirizing and even embarrassing her readers, the autobiographical Kamala prefers to confine herself to her cosy home in a rather puritanical posture, exhibiting exemplary qualities of a mother and a wife—a mother not only to her own children but to all youngsters who turn to her for help. She says about herself:

> The mother instinct has always been there. Because I was always a maternal kind of person knowing only how to mother. The feelings of a mother are very strong in me. There is no doubt about that. So much so I end up mothering even those who do me harm." (*IL* 155, 1993, 158).

In order to explore this aspect of her personality one may recall the informal get-togethers called *Bahutantrika* (meaning a many-stringed instrument) which she used to organize at her Reserve Bank apartment, Bank House in Bombay in the 70's on the first Saturday of every month. It was a forum to encourage budding artists, young or old. It used to be a gathering of poets, playwrights, singers,

dancers, literary enthusiasts and lovers of art with Mrs. Das applauding the participants with whom she developed an intimate bond. Shaanti Goklaney closely looks at those sessions in one of her articles entitled "Friendly Doors For Lovers of Art, published in *Eves Weekly*:

> ...Each comes with a piece of talent to present to the rest. It's a place where every lonely young person can walk in, with the feeling. "This is where I belong", ...for the rest, who have entered Kamala Das's friendly doors only because they love art, *Bahutantrika* is more than free entertainment. It is a quiet chamber of the soul where they may rest before stepping out again into a noisy world." (8 May 1976).

Das explains her objectives behind arranging these get-togethers. She emerges as an ardent patron of art. Among other things, as she says, her main purpose was to encourage the human spirit:

> Many bring poetry because I am a poet. But I am happier when they bring something original, even if it is a piece of embroidery. Basically, *Bahutantrika* wishes to encourage the human spirit....
>
> In each person I see somebody who demands attention, somebody who deserves love. And that somebody is no different from me. I wish this were a

bigger room, a room as big as this wretched heart, which wants to envelop everyone. (*Eves Weekly*).

It will be seen in the next chapter that these informal sessions might have been inspired by and are reminiscent of the regular literary discussions and get-togethers at the Nalapat house that centred around the charming personality of her granduncle Nalapat Narayana Menon.

As will be seen in greater detail in chapter five, to Das literature is for humanity's sake. She has a passion for social reform. She writes with the objective of communicating her various commitments to life and society. She believes in the gospel of love and the Shelleyan dictum "love of love and hate of hate". An extract from one of her articles can further highlight the fact that she has great enthusiasm for social work and is alive to many socio-political issues. She gives the following reasons for contesting the 1984 parliamentary election as an independent candidate:

> I had returned to my home state, Kerala, after living almost all my life outside, and I felt that as a candidate I would get an opportunity to meet the poor and the distressed. I had heard of the real problems faced by the lowly in India, but had not talked to them about such things. There is no communication....Having become braver I decided that all the love within me needed an outlet, a receptacle. What better receptacle

than the mass of the deprived who obviously needed people like me to work for them. I was not exactly a Mother Teresa but loving came easy to me. (*Femina*, 23 Feb - 7 Mar 1985, 48).

Her concerns are not just limited to human beings, the poor and the down-trodden but also to plants and animals. Throughout she has been an environmentalist. She led the *Bodi yatra* as the chairperson of the Kerala Forestry Board and won the prestigious *Indira Gandhi Priyadarshini Brikshamitra Award* in the year 1985 for her exemplary contribution to the field of forest conservation. In the following passage she explains with characteristic frankness her activities in that capacity and the usual constraints under which she had had to work:

> I am the Chairman of the Forestry Board of Kerala. I am supposed to be an Environmentalist. Of course, we have bureaucratised environment, we have bureaucratised literature. You can see the Sahitya Akademi, and all that. I have been trying to do a good job, but it is not easy. There are political reasons why I should remove myself from that post. People attack me, make wild allegations, yet I go on and on. I plant trees, I make people plant trees. I hold workshops and seminars. And I know how foolish are people to hold workshops and seminars. Nothing is achieved. (*IL* 139. 1990, 159).

Most often Das's melioristic sensibility manifests itself in the rejection of every form of violence: patriotic, ethnic, social, sexual or religious. To her life must be preserved at all cost. Except for "The Inheritance" the exposure of religious violence is confined to her prose articles and short stories. Despite the devotional strain in a number of her poems, Das has always found institutional religion redundant because of its growing intolerant character. She voices her resentment in the following representative passage from her interview:

> I have always felt that religions, political systems and ideas have all become redundant today. They have crossed their expiry date. And they have become poisonous to the consumer. Now if you practise a religion which is out of date, certainly it's going to destroy your soul. What I say is that worship should be made very private. I certainly believe that religion, that is, public practice of religion, should be legislated away. As religions are man-made—which is obvious—let man legislate them away. Remove them from the scene for a change. For I think they have become too venomous for peace. And if you let religions revive themselves—and that's precisely what is happening these days all over the world—I think we shall all suffer. It will be a holocaust worse than the nuclear holocaust. (160).

Whatever may be the mode of one's interpretation such details are helpful in a comprehensive assessment of Das, specially because she has a distinct objective in conveying ideas to her readers. Das speaks in a tone of great sincerity and makes her life available for scrutiny through her public speeches and prose articles. However, Das's "sincerity" should not be confused with the sincerity of her personae which obviously cannot be open to factual verification. Annulling the difference between life and art, Yeats says in an unpublished letter of 1907, quoted by Richard Ellmann in *Yeats: The Man and the Masks:*

> A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather, the better his poetry the more sincere his life. His life is an experiment in living and those that come after have a right to know it. Above all it is necessary that a lyric poet's life should be known, that we should understand that his poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man....To give one's life as well as one's words which are so much nearer to one's soul to the criticism of the world. (Ellmann, 1948, 5-6).

This is very similar to the view that Das holds in the later part of her literary career although she may not be prepared to link up poetic excellence with the poet's sincerity of life the way Yeats does. It is not clear in what sense the poet's life should be an "experiment in living" but it is obvious that like Das, Yeats too felt

the need for a melioristic sensibility. The excerpt presents a humanized poetic self. In the case of Das sincerity becomes so important not because she is a "lyric poet" but because to her poetry is a powerful medium of communication. Accordingly her life must be known and as Yeats says, all those who come after have a right to know it. It also becomes evident from her writings that her poetry is "no rootless flower". She has always given her life as well as her words to the "criticism of the world".

Indeed, the two Kamalas in the first phase of her poetic career are so dissimilar that they can hardly recognize each other; they might have never met as they represent the two extremes of human values, except for the fact that both are equally intrepid. The fictionalized Kamala is highly controversial whose autobiography begins in the second part of *My Story*. Indeed, the autobiographical Kamala is far from being a zealous feminist crusader. She has nothing against men as will be seen in chapter three. Even then the created Kamala can vociferously repudiate an androcentric cult:

> ...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.
>
> ("A Losing Battle")

As far as subject-matter goes there is hardly any difference between Das's *My Story* and her love, or rather love-less poems. Each of the poems in her first three collections revolves around the same liberal and liberated Kamala. The Nair heritage of the poet is at work. The male addressee, the husband-figure echoes the behavioural patter of the Nambudari community of the olden days.

It is clear from the above discussion that Das's poetic pilgrimage embraces dissimilar territories existing parallel to each other:

> I believe that each of us must live in two worlds existing close to each other like substance and shadow—one the world visible to us and therefore called real, and the other invisible, existing in the sixth and inaccessible dimension which we fill with fantasies. (Das, in Answer to my questionnaire, 3 Feb 1988).

After five years the poet reaffirms this position in an interview to P.P. Raveendran:

> Frankly, a writer deals with a world that is supposed to be real and then a world that is only a shadow of this real world. This second world could even be called an unreal world. But unless we live in these two worlds at the same time, simultaneously enjoying the

> fruits of each world, I do not think a writer can progress much. The strength that you get from this imaginary world, this shadowy world, this dream world, can be utilised when working in the other world. You can add on to the experiences of the other world with this. It's like an alloy. Like adding alloy to make the metal strong. I think that's most necessary. Every writer will have a split personality. (150).

The extracts indicate that the idea of the double in Das is philosophically grounded. The underlying creative principle as well as her vision of artistic creation is fundamentally dualistic in character. This essential dualism manifests itself in the poet's recurrent juxtaposition of opposites that takes the reader into the troubled sea of her mind. This sense of polarity is reflected very significantly in her frequent use of oxymoron, antithesis and paradox. In fact the very poetic consciousness of Das is oxymoronic. The figurative device reflects her janus-existence and embodies in a highly concentrated form her "Private" and multiple public voices. The double in the poet's consciousness finds a thematic representation in one of her poems entitled "Feline":

> ...There is a sea wailing beneath the sea,
> a sky behind the taut drapes of our firmament,
> a rain that rains hard and long within the summer rain.
> Another lives in 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.

The poem presents a vision of cosmic duality. To the poet the duality that she finds in nature also characterizes the universe within her. The juxtaposition of opposites and the poet's obsession with binaries should not be seen just as a matter of personal style, as a linguistic device to achieve a certain impact. It accentuates a philosophical position, her dualistic vision. The figurative devices affirm and reaffirm Das's apprehension of this all-pervasive duality. It is a subject that demands a full-length study and due to lack of space it is not possible to do it justice here.

The constant shift in Das's stance can be viewed from the point of view of Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Lacan describes the self as "kaleidoscopic self" or "shifting self". The self is in a constant state of flux and is therefore never the same. As the word "kaleidoscope" suggests, the self takes highly diversified forms and colours and therefore it cannot be seen as a homogeneous entity. The idea can very well be applied to Das. The frequent shifts in her position may be seen as the manifestations of the poet's changing self. This leads on to Das's oppositional aesthetics. Of course, the phrase "oppositional aesthetics" is used here in a more general sense of studying the essential dichotomy in thought pattern and use of language rather than in the sense applied to the literature of

resistance by some Commonwealth critics including Arun P. Mukherjee who uses it in the context of some Canadian writers.

In any introduction to Das the question of various influences on her cannot altogether be ignored. In itself the issue is quite insignificant; it is made vital by her inquisitive critics. Parallel development in literary composition is not at all unusual nor is the phenomenon of literary echoes. A text may be full of echoes which ultimately become its constitutive tissues. Poststructuralist critics identify these echoes as intertexts. From this point of view the echoes of Indian and Western concepts and personalities may be seen as various intertextual presences in the writings of Das. However, Poststructuralist poetics with its stress on extreme objectivity and the obliteration of authorial presence may be quite inadequate in the interpretation of her autobiographical poems of her second phase. This is also the poetry of her "private voice". In these poems the author is not only very much "alive", as opposed to Barthes's "death-of-the-Author" theory, but is rather intrusively present. As mentioned earlier in her poetry of this phase there is a total fusion of "the man who suffers" with "the mind that creates". However, certain features of Poststructuralism like intertextuality may be helpful in developing a more balanced and objective view of Das's subjectivity. She offers the following explanation for the resemblance between her poetry and that of Plath and Whitman in her answer to my questionnaire:

> I read parts of Whitman in my childhood. But Sylvia Plath came to my book-shelf very late in life, perhaps only eight years ago when some critics told me that my poetry resembled hers and for proof sent me a copy of her verse. There is a resemblance between her poetry and mine only because both she and I were unhappy women, unhappy wives, unhappy mothers. (Questionnaire, 2 Jan 1990).

Although at a certain level she embodies a composite culture, her distinctly Indian identity asserts itself in most of her writings. Indeed, her English writings have an Indian soul. She twists, moulds and remoulds the English language to suit her dynamic sensibility. There is a bold and unequivocal assertion of her Indian identity in her celebrated poem "An Introduction" which will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters. Contrary to Das's assertion, Divendra Kohli finds nothing Indian about the poet and her sensibility except for her Indian landscape: "the fact is that she does not strive to be Indian, and neither her themes nor her language has any conspicuously Indian flavour about it." (Kolhi, 1975, 122). It is not clear what Kolhi means by "Indian themes" and what is un-Indian about the themes of Das's poetry. Possibly he has in mind the eroticism of her poetry, but then, what about the vast corpus of Sanskrit erotic poetry? Indeed, what is specifically Indian about the erotica in Das's poetry is her conspicuously ambivalent attitude towards sex. Arthur Koestler locates this ambivalence in the very Indian psychology when he says that :

> Sex is the means by which the young husband can assert himself in the eyes of his stranger-bride, and the only token of affection that he can offer her. At the same time, sex is the source of anxious worry, a depletion of the vital forces of body and mind. As a result the Indian attitude to sex is perhaps more ambivalent and paradoxical than any other nation's. (Koestler in Bhattacharya, 1975, 3).

The attitude of the "young husband" is characteristic of the male protagonist, the husband-figure of *My Story*. Narendra Nath Bhattacharya too recognizes the ambivalent attitude towards sex in Indian society. But he ascribes it not to the Indian psychology like Koestler but to the prevalent conflict between Indian patriarchal structures of power of the dominant class and the matriarchal leanings of the simpler peoples:

> The unnatural existence of Indian patriarchy of the dominant class through a constant struggle with matriarchal leanings of the simpler peoples alone explains the ambivalent and paradoxical attitude of the high-class Hindus towards sex...."(Bhattacharya, 1975, 3).

Bhattacharya's argument seems more cogent as patriarchal and matriarchal values have always been at variance and can, therefore, be taken as a vital source of the contradiction in question. This kind

of ambivalence is central to Das's poetic consciousness. It also manifests the poet's fragmented self. The tenability of Kolhi's view is also rendered questionable by the fact that Das's concepts of love and transcendence are beyond the purview of occidental feminist discourse. By identifying the lover with Krishna the poet reveals her typical Indianness. Her redeeming compassion for all the suffering beings and her sustained endeavour to transcend the body have roots in Indian philosophy of the body, the self and Brahman as expounded in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The Indian consciousness of Das also embraces the West. In a number of her writings the Orient and the Occident appear to be dialectically related. This makes her a unique poetic personality.

Since Das also needs to be seen as a postcolonial writer, the aspect of decolonization and the poet's postcolonial context requires examination. The element of decolonization becomes important specially in the use and moulding of the English language and her oriental philosophical orientation—a fact that calls for decolonized critical tools. The subject will be dealt with in chapter three. Despite Das's explicit postcolonial agenda and her melioristic sensibility, one should not lose sight of the literary merit of her work. There is also some truth in the assumption that a literary work of art is a self-contained whole and its intrinsic interpretative possibilities can be infinite. In its essential textuality lies its elastic interpretative potential. Hence the relative indifference to the artist's ideas and beliefs and to the genre of the piece. Herein lies the sheer futility of many critical attempts to draw the knowledge-map of Das.

The overall critical perspective on Das demands an examination of certain basic notions of literature and literary reading. It is a commonplace of critical response that one can read a given work of literature in varied ways and get a variety of things out of one's reading. An "empirical reading" of a work—to use a term from reader-response criticism—as Jeremy Hawthorn points out: "...can generate a range of different reading experiences, over time, between cultures and groups, (or within them) and even for the same individual, leads necessarily to the question of the status and authority of these different reading experiences." (Hawthorn, 1994, 240).

Nabar rejects Harrex's interpretation of Das in a rather questionable way. As empirical readers, both Harrex and Nabar, or anybody else, can have their "varied reading experiences" and come up with their own valuable perceptions of the poet in question. But these "varied reading experiences" can in no way nullify each other. They can only coexist on the canvas of the text. The "status and authority" of these reading experiences are always open to question, and therefore, cannot be governed by any rigid notion of interpretation. Although reader-response critics do recognize a category of readers which they designate as "ideal" or "optimal" readers, "optimal reading" still remains a remote possibility. This leaves the critics with no option but to take cognizance of the fact that a significant work of literature can generate a succession of new reading experiences as the individual reader or his culture changes. As pointed earlier, the world of Das is a world of doubles, a world

of myriad existent contradictions and ambivalent attitudes, which are also philosophically grounded. It is perhaps out of a similar notion that Harrex is reminded of a philosophical assertion of the hero of Raja Rao's *Serpent And The Rope*. It is a lucid summary of the Vedantic and the Marxist positions—"whether the world exists and so—you or you exist and so—the world"—as Raja Rao's hero puts it. The two positions have always been held in irreconcilable opposition. It is very much part of the poetic consciousness of Das. Nabar does not accept this view. Her resentment stems from her belief that Das's knowledge of Marxism is virtually "non-existent". The interpretative possibilities of a literary text have nothing to do with, and are in no way conditional on, the knowledge of the poet. It is true that Das never made any conscious effort to make herself familiar with Vedantic philosophy, in fact with any philosophical system, but should it prevent her poetry from reflecting these positions and attitudes? Conscious pumping of scholarship into poetry and mechanical adherence to systems of knowledge often give rise to philosophical treatise in verse. Incidentally, the University of Georgia conferred upon Das the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the mid eighties for her, to quote Das's own words, "jottings on Natural Religion", a fact that testifies to her philosophical orientation.

With the help of certain poetical devices and strategies, a poet creates, consciously or unconsciously, sub-texts and suggestive power which can be said in a way to constitute a vital component of poeticism. Indeed, the greater the power and range of

suggestiveness, greater the scope for varied reading experiences and interpretations. Thus, the sub-texts can coalesce to constitute attitudes, positions, thematic possibilities, shades of meanings and nuances, ideas, knowledge and even systems of philosophy, independent of the knowledge and beliefs of the poet, making it possible for a poem like "The Inheritance" to emulate "prayer and Shakespearean soliloquy, vision and violence, Brahma and Macbeth" and indeed, a great deal more. According to some of the New Critics, "poetry is not cognitive but emotive"—a position not quite acceptable to later critics. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that poetry is more emotive than cognitive, with the ratio varying, depending on the nature of the poet's sensibility. Suggestiveness primarily inheres in the emotive dimension of poetry while poetic cognitiveness belongs to its enunciative domain. Das's poetry presents an impressive fusion of emotiveness and cognitiveness: suggestion and enunciation. This is despite the fact that her poetry in general is also declarative. It must also be borne in mind that in many of her poems enunciativeness far outweighs suggestiveness and lyrical intensity suffers under a surfeit of statements which may be more acceptable in prose than in poetry. This happens mainly in her longer poems like "Composition", "Suicide", "Of Calcutta", "Requiem for my Father" etc. She often tends to use lyrical and narrative devices simultaneously in these poems which quite often turn out to be incongruous, otherwise this blending of the lyrical and the narrative modes can be seen as a valuable experiment with poetic form.

Das emerges on the Indo-English poetic scene more as an anachronism and iconoclast, presenting through her writings in general and her poetry in particular, a critique of culture, worn-out values, customs and canons of poetry. As she advances in her poetic journey she disentangles herself from her gender identity and feels greater need to "look beyond the chilling flesh" until she "gatecrashes" "into the precincts of others' dreams":

> My songs echoed in strangers' dreams, in unease
> They stirred in their sleep and sighed. Yes, often, poets
> Gatecrash into the precincts of others' dreams
> As Gods and Goddesses do many a time
> In unsolicited magnanimity.

CHAPTER II

POETRY AND ANCESTRY: REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

> "Life is like a river, and as fixed, unutterable in unceasing movement and in changeless change as the great river is, and time itself."
>
> (Meyerhoff)

> I thought as child the blue vein
> At my mother's throat.
> My roots, yes , I believed in
> Robust family trees.
>
> (")

The literary creativity of Kamala Das has its roots, to a considerable extent, in the poet's awareness of a vibrant past with which her poetic psyche is in a constant dialogue. Past becomes an inescapable obsession with Das: "Like the phoenix I rose from the ashes of my past" (*MS* 177) as she proclaims in her "autobiography". Das writes with a very strong sense of the past which becomes for her the repository of "experience" as well as "innocence". Naturally, her "inward journeys" and moments of introspection are seldom without reverberations of the past. One may, therefore, designate her poetry, with rare exceptions, as retro-introspective.

The poems dealing with the poet's personal ancestry can be said to be dialogues between the past and the present embedded in memory. In Das the past is filtered and apprehended through ancestry which exists both at the extrinsic as well as intrinsic levels in her writings in general and in her poetry in particular. It serves two distinct purposes: firstly, ancestry can be seen as a background of Das's poetry and is therefore a major determinant of its historical context. This is necessary for an extrinsic approach to her poetry. Secondly, ancestry is a recurrent theme of Das's poetry and hence intrinsic to it. To be more precise, Das's immediate personal ancestry is thematic and intrinsic while the rather remote historical ancestry is extrinsic to her poetry. The word "ancestor" does not imply only the poet's immediate predecessors but all those who have in one way or the other contributed to the formation and evolution of the poet's consciousness, irrespective of language and spatio-temporal distance. Or, as Eunice De Souza observes in her introduction to *Nine Indian Women-Poets*, "Women have been writing poetry in India since about 1000 B.C. on religious and secular themes, and it is among these rather more distant ancestors that contemporary women writers are likely to find congenial voices and styles," (1997). Thus Das's poetic ancestry can be seen to stretch as far back as the ancient Buddhist nuns, Mahadevi Akka, Jana Bai and many such women-poets who have exhibited iconoclastic traits of various types mainly in their critiquing of hegemonic patriarchy in the manner of Das. It may be useful to consider a few points in this connection.

It is significant that the earliest lyrical outbursts of the women- poets, the Buddhist nuns, are celebrations of freedom arising from the attainment of *nirvana*. The following lyric is attributed to Sumangalamata (mother of Sumangala) who, following her disillusionment with domesticity, left her hunch-backed Brahmin husband to join the ascetic order of theris (senior nuns) undeterred by the rigorous conditions imposed upon women by Buddhism to take holy orders. The song can be taken as one of the earliest instances of feminism in its incipient form:

A woman well set free! How free I am,
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,
And from empty cooking pots,
Free too of that unscrupulous man,
The weaver of sunshades.
Calm now, and serene I am,
All lust and hatred purged
To the shade of the spreading trees I go
And contemplate my happiness.
Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy.

Each lyric in the Therigatha focuses on an epiphanic experience in which the painful hurdles of secular life are overcome and the torment and agony of the speaker subside as the transcendental bliss of nirvana descends upon her. As the poets rejoice in their new life, they also draw a contrast between their present life and the one left

behind. The rhetoric of their testimony is pregnant with the suggestion that one should go beyond the fact or the statement to its significance. But, to quote Tharu and Lalita, "Even though the structural focus is on the message of the Buddha, that message itself depends for its texture and quality on the actual lives it transforms, and acquires fresh currency in each lyric" (67). A striking feature of this representative lyric is its conspicuously anti-patriarchal agenda contained in the reference to the husband as "that unscrupulous man," reminiscent of modern feminist preoccupations which Das also voices in her "love" poems.

Das's sensibility is remarkably similar to that of the Kannada saint-poet of the twelfth century A.D. Mahadevi Akka. A.K. Ramanujan gives a description of Mahadevi's sensibility in the following passage:

> Her search is recorded in her vacanas as a search for her love, following all the phases of human love as set forth by the conventions of Indian, especially Sanskrit, poetry. The three chief forms of love, love forbidden...love as separation...and love in union are all expressed in her poems, often one attitude informing and complicating another in the same poem....
>
> She was recognised by her fellow-saints as the most poetic of them all, with a single symbolic action unifying all her poetry....In her, the phases of human

> love are metaphors for the phases of mystic ascent. In this search, unlike the other saints, she involves all of nature, a sister to bird, beast and tree....Appropriately, she chose for adoration an aesthetic aspect of Siva, Siva as Cennamllikarjuna, or the Lovely Lord White as Jasmine.
>
> Like other bhaktas, her struggle was with her condition, as body, as woman, as social being tyrannised by social roles, as a human confined to a place and a time. Through these shackles she burst defiant in her quest for ecstasy. (Ramanujan, 1979, 113-114).

As is the case with Das, Akka's poetry is about search for love. In both cases love is made to rise above social taboos. Love in union becomes a mere illusion to Das, or rather to her personae, giving her little happiness. This is evident from lines like: "My love is an empty gift, a gilded/Container, good for show, nothing/Else...." Akka on the other hand finds it meaningful and becomes defiant in her search for ecstasy that results from such a love. Both the poets turn to myth for an archetypal symbol of fulfilled love: Das turns to Krishna; Akka to Siva. To Das as well as to Akka sexual love is a stepping stone to a more complex and mystical experience of a final union with the bodiless or the archetypal lover. Siva is referred to by Akka as Chennamallikarjuna, the "Lord as White as Jasmine" and the "phases of human love" as Ramanujan puts it, become "metaphors for the phases of a mystic ascent." The growth of

physical passion becomes symbolic of a mystic spiritual progression. Das on the other hand de-mythicizes and demystifies mythical characters. Radha and Krishna are radically humanized and the divine sexual congress is conceived of in ultra-human terms. In her struggle with her condition: "as body, as woman, as social being tyrannised by social roles," Akka moves once again close to Das and becomes her legitimate predecessor. But the most interesting feature that unites the two poets in a venerable ancestry, hitherto unnoticed by their critics, is their ecofeminism. Akka was, to reiterate Ramanujan's words, "a sister to bird, beast and tree." Her involvement with nature comes out in the following analogy. The lines are attributed to her and translated by Ramanujan himself: "It was like a stream/running into the dry bed/of a lake,/like rain/pouring on plants/perched to sticks...." On the other hand Das's ecofeminist concerns are more confined to her role in society as a conservationist.

The candour and forthrightness with which Das expresses personal feelings and intimate thoughts are part of a long Indian tradition in poetry particularly Sanskrit, admirably exemplified by poets like Akka and Jana Bai. Quite often private commitments acquired public manifestation that raised these woman-poets to the pedestal of rebels. According to a popular legend Akka discarded clothes and wandered naked in the countryside, covered only with her long tresses in search of her divine lover, her chennamallikarjuna. This archetypal lover is contrasted in the following poem with the self-seeking men who are drawn merely by

her physical beauty and regard her as a pleasurable object. "Brother" in the context of the poem only means a male:

Brother, you've come
Drawn by the beauty
Of these billowing breasts,
This brimming youth.
Everytime you've looked at me,
Who have you taken me for?
All men other than Chennamallikarjuna
Are faces to be shunned, see, brother.
Translated by Susan Daniel.

What is immediately striking about these lines is the directness of the speaking voice and the addresser-addressee pattern to be echoed in Das's poems like "The Old Playhouse", "The Stone Age" or "Man is a Season", to name just a few. The conversational tone and uninhibited self-assertion find continuity in the medieval Maharashtrian *varkari* poet Jana Bai. She is important in the context of Das's poetry. Apart from the candour with which the poet speaks, she predates Das in her iconoclastic exposition of patriarchal expectations about women and the way she is regarded as a mere body that should be dressed up to suit phallocentric norms of the society that remains ignorant of her spiritual quest:

Cast off all shame
And sell yourself

In the marketplace;
Then alone
Can you hope
To reach the Lord.

Cymbals in hand,
A veena upon my shoulder,
I go about;
Who dares to stop me?

The pallav of my sari
Falls away (a scandal!);
Yet will I enter
The crowded marketplace
Without a thought.

Jani says, My Lord,
I have become a slut
To reach Your home.
Translated by Vilas Sarang.

Das resembles Jana Bai in her treatment of the Krishna theme and her handling of this motif. Das may not even be aware that her attitude to Krishna has interesting parallels in the *varkari* poets of the Maharashtrian bhakti tradition, represented by this poet. The most interesting parallel can be seen in the way both of these poets demythicize Krishna. It is consistent with this tradition to regard

Krishna as an intimate friend, a mate to share day to day household responsibilities as will be seen in a later chapter and as is evident from the following translation:

> Jani sweeps the floor,
> The Lord collects the dirt,
> Carries it upon His head,
> And casts it away.
> Won over by devotion,
> The Lord does lowly chores!
> Says Jani to Vithoba,
> How shall I pay your debt?
> *Translated by Vilas Sarang.*

Poetic ancestry does not always imply an act of conscious borrowing or emulation on the part of a poet. More often, poetic genealogy is a matter of finding parallels in the handling of certain conventions, themes and literary devices as is most often the case with a poet like Das. One such convention relates to Das's handling of this Radha-Krishna myth and the resultant placing of Das in the bhakti (Devotional) tradition by some of her critics, including Vincent O'Sullivan who advocates a religious reading of Das.

The overall attitude of the poet towards the past as a single historical entity appears to be one of ambivalence. Indeed, it is this sense of ambivalence in Das that makes K Satchidanandan posit in his highly revealing foreword to *Only The Soul Knows How To*

Sing: A Selection From Kamala Das, a binary opposition in the work of Das between the "historical past" and the poet's personal past: "She refuses to glorify the historical past; her nostalgias are confined to certain moments of love and tenderness in her personal past. Hence her natural opposition to all forms of revivalism" (1996, 16). Useful though the distinction is in its own way, its tenability may be rendered questionable by the fact that the "historical past" and the poet's "personal past" can also overlap and at points become inseparable. The poet's grandmother, the great grandmother, the confidence-honouring maid-servants on the one hand and her feudal Nair ancestors on the other belong to the historical as well as to the personal past of the poet. It may even be called perhaps the objective past and the poet's subjective past. The poems of Das in which the personal past becomes inseparable from the historical past include: "Millionaires at Marine Drive", "Blood", "My Grandmother's House", "Half Day's Bewitchment", "A Hot Noon in Malabar", "Evening at the Old Nalapat House", "Composition" on the one hand and "Honour" on the other. The latter poem will be discussed in the context of Das's persistent humanity in Chapter Five.

"Millionaires at Marine Drive" is a poem of strong binaries and contrastive features. In this poem and in the ones cited above, past derives its meaning from its opposition to the present:

> Eighteen years have past since my grandmother's death
> I wonder why the ache still persists. Was

She buried, bones and all, in the loose red
Soil of my heart? ...

Death and memory are described with the help of images which are elemental as well as sensory. In fact memory is intertwined with death with a sense of transition from death to life. In the line "buried, bones and all, in the red, loose soil of my heart" the sense of death is conveyed by "buried bones" which is an elemental tactile image that finds completion in "the red, loose soil" with a visual dimension being added to it by "red". Since "red" signifies blood the elemental character of the image is reinforced and the grandmother is brought to life by memory. The line also conveys a sense of fluidity that characterizes time and memory. The poet makes frequent use of "pathetic fallacy" in order to articulate shifting states of mind as is evident in the lines: "All through the sun-singing /Day all through the moon-wailing night". The image of the moon as "wailing" is rather unconventional in the present context as it is associated with pain and gloom in a sharp opposition to the "singing" sun. The image should be interpreted in the context of Das's poetry as a whole in order to arrive at its full import. Moon signifies night which in turn is very rarely associated with a happy experience because that is also the time when the woman's body is subjected to maximum sexual abuse as evident from poems like "Death is so Mediocre" and "The Wild Bougainvillaea". In the former night is nothing but a collector of junk; sexuality is seen as grossness: "...The night forever/A garbage collector, tearing grubbily/Wrappers off many a guilt remains,/A dubious ally...",

while in the latter the pain-inflicting nocturnal bed is compared to a rough sea with violent waves on which the woman-persona, moaning and groaning, is tossed mercilessly. Sexual violence is paralleled by the image of the "troubled sea". Night also brings the "fire of the arsonist" as opposed to the "warmth" of the speaker's grandmother:

> All through the sun singing
> Day, all through the moon wailing night, I
> Think of her, of the warmth she took away,
> Wrapped in funerary white, a fire that
> Stayed lit while her blood cooled and there was no
> More of it for me, for, no longer was
> There someone to put an arm around my
> Shoulders without a purpose, all the hands,
> The great brown thieving hands groped beneath my
> Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist's,
> Warmth was not their aim, they burned my cities
> Down, it was not blood but acid that flowed
> Through my arteries and in autumn years
> I yellowed, sickened like the leaves on trees,
> Gained a freedom I never once had asked for.

The dominant elemental image in these lines is that of fire, an image that permeates almost entire *Summer in Calcutta*. Heat with its varying intensity is associated with love as well as passion, hence life and death, creation and destruction, purification and defilement.

Night is a time of encounter with her own loneliness and bereavement, a time when "the sad winds of memory" always blow. Hence to the poet "Night is a woman in widow's weeds/Reminding of wet graves and wreaths...." ("Requiem for a Son"). These deathly associations fill her mind with an urge to obliterate the very existence of night: "I wished as child to peel the night like old/Wallpaper and burn it,..." ("A Souvenir of Bone"). On the other hand in the poem "The Moon" the sun and the moon are seen not in opposition but as playing complementary roles:

> Each night the moon cools the sun-cooked
> Goodies of the world, pats and shapes
> With weathered hands the dough of grief,
> And swathes gently the embarrassed
> Loneliness of middle age, so
> That again the desired words
> Are said on balconies, and faded
> Eyes glitter with hope.
>
> ("The Moon")

The imagery of arson suggesting destructive passion in "The Millionaires At Marine Drive" gives way to the imagery drawn from the world of culinary art and domesticity in the above lines from "The Moon" which is a great poem that evokes a wide range of thoughts and shows the immense strength of Das's poetry. As is the case with a large number of her poems, it eludes easy interpretation. The moon is projected as "just a witch who fattens on other's

mishaps". The unconventionality of the image lies in the suggestion that the "witch" is not a party to the "mishaps" but on the contrary a healer. This is the other side of the moon that the conceit reveals. The poet depicts the moon as having been engaged in an endless act of healing, waiting for the new day's wounds. But still she is a witch because this act of healing does not stem from any moral or spiritual fervour but from something more physical and gross since she "fattens on other's mishaps". The moon holds on "like a trained circus dog" even when every hope gets shattered and ends in despair. The "new planetarium that smells of chrome and Rexene cannot change her course" and she is the only hope of the leper, the lunatic and those lost in lonely middle age.

To return to "The Millionaires at Marine Drive", the characteristic juxtaposition of opposites brings out the implied contrast between the poet's uncorrupted past and the corrupt and dehumanizing present. Trapped in a love-less relationship with an insensate husband, the poetic persona retreats to childhood for ideal love and tutelary protection. Thus the obsessive but therapeutic return to the past, to her roots in Kerala often acquires a Freudian dimension. Her bruised self-esteem finds solace in the gratifying act of re-living a healing past represented by her grandmother and the old Nalapat House which in turn becomes an epitome of everything the poet holds precious in life—true love, emotional security, uncorrupted values and above all the poet's real identity, now disfigured by compulsions of adulthood. This brings us to another of Das's celebrated poems: "My Grandmother's House" in which the

contrast is not so much stated as in the poem just discussed but evoked. The time-pattern presented in the poem is present-past-present. The poem is about giving and receiving of love which is spontaneous and expects nothing in return. This is Das's concept of true love but it can only be located in the premarital phase of her life. The poems that show an obsession with sexual love in reality deplore the glaring absence of this selfless love in the post-marital phase of her life. Her poetic evolution is a story of her journey from innocence to experience :

> There is a house now far away where once
> I received love. That woman died,
> The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
> Among books I was then too young
> To read, and, my blood turned cold like the moon.

This is more than just nostalgia transmuted into poetry. The poem begins in the present tense: "There is a house," but the insignificant present holds only the physical structure of the old house. Its rich attributes, which are often human, belong to that phase of the poet's life that ended with the grandmother. The death of the house coincides with the death of the grandmother. The opening five lines enforce a sense of the pastward flight. A sense of natural temporal distance is created by the reference to the grandmother as "that woman". The demonstrative adjective "that" as contrasted with the personal possessive pronoun "my" also suggests emotional distancing to which the dead woman is subjected with the passage

of time. The transformation of the matriarch from "my grandmother" into "that woman" brings a note of impersonality and cold detachment culminating in the simile "my blood turned cold like the moon". One can compare this tactile image suggesting loss of emotion with the auditory representation of the moon in the earlier poem as "wailing" suggesting some kind of emotional involvement in the predicament of the poet. One of the effects the poet seeks to achieve is that of cultivated silence to which the house is said to have withdrawn with the demise of the grandmother. Silence signifies oblivion as well as state of desertion. Either its inhabitants are dead or have moved to busy cities. This silence becomes greater and more agonizing when one remembers the scintillating conversations and lively discussions that filled the house in the past, as the poet recalls, "Conversation in the hall was always scintillating." Even the soundless movement of snakes among books is an image of silence. The effect is partly achieved by the use of sibilant consonants.

The description of the vicissitudes of the house is followed by a wistful articulation of the poet's desire for a reunion with it, or at least to catch a glimpse of the house in her drab moments of a loveless present. It also indicates how strongly the house has impinged on the poet:

> How often I think of going
> There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
> Just listen to the frozen air.

The lines embody a profound anguish of alienation from her true identity, her inner self, of which the house becomes a powerful symbol. She cannot enter the house; she can only, stranger-like, "peer through blind eyes of (its) windows." The window panes have been rendered "blind" or opaque by the symbolic dust that has settled over them with the passage of time, signifying neglect and a process of desertion to which the house gets subjected over the years. The window of the house is the window of time through which the poet yearningly peeps into her past, as Anisur Rehman puts:

> The image underlines here, with sufficient emphasis, the languishing desire of the poet for a sentient peep into her past and resurrect her dreams and desires. With the dereliction of the old house the windows have become blind. Only the heat of reunion with the house will melt the ice and window will again be restored to old life. (1981, 56).

Absence of transparency as suggested by "blind eyes" also implies denial to the poet of access to the house, consequent upon a weakened bond with it. The house is old and decrepit, hence its eyes are "blind" or bleary and its lost vitality can return only with renewed human habitation. The "air" that used to be warm with human fellowship is now "frozen" with its absence. However, embedded in the "frozen" air are warm reminiscences, the fond echoes of the past to which she craves to listen.

The condition of dereliction of the house is conveyed by references to darkness into which it has been plunged. It is also darkness of despair and gloom that fills Das's poetic psyche. Her poems abound in images of darkness and opacity. "The snake-shrine" of the house "is dark with weeds", "...the rats are running now/Across the darkened halls" ("Blood"), or:

> No lamps are lit at the Nalapat House
> When the first star comes, only the fireflies
> Light up the stone steps and their potted plants.
> ("Evening at the Old Nalapat House")

The house, wrapped in darkness with "frozen air" that "crouches in dust in the/Evenings" ("The Snobs"), is thrown into a contrast with the "warm well-lit/Bazar." The darkness of the house extends to envelop the entire surrounding and the introduction of the grandmother's ghost that stalks the "courtyard" creates an eerie effect:

> ...only my grandmother walks there
> Then, though dead for eighteen years and wispy
> As a shred of mist, walks on the white sand
> Of the courtyard where she watched us play as
> Children, long long time ago, walks through
> The barred doors, all brass-knobbed and dark and
> Climbs the stairs scaring even the civets,
> The bats and the insane rats, clambers up to peer

Out through loose-hinged windows at the roots of
Old trees all cut down and sold, thick roots like
Truncated necks wrapped in the lichen of
A dozen monsoons, and sighs....

Since the house is emptied of human presence its legitimate inhabitants are "the civets", "the bats" and "the insane rats" with the spirit of the grandmother walking around, climbing the stairs and peering through the "loose-hinged windows". The non-human creatures, the supernatural spirit and the prevalent darkness are intertwined to enforce the idea of uncanny desolation. The function of the supernatural spirit is also to present a point of view of someone who has been an eye-witness to all the extreme conditions of glory and cimerian gloom of desertion and dilapidation through which the Nalapat House has had to pass.

The atmosphere that combines the dark and the uncanny is found in another poem entitled: "No Noon at My Village Home":

...On the dust of
Windowsills I spot the signatures of
The patient ghosts. The trees have thatched a darker
Roof; the moon of cities, the moon of vast
Rice-fields sprinting past the trains, is nowhere
To be seen. Only the fireflies light up
our porch....

Thus, darkness becomes an integral attribute of the abandoned house. However unhappy its associations may be in the impoverished present it will have its own meaning to the poet:

> Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
> Darkness to bring it here to lie
> Behind my bedroom door like a brooding Dog....

The analogy is rather too far-fetched and the lines display obvious syntactical weakness, as Nabar rightly observes, but they certainly make sense. The fiercely drab reality that has dawned upon the house and hence upon the poet becomes the source of her "wild despair". She has failed to fulfil her childhood promise of rebuilding the fallen walls of the house. Nor the future holds any hope for her to improve its plight and rid it of its prolonged darkness. So she accepts it in a helpless posture of compromise. Besides, whatever belongs to the house is dear to her including its darkness.

The poem concludes in a dialogic situation. The gap between her loving past and her loveless present is rendered incredible from the point of view of the male addressee:

> ...you cannot believe, darling.
> Can you, that I lived in such a house and
> Was proud, and loved... I who have lost
> My way and beg now at strangers" doors to

Receive love, at least in small change?

("My Grandmother's House")

However according to Nabar, "There seems, again, no convincing reason for the poet's apprehension that her lover would not be able to believe that she once lived in a house where she was "proud and loved" (1996). It must be pointed out that there is nothing in the poem that tells us that "darling" refers to a lover who is supposed to know everything about the speaker. It is only a poetic strategy to generate a sense of surprise and dismay in a dialogic mode.

In this state of alienation she also senses a separation from her matriarchal roots. Since the old house often becomes an extension of the poet's personality, away from it she experiences a gnawing sense of incompleteness:

> Returning again and again to Kerala, to my old house which must be ancient, 450, 460 years—the feeling that the house and I have become one; for instance, if the gate is rusty I feel it's the gate to my heart—it sounds so stupid when it comes out in prose; as though I identify myself with it. (Das, Nov 1980, 65).

This is empathic identification which may truly be more acceptable in poetry than in prose. Poetry in this sense can be more accommodating than prose. The idea receives a poetic treatment in a

poem like "Half Day's Bewitchment". The poet completely identifies herself with the house:

> Ultimately the house and I became one. My Heart's door
> Swinging ajar with each vagrant breeze was the wrought iron gate,
> Its hinges rusted from disuse, creaking to let
> A traveller in....

Thus, the old house becomes the poet's real ancestral heritage, a priceless legacy around which the poetic pilgrimage of Das revolves. The house is represented in her work as a repository of fond memories. On the one hand it symbolizes innocence, on the other a dying glory. There are elaborate descriptions of the house in *My Story* and other writings of Das and a repetition may be unwarranted. In an upsurge of empathic nostalgia the grandmother, the great grandmother, the poet and the old house become one. It becomes a metaphor of the poet's personality in a poem like "Half Day's Bewitchment". The house often gets completely internalized as evident from the following passage from her story "The Sparrow on the Glass Pane". The poet's obsession with death and decay is reflected in the way she highlights the decaying condition of the house:

> My body is like a mansion where once parties were given. Wine flowed. The dancers danced, the

> musicians sang. Every guest was noble. Every guest was a pleasure-seeker. Then the house crumbled, and one day the slumdwellers began to arrive with their shabby luggage. Each step they took was with an apology. We know that we ought not to have come, they said. Like the slumdwellers the aches come creeping in a night into this body where once only pleasure dwelt....These are the new tenants, they know that they have come to stay. (Dialogue India No. 5).

In a similar vein the mind of the poet is compared to an old playhouse now deserted with all its lights put out: "There is no more singing, no more a dance/My mind is an old playhouse with all its lights put out" ("The Old Playhouse"). Too often in Das, as exemplified by the above passage, there is a blurring of the distinction between prose and poetry. It is consistent with her characteristic blending of modes in a postmodernist fashion, a subject that calls for a separate and comprehensive treatment.

Thus, through the lanes and bylanes of memory the poetic pilgrim traverses the territories of myth, history and ancestry. In the essentially retrospective framework of her mind, memory is accorded a primary place. She often "boasts" of having been gifted with a powerful memory which has enabled her to re-live and re-create a distant past. The results of an innovative experiment with memory are her famous Malayalam works *Balyakala Smaranakala*

(Memories of Childhood), *Varshangalku Mumbu* (Years Ago) and *Neermalthalam Pootha Kalam* (When the Pomegranate Bloomed). The former records in minutest possible detail the events of her childhood days with vivid reproduction of the local dialect and even idiolectal peculiarities of the people with whom she used to interact as a child. In the following excerpt from one of her interviews, she tells her readers how these works of memory came into being and what purpose they serve:

> Balyakala Smaranakala is an experiment I undertook. I wanted each piece in it to stand apart as a short story and yet I wanted the truth to be told, as far as I could remember it. I have used dialogue which I heard years ago and I have retained the rustic flavour. I have a very good memory. Some of us in the Nalapat family possess a great memory. I suppose I can boast a bit. When I experience something, I remember the colours, the dialogue, the sound and its texture without any difficulty. (154).

The experiment as reported by the poet was taken up at the behest of a Bombay-based psychiatrist Dr. Ramanlal Patel. *Balyakala Smaranakala* can be seen as having a strong autobiographical element. Unlike in *My Story*, in these memoirs fiction has been kept at a perceptible distance. With this ability she has been able to penetrate the layers of her long ancestry.... The word "memory" is used in Das's writings in its two obvious senses: as a mnemonic

faculty and as object captured or evoked by that faculty that is remembrance or reminiscence. The faculty of memory is hailed in her discursive prose as a vital mental apparatus and a source of creative power. It is the courier of the moments of childhood and ancestry. Ironically, memory as an object of that remarkable faculty brings her pain and gloom:

> The fieldhands,
> Returning home with baskets on their heads,
> Hear that sigh and speed, their thin legs crushing
> The weeds, the shrubs, their ankles bruised by
> Thorns, their insides bruised by memories....
> ("Evening At The Old Nalapat House")

It is not a matter of contradiction but of distinction and semantics. Thus in Das the faculty of memory as a sensitive antenna is more prone to catching unhappy signals that find expression more in her poetry than in her prose. In "substitute", as mentioned early in this chapter though in a slightly different context, memory is given the metaphor of a "moody sea" and brings her sorrow, and disenchantment:

> memory
> A great moody sea,
> Do not thump so
> Against my shore.

Let me lie still without thought or will.
For a benign hour or two,
Dear night, be my tomb.

Thus, past is perceived as a vast assemblage of memories of pain and pleasure that crystallize into poetical artefacts. The fond memories of the poet's grandmother and great grandmother at the legendary Nalapat House give her her nostalgias and even perhaps her "songs of innocence" while the memories of her feudal past give her her "songs of experience". However, it must be affirmed that in Das's poetry innocence and experience do not remain two distinct entities separately expressed as in Blake. Instead there is an interplay of the two which can be seen as the two vital components of her poetic consciousness, a subject to be taken up in the fourth chapter. It can also be said that innocence and experience exist in a dialectical relationship in her poetry.

It is evident that the poetry of Das exhibits an undeniable ancestral strain. It is far from being just a recording of fond memories of ancestors and ancestresses, buried in a distant past. They are very much alive in her dynamic consciousness, for, to echo Eliot, the poet is not so much concerned with "the pastness of the past" but its "presentness". As a result, ancestry becomes a living reality to which her overall attitude is once again one of ambivalence. Her feminine ancestry as represented by her grandmother along with the old house embodies her nostalgia and finds expression in the above poems. In all these poems the return

to the past is obsessive as well as therapeutic. The poems succeed remarkably in evoking the idyllic atmosphere of the old Nalapat House. This personal past with its fond memories heals the wounds of the present that has to offer nothing but guilt and disillusionment. Indeed, past becomes a critique of the present and the transition is well brought out. The poetic pilgrim repudiates the worn-out canons of a dead past exactly the way the sea hurls the bruising dead body on the shore in "Suicide". Sea stands for the freedom of the creative imagination which can never be fettered and be forced to "belong" to the fatuous categories, formulated and transmitted over the years by oppressive and discriminating patriarchy. Past is also "the great blue sea" of creative fantasy and imagination, and the "pale green pond" a pool of childhood memories and both have powerful symbolic associations in the retrospective framework of the poet's mind.

Since Das's ancestors and ancestresses stalk her poetic world a brief overview of her personal ancestry is necessary before examining the question of her ancestral heritage. It is interesting to note that apart from the towering presence of her maternal granduncle Das's poetic ancestry is fundamentally feminine in character. It may to a great extent be ascribed to her matriarchal and matrilineal background, as she herself informs her readers: "I must tell you that we are members of a matriarchal community and that our children take the mother's family name instead of the father's". (*IL*, "Of Mother Childhood And All: Reminiscences From Indian English", 112). It is a fact that merits critical appraisal for a more

vital purpose. She is constantly aware of her matriarchal tradition, and this awareness embodies her anguish as well as her rebellion. Her anguish stems from her perception of the vast dividing chasm between the legitimate place of the Nair women as sanctioned by a historical tradition, and the actual subaltern status given to them by a feudal patriarchy. This constitutes the poet's agony of ancestry as evident from her following observation in one of her columns:

> In the family I was born into, all women behaved like bonded slaves in order to survive. And nobody seemed to think it funny. I belonged to the matrilineal and matriarchal community of Nayars but there was not a single matriarch in my family who had the courage to make a decision without consulting a male. Clearly there was something wrong with all of us. Perhaps it had something to do with our admiration for Mahatma Gandhi, then the national hero. (Das, 10 April 1981).

The extract evinces Das's matriarchal consciousness and her tradition gives her the authority to speak representatively. She says she "belonged" to a matriarchal tradition and her choice of the past tense reflects her concern for the agonizing fact that she has been considerably distanced from her roots. It generates an existential crisis in the poet as is evident from the following extract from one of her articles:

> I don't know why I keep going back there, because there is nobody to welcome me except the servants....Besides, that's the only time we feel we have an address, that we are something. Here in the city you are swallowed up—like cockroaches that move around at night—what are you? (Das, Nov 1980, 65).

She cannot choose to be one of those women who endure injustice for the sake of survival. Her mode of survival is by keeping her identity intact. When the poet finds it threatened she becomes a rebel:

> I became acquainted with the stories of those old women. I had this great grandmother's sister, who had suffered a great deal. She had to obey her uncle's commands. Uncle commanded her to divorce her husband, to send him away. I don't know the reason, she did not tell me the reason either. She was in love with the man, he was the father of her son. She waited, she used to go every afternoon and stand at the fence. It was a long vigil, just to catch a glimpse of the man when he passed that way. And then a new marriage was thrust upon her, a new husband she did not want. So this was the suffering, these were the kinds of stories all the women in my background had to tell me. So I thought I would not be able to grow

into a woman like them with silence, which did not protect them at all. (*IL* 139, 1990, 155).

Das's granduncle Nalapat Narayana Menon was a leading philosopher and poet of Malabar. It is said that he held court like a king, people thronged to listen to him when he discoursed on a wide variety of subjects. His elegy on the death of his wife titled *Karnuneer Thuli* (Teardrop) was translated into English by Das's father V.M. Nair and published in a London Magazine. Over and above it was her granduncle who first presented to Das when just a budding poet a copy of Whitman's *The Leaves Of Grass* as a token of encouragement and appreciation. He continued to serve as a source of inspiration to her. He was a towering intellectual personality with a fine library to his credit which included some invaluable palm leaf manuscripts. Most of them were written in Vattezhutha that in all probability came from the Phoenecians to Malabar as Das recalls the literary and intellectual climate of the house: "Our house revolved entirely around my uncle, the well-known philosopher Nalapat Narayana Menon's library. I would read and read and read, and write". Das gives more details of the contents of the library the types of literature she was privileged to read:

> The Nalapat library which we ransacked during the summer vacations had classics piled roof high. We read Materlinck, Anotole France, Dickens, Turgenev, Tolstoy before we were twelve, not comprehending

> all, but relishing the honey of good writing all the same. This probably made us averse to reading the insipid fare prescribed in our schools. (*MS* 113).

Among his nonpoetical works was his *Rati Samrajya*, a scholarly study based mainly on the works of Havelock Ellis and Indian sexiologists, his translation of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* and Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* into Malayalam. His contribution to the poet's life has one more important dimension. I agree with Nabar that the monthly literary get-togethers in Das's Bombay apartment "Bahutantrika" can be seen as a reminder of the lively discussions and poetry sessions at the Nalapat house. Das fondly recollects those moments: "Sri Nalapat Narayana Menon who was a poet-philosopher and a charming host. The Nalapat House used to have streams of guests coming to stay, nearly all of them scholars or writers."

Das's great grandaunt Ammalu had been a poet till she was struck down all of a sudden by paralysis but she continued to be Das's closest companion till her demise. Ammalu was basically a devotional poet. Her poetry centred on the Krishna myth which was later on to receive a more complex kind of treatment at the hands of Das. Certainly Ammalu can be seen as the poet's predecessor in her handling of this myth:

> Most of the Ammulu poems were about Krishna. To him she had been faithful. My chastity is my only gift to you, oh

> Krishna, she wrote in her last poem. Her writings disturbed me. I felt that after thirty years she was trying once again to communicate with the world and with me. (*MS* 18).

One of Das's aunts Ammini, though averse to marriage, in her lonely hours recited the love songs of Kumaran Asan, a popular poet of that time. Ammini made a significant impact on Das for it was she who for the first time made the poet aware of love—"It was while listening to her voice that I sensed for the first time that love was a beautiful anguish and a tapashya." (*MS* 14).

Das's mother Balamani Amma has been a prolific Malayalam poet of rare distinction. A basically self-taught genius like her daughter, Balamani Amma has published over seventeen volumes of poetry in Malayalam. Her outstanding literary achievements have fetched her numerous awards which include: Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (1964), The National Sahitya Akademi Award (1966), Padma Bhusan for Literature (1988) and the Fellowship of the National Sahitya Akademi in 1993. She has also been honoured with Birla Saraswati Samman.

The literary achievements of Balamani Amma become more meaningful when one considers the fact that she was not sent to school. On her own with the help of books and tutors she could become not only a great poet but also an outstanding scholar. Das gives a very close account of her mother's life and literary pursuits:

> My mother was never any good at mathematics. She had belonged to an orthodox family, the Nalapats, who did not think it proper for a girl to attend a school. She had a tutor for teaching Sanskrit. All the rest she had learnt by herself with the help of dictionaries. She had learnt to read English, Hindi, Bengali and Tamil. In Malayalam and in Sanskrit, she had a most enviable proficiency. She was a theosophist like her own uncle.
>
> Mother remained a true desi despite the fact that it was then a time for imitating the British. She did not attend the dinners my father gave at hotels, fearing that she would find herself out of place. She was shy and could not bring herself to converse with strangers. (113).

In her poetry, Balamani Amma draws heavily upon Indian classical mythology for the theme and subject of her poetry. She writes with a strong sense of tradition and classical restraint. Her poetry presents a fusion of a highly charged mystical experience of motherhood and the feelings and emotions of a sensitive human being with unwavering optimism about man's potentials. All this comes through in the foreword to one of her anthologies: "Man may be weak in many respects; but every day I feel more and more confident that poetry, as an art beneficial to humanity, must make him know his unconquerable, ever-evolving inner-being, not his weakness," (1970). She draws inspiration equally from the scenes of

domestic life she participates in and the mystical visions and metaphysical ideas she contemplates. In one of her poems from the Indian Puranic tradition called "Vibhishana" she hails the Puranic character of that name from the *Ramayana* as a messenger of peace and non-violence. It is a dramatic monologue of the ancient character but with a modern setting in contemporary Sri Lanka. With its vast canvas the poem encompasses the legendary times of the *Ramayana* as well as the turbulent period of social and political unrest after the Second World War. The poem rejects the mechanical subservience of compassionate feeling and intuitive judgement to the cold command of reason and justice devoid of mercy in a culture based on mere intellect. The idea is contained in the following concluding lines of the poem:

> ...In each man I meet, I perceive
> Rama, symbol of a culture based on mere intellect,
> A prince who bore in vein his love, like a blade tightly encased.
> One who sought fame more than all, the meagre innings of fame.
> In the sudden burst of a nuclear bomb I hear only
> the hiss of Rama's arrow and Ravana's final roar.
> Oh time, so complacent, so sure, you failed too, for you chose
> The brain's elegant illuminated streets ignoring
> The mute heart's shadowed lanes.
> (Translated from Malayalam by Kamala Das)

While in "The Story of the Axe" she exposes the utter futility of physical strength and power based on violence, she interprets myth in the context of present-day reality granting it a contemporary significance.

The potent literary ancestry of Das, she tells her readers, has had no bearing of any kind on the character and quality of her poetry. What came to her as a family legacy was the realization that as a member of a family of poets she too should write poetry: "Growing up listening to such discussions and debates my mother naturally turned to poetry, as I did too when I grew up, thinking that it was my duty as a member of the Nalapat family to write" (*MS* 112). Her personal experience and observation of life around her, she often asserts, far outweigh in importance any "ancestral heritage". Her poetry, on the whole, can be seen as a critique of the poetic conventions of her ancestors as well as her contemporaries: "My mother's poetry has not influenced me or my writing one bit". It is evident from her autobiographical writings that her mother was made to concentrate more on her poetry than on her children. As result the sensitive poet-child felt considerably alienated from her parents as can be seen from the following excerpt:

> Do you know what will make me really angry? he would ask us, peering into our faces, if you ever harass your mother that will make me really angry. So gradually turning wiser we moved away from mother

towards the maid-servants who had enough time for us who indeed were dying to tell us stories, (*MS* 112).

Even though Das started off as an iconoclast and has sustained her iconoclastic posture through the considerable part of her poetic career, she displays some interesting points of resemblance to her mother Balamani Amma mainly in her later poetry. This is visible in her treatment of the themes of motherhood, non-violence, love and human relationship. And the relevant poems written after 1980 are "Smoke in Colombo", "After July", "The Sea at Galle Face Green", "Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo" which will be discussed in chapter five in a different context. However, according to an earlier statement such a commonality should not be seen as an instance of parental influence or borrowing. Instead of her "real" parents, Das tells her readers, it was her "foster-parents" who helped her develop an identity of her own and inspired her to speak in an original voice: "Had we not grown up listening to the firm voices of Chekov, Flaubert, Materlink, Mansfield and Virginia Woolf? The sounds that our real parents made in our presence had been so indistinct while the dead ones filled our ears with their philosophy. Isabella Duncan told us that love was best when free,"(MS 108). In a sharp contrast to this observation, at a much later stage of her poetic development, and in a characteristically forthright manner, she rejects the idea of any kind of influence on her. The following quotation brings out the changed stance:

> I think my talent has become a robust one only because others have not interfered with it. You see, I can foresee many things without anyone telling me. People were sent in as tutors, but they came and went back because I slipped in mathematics. I had the best tutors in Calcutta my father could afford. And as you say, for me there has been no teacher at all practically. Some of them came but they did not help me. (*IL* 155, 147).

Again in an interview to R. Balashankar about the possibility of various influences on her poetry including that of Sylvia Plath, she says:

> I may be imperfect as a mother, a wife and a woman. But as a poet, I am terrific. I don't belong to any particular school of poetry. I am the greatest influence on my own poetry. I have not been influenced by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton or Judith Wright. I have managed, through constant chiselling, to evolve a style which is bare and bereft of any ornamentation. I consider this my greatest gain. After all the vocation of a poet is a ceaseless effort to try to learn to use words. (Aug 86, 31).

This may be called the egotistical feminine triggered off by her ire at the influence-hunters but the quotation also highlights Das's

aesthetics of linguistic simplicity of which she has been an ardent practitioner. She further affirms her originality in the same manner in an answer to my questionnaire: "Consciously I have not imitated any writer. I have kept myself away from books in order to preserve my independent voice" (3 Feb 1988). These quotations are illustrative of the paradox that lies at the centre of the poet's consciousness. Thus, the idea of fragmentation and multiplicity is intrinsic to the creativity of the poet and can, therefore, be seen as the central and structuring principle of Das's writings. Before one reacts to these "contradictions" and ambivalent attitudes it must be borne in mind that contradictions also signify growth and, as stated in the first chapter, these contradictions or "fragments" are the diverse forms of the "kaleidoscopic" self that is ever shifting and changing its colour. This is what Lacan believes and this is the view of most of the postmodernists.

A study of the ancestral past of the poet is fundamental to the understanding of Das as a poet. Her poetry is "remembrance of things past" with memory playing a vital role. Whether Das is aware or not she is a part of a vast tradition of women-poets stretching from the ancient Buddhist nuns to her own mother Balamani Amma and her poetry is, to echo Yeats, no rootless flower.

CHAPTER III

KAMALA DAS:
THE CONTEXT OF POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

> Let me not be sad because I am born a woman
> In this world; many saints suffer in this way.
>
> (Jana Bai)

As discussed in the first chapter, modern Indian-English poetry is a post-independence phenomenon. The poets of the earlier phase had yet to break with the poetic conventions and idiom of their colonizers. This pre-independence poetry was more in consonance with Victorian romanticism. The phase was represented by Aurobindo Ghose. Owing to his inability to substitute an adequate idiom he has had to suffer considerable marginalization. However, an important fact concerning his complementary role in the formation of a postcolonial consciousness has been overlooked. It is manifest in his choice of oriental subjects in poems like *Savitri*, although the bulk of the work and its metaphysical pressure on the reader weaken its poetic value. But Aurobindo Ghose deserves a fairer deal at least for his contribution to Indian poetics, however unimpressive his poetical output may be. Some of his conclusions can provide valuable insight into Indo-Anglian poetry including that of Das. This becomes specially essential when one considers the vacuum in the Indian literary-critical circle created by nonavailability of indigenous tools of criticism. The task of forging a new kind of idiom to suit the native sensibility fell on the new

generation of poets for whom a postcolonial context was gradually taking shape. The spirit of modernism manifests itself in the new poet's rejection of the ossified remains of the colonial past.

It remains a deplorable fact that despite its sustained stress on nativism, Indian literary criticism has yet to develop an indigenous apparatus for decoding gender and reading texts deforming and foregrounding the feminine. The problem needs to be seen in the context of postcolonialism in its secondary sense of providing a forum for the subaltern and the down-trodden. Cultural decolonization is in a process of becoming a mere theoretical concept, perhaps an abstraction, owing to a visible onslaught of various forms of neo-colonialism. As a result postcolonialism, with its primary sense of interrogating the relationship between culture and imperialism, is becoming a vague and self-defeating idea, despite its emancipatory agenda to develop separate critical tools to suit one's native sensibility. As K. Satchidanandan observes: "Postcolonialism can be neo-colonialism with or without a hyphen, the empire assigning a role to former colonies and commanding them once again to speak its language" (*IL* 175, 96, 6). Even Aijaz Ahmed shares the above view in his critique of postcolonial theory. Bart Moore-Gilbert sums up Ahmad's argument thus:

> Postcolonial theory is simply one more medium through which the authority of the West over the formerly imperialized parts of the globe is currently being reinscribed within a neo-colonial "new world

> order" and is, indeed, best understood as a new expression of the West's historical will to power over the rest of the world. (18).

The remarks are highly revealing and thought-provoking as far as the primary meaning of the term is concerned. But they seem to ignore the secondary meaning of the term which may be more useful and relevant, specially in the context of a writer like Das, than its primary meaning. In this sense postcolonialism, like feminism, is a theory of engagement—creating agency for the marginalized, the oppressed and the underprivileged, the Other. As mentioned above, Das is a postcolonial writer more in its secondary sense than the first.

Her writings in general and her poetry in particular can be seen as a critique of the hegemonic and oppressive patriarchal structures of power, antecedent to a profound sense of alienation in the personae of her work. The idea can be illustrated with examples from her autobiography *My Story* which has been a subject of prolonged controversy ever since its publication in 1976. Of course the controversy has mellowed considerably with the growing recognition of the notion that autobiography is first and foremost a literary form and is therefore as much about the persona as any historical individual. It is an imaginative representation of certain selected facts of the subject's life. There is no difference between the "I" of the poems and the "I" of the autobiography. Therefore a

backward reading from Das's *My Story* to her poetry is unwarranted. Or, as Katherine R. Goodman remarks:

> To read an autobiography one must know the fiction it engages. No more or less than men, women have fashioned the stories of their lives from the ready-made images at their disposal. Indeed, all of us tend to read our real and daily lives guided by these ready-made images. But successful autobiographers have also broken with those fictions, manipulated and altered them, thus revealing important and genuine experiences from their lives. (1989, 118).

My Story engages its own kind of fiction that is certainly not easy to identify because it is seamlessly blended with facts approaching magic realism. Taking the book very close to a novel. Critical response becomes difficult if it is considered to be a factual account. This kind of reading makes Vincent O'Sullivan voice her own difficulty in responding to this work:

> It is little hard to know how to respond to this book which, while adopting an openly confessional tone, conceals quite as much or more as it reveals. But if considered as a literary rather than a factual recreation of the writer's life, it often serves as an illuminating comment on her poetry and fiction. (1986, 197).

However strong the fictional element may be, an autobiography like this has its roots in the writer's life that often gathers fictional layers 0as the book progresses. This is precisely what happens in Das's autobiography that initially "breaks with fiction" and reveals the genuine experience of a sensitive child-poet battered by alienation and discrimination. The fiction that the book "engages" comes gradually with the transformation of the narrative from an account of a neglected child into a story of a liberated woman. The importance of this book lies in the fact that it provides a valuable insight into Das's poetry. The book is important from the point of view of genre study as well. For there is a seamless blending not only of fact and fiction but also of prose and poetry that ultimately raises question as to its specific genre. The work acquires significance from the context of postcolonial feminism. In fact women's autobiography itself is a feminist gesture as through her autobiography the woman-writer asserts the legitimacy of her personal experiences which are otherwise undermined and relegated to a lower order. Besides, the "personal experiences" are often overrated to the extent that the other aspects of the work get overlooked which is exactly the case with Das's *My Story*.

The book presents a tension between colonialism and anti-colonial Gandhism, between patriarchy and matriarchy. Significantly enough the father-figure as an employee of the British Automobile Company is represented to have adopted a British way of life even in his food-habits and choice of clothes. He preferred to eat with a knife and fork, signifying assimilated British culture,

while the children and the ladies of the house ate typically Keralian food in the Indian fashion—with their hands! However, at the theoretical level the father-figure remains out and out a Gandhian going to the extent of commanding his timid wife to strip herself of all the jewellery and wear white khaddar, insensitive to her sentiments:

> After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person except the mangalsutra; to her it must have seemed like taking to widow's weeds, but she did not protest. She was mortally scared of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle. (*MS* 4).

The passage presents a powerful image of a tyrannical patriarchy. The irony lies in the fact that an alien lifestyle is being ruthlessly inflicted upon an aristocratic Nair wife with a matriarchal and matrilineal tradition. All the accomplishments of the poet-matriarch are undermined. On the one hand the father's personality exhibits an embedded conflict between two cultures, on the other he can be seen as representing a synthesis of colonialism and patriarchy. By imposing his personal stances and points of view he becomes a colonizer at home and the wife and other women in the family are granted a conspicuously subaltern status. The phallocratic order is further fortified by the husband-figure. The domestic colonialism exemplified by the two men with all their overbearingness, becomes

an ironic sequel to the imperialism of the British settlers who "traumatised" the persona's early childhood at school in Calcutta. As a child she felt tortured by the "subtle sadism" of her white teachers who, according to the protagonist, were "old maids turned sour with dejection".

The theme of domestic colonization is also taken up by the poet in her poem "The stone Age":

> Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind
> Old fat spider. Weaving webs of bewilderment,
> Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
> Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing-room,
> And stroke my pitted face absentmindedly while
> You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning
> sleep,
> You stick a finger into my dreaming eye....

As these opening lines suggest, among other things, the poem is also about the colonization of the woman's mind by patriarchy. It is not a recent phenomenon; colonization has been there since time immemorial which is why the colonizer-husband is referred to as "ancient settler in the mind" while in "Gino" he is addressed as "fair conqueror of another's/Country". The image of the settler/conqueror also implies intruder, "fair" being suggestive of British colonialism. The husband's imperialist authority over the female is legitimized through the age-old social sanctions and hegemonic structures of

power, particularly the institution of marriage. The retrograde value systems and obscurantism underlying domestic colonialism are significantly brought out by the title of the poem "Stone Age".

Indeed, colonization of the female mind at home far predates British colonialism. It has proved to be far more damaging and unjust than political imperialism from which there is always scope for freedom. This is not the "stone age" of the noble savage—benign and simple, but of the "old fat spider", the "carnivorous "plant", the "hooded snake", an untamed "lion" and "libertine. The highly functional animal imagery is suggestive of the predatory character of the deceiving male, always weaving "a web of bewilderment", and waiting with a trap to catch the gentle dove-like woman and like a python to strangulate her gradually, reducing her to a soulless shape, a mere plaything with no emotion of her own—she the "dove", he the "granite" with all their symbolic suggestions. "With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep" is an auditory representation of the brutal unconcern of the barbarous male. And, "you stick a finger into my dreaming eye" signifies extreme condition of invaded privacy and harsh denial of individual freedom. In her poetry of resistance the man-beast claws the deep interiors of her being. In protest the "funeral pyre" snarls, the "sea" roars "a hungry roar", "leaps forward and retreats", the fierce storms claw the country's face. These along with images of sickness and health conditions can be said to form the "iterative imagery" of Das.

The attitude of the poet in "An Introduction" and "Spoiling The Name"—in fact in most of her poems—is conspicuously proactive as opposed to the reactive attitude of mainstream feminists. It is this proactive position of Das that makes her a Third World feminist. As will be seen in these poems, every attempt by patriarchy to marginalize her is rendered ineffective by her persistent refusal to change her ways. These poems have identity as their major unifying theme with obvious variation in tone and treatment. In "Spoiling the Name" the poet strives to disentangle her identity from the socially woven web of names and roles. The poem is a bold affirmation of her inner identity as opposed to her "social average identity" as she puts it in her poem "Siesta". The poet certainly does not bemoan the loss of identity but rather comes up with a unique kind of philosophy. "An Introduction" is more complexly structured. On the one hand like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, it is about the growth of a poet's mind and on the other about the growth of a feminist consciousness. It encompasses the whole of Das's poetic pilgrimage including the obvious postcolonial agenda with which the poem begins. The first section is about the identity of a woman battered by hegemonic discourse, or rather, the woman who suffers. The second section is about identities of personae into which the woman who suffers dissolves:

> ...It is I who drink lonely
> Drinks at twelve, mid-night, in hotels of strange towns,
>
> 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
Betrayed....

The private self gives way to the public selves and then there is a final fusion of the two selves in the concluding climactic assertion: "I too call myself I."

"An Introduction" was published in Das's first collection *Summer in Calcutta*, 1965 which with its regionalist title situated the poet away from the colony, in the orient. It announced the advent of a robust postcolonial, Third World poetic sensibility that took the literary world by storm:

...I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. 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?

The lines address themselves to the key postcolonial feminist question of identity of a woman of substance who also happens to be a poet. They voice her firm refusal to abandon English as an alien tongue and on behalf of all the Indo-Anglian poets she identifies English as a vital and inseparable component of the Indian identity. In this bold rejoinder also lies a powerful vindication of Modern Indo-English poetic sensibility. It appeared at a crucial time when the Indo-Anglian poets were still passing through a period of poetic preparation and some kind of ambivalence still characterized the overall Indian attitude towards the English language.

The poem on the whole is a polyphonic text about identities with the autobiographical voice of the first section multiplying itself into myriad selves: "I am a million, million people/Talking all at once, with voices raised in clamour". As discussed earlier these myriad selves need to be seen as myriad shapes and forms of one and the same dynamic "Kaleidoscopic self" to echo Lacan once again. Audible in these lines is a strident voice of a postcolonial Third World woman-poet having to confront a captious world of "critics, friends, visiting cousins", biased against the English language and also suspicious of her ability to handle it. Undeterred by criticism, brushing aside the cultural categorizers, the poet articulates her passionate sense of possessing the language. The repetitive use of the first person singular possessive pronoun "mine" followed by "alone" indicates certain vehemence about the poet's sense of possession. With all its traits, including its "distortions and queernesses" the language gets absorbed into the poetic

consciousness leading to an empathic identification of the poet with the language which comes to acquire for the poet "honesty" and "humanness", which also belong to the speaking voice. It becomes the only language of the poet's unconscious mind, capable of expressing every kind of mental state including "joys", "longings" and "hopes". And

> ...it is useful to me as cawing
> Is to crow or roaring to the lions, it
> Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
> Here and not there, the mind that sees and hears and
> Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
> Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or
> the
> Incoherent murmurings of the blazing
> Funeral pyre....

The sudden juxtaposition of the human with trees in storm, monsoon clouds and "roaring" lions accords a certain fierceness to the instinctive nature of the poet's assimilation of the English language. It no longer remains the colonizer's language, superficially appropriated by an alien but a transgeographical primal force within the poet, a naturalized medium that carries within it a voice of protest and affirmation—protest against every form of colonization and affirmation of her identity as a Third World woman-poet. English becomes the language of a countercultural discourse. Furthermore, the elemental and animal images in the

above lines coalesce to enforce the notion of vehemence and impetuosity with which the poet appropriates and internalizes the English language, or, rather, snatches it from its colonial masters. Thus, English becomes the language of her instinct as roaring is to lions or cawing is to crows and the language that she dreams in is also English (as disclosed to P.P. Raveendran in *IL* 155, 1993, 148). She peels off the colonial and patriarchal layers of the language, moulds and remoulds it. This is her major contribution to the evolution of the postcolonial feminist sensibility. The view is also shared by Eunice De Souza: "Women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. She mapped out the terrain for the post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms. Whatever her vernacular oddities, she has spared us the colonial cringe. She has also spared us what in some circles, nativists and expatriates, is still considered mandatory: the politically correct "anguish" of writing in English." (1997, 8).

As for her distortion of the English language, Das can invoke one of her "foster parents" Virginia Woolf: "Women must alter and adapt the current sentence until she can write one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it" (1966, 145). Thus, to Woolf as well as to Das distortion of language can be acceptable but not distortion of thought: "The language one employs is not important," Das asserts, "what is important is the thought contained by the words" (Replies to the questionnaire: Modern Indian Poetry in English, Second Revised and Enlarged Edition, ed. Lal.102). the poet gives evidence of having a natural preference for

a functional use of language. Hers is poetry of ideas, of powerful thoughts which she is in a tearing hurry to record. Hence, she must write in haste:

> ...Write without
> A pause, don't search for pretty worlds which
> Dilute the truth, but write in haste, of
> Everything perceived, and known, and loved...
>
> ("Without A Pause")

Significantly enough, "the natural shape" of Das's "thought" includes her preoccupation not only with gender but with caste, race, class, colour and language as well. Indeed, it is this fact that separates her from most of the Western feminists and positions her as a Third World feminist. Indeed, the first thing Das asserts in the poem under discussion by way of introduction is her Indianness and the brownness of her complexion.

The essentially elemental imagery of the lines quoted earlier from this poem is also functional in enforcing the idea of naturalness and instinctuality. In these lines Das is also making a case for a natural poetic with its implicit rejection of the dictums of the ever multiplying schools of literary theory and criticism. Indeed, this kind of natural poetic alone can explain the relationship between the poet and her poetry and the English language. She defines her speech as "Indian English" and then the language gets further internalized to be designated as the speech of the mind that is

alert and aware of its environment—"...the mind that sees and hears and/Is aware". Visible in this poetic assertion is a conscious or unconscious blurring of the distinction between her poetry and her medium because in the given context the two can be interchangeable. S.C Harrex makes similar points about the relationship between Das's natural poetic and her Indian English in his "Strange Case of Matthew Arnold in a Sari: An Introduction to Kamala Das": "In her poem "An Introduction" Das "defines her speech as Indian English in defence of a natural poetic, of a verse voice or language which is a natural, uninhibited expression of her personality" (Harrex, 164). Das's natural poetics is to a large extent rooted in a distinct philosophy of language as evidenced by the following extract from one of her interviews to P.P. Raveendran:

> Good, simple language comes to us quite naturally....We should have the courage to use clean, unadorned language in our writing. Our thoughts too will then be right. I always prefer to see near-naked women rather than overdressed women. Look at some of our bharatanatyam dancers. They are overdressed with a lot of jewellery and glitter. This overdressing seems to be characteristic of our writing today. We have to change this. What we need is not the extravagance of the bharatanatyam dancer but the simplicity of the ballet dancer. We must try to bring in such simplicity to our language. Use less rhetoric. Whittle your language down to the essentials. Let the

kernel come out. We should be able to produce such literature in the future. (*IL* 155, 156).

Das's doctrine of simplicity also reflects her aesthetic vision. In her poetic praxis she displays the simplicity of a ballet dancer.

Das is perhaps the first poet to voice the need to liberate the term "Indian English" from its pejorative overtones. In fact Indian English was not taken seriously. Ironically, a pioneer of Indo-Anglian poetry like Nissim Ezekiel has shown a rather disdainful attitude towards "Indian English" in his poems on various comic themes. Das's "An Introduction" stands in sharp contrast to a very representative poem by Ezekiel written in "Indian English" and entitled "Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S.":

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,
what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling....

There is no need to quote the poem in full because it is one of the most popular poems of Ezekiel's. It is also one of his most anthologized pieces. It is a brilliant comic piece and reflects the poet's commendable sense of humour. But it is also a parody, a comic representation of "Indian English" with an implicit criticism of the speaker's ignorance of impeccable British English. The poem combines entertainment with derisiveness and this is not the only poem of its kind. The two poems embody polarized attitudes to the question of Indian English. Furthermore, one may also be inclined to ask: what makes these lines "poetic"?

It is far from true that Das has been able to supply a viable alternative to "British English" with neatly defined linguistic features. As a matter of fact such an alternative does not exist in spite of Indira Chowdhury Sengupta's appendix on Indian English in the current edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. In fact a close study of Das's use of the English language will show that although she does take her own kind of liberty, her "Indian English" may be found to be less "Indian" than that of many of her contemporaries. Indeed, more than her linguistic deviations which her critics like Bruce King hasten to identify as an instance of Indianization of English, it is the proactive position in respect of the language that makes her a postcolonial or rather anticolonial writer.

Thus, one of the most significant contributions of Das is her unwavering commitment to the decolonization of the English language. It consists in her developing and asserting a theoretical position as well as in her poetic praxis with an ability to mould the English language and create an idiom to suit her natural poetics. King looks at some of the features of Das's linguistic deviations and locates them in the context of decolonization and Indianization of English with which he credits Das :

> Kamala Das's most remarkable achievement, however, is writing in an Indian English. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of a national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech; and this is especially important for women writers. Such a development is not a matter of national pride or a linguistic equivalent of "local colour"; rather it is a matter of voice, tone, idiom and rhythm, creating a style that accurately reflects what the writer feels or is trying to say instead of it being filtered through speech meant to reflect the assumptions and nuances of another society. (1987, 153).

The voice, tone and idiom also go into the formation of a distinct female identity. Despite the prolonged endeavours of the feminist critics to formulate a separate cogent poetics, the possibility of a distinctly feminine style, separable from an andocentric style, still appears remote. Das gains a strategic position in the development of postcolonial feminist poetics. Her contribution is twofold: on the one hand she has been able to nativize a colonial language, on the other she has succeeded in projecting her gender identity through the use of language and choice of diction, as much as through themes and ideas. Her gendered subjectivity inscribes itself in most of her writings. This is done by putting to effective use images of the female body and its anatomy:

> This body that I wear without joy, this body
> Burdened with lenience, slender toy, owned
> By man of substance shall perhaps wither, battling with
> My darling's impersonal lust. Or, it shall grow gross
> And reach large proportions before its end.
>
> ("Gino")

Or:

> ...you were pleased with my body's response,
> Its weather, its usual shallow
> Convulsions....
>
> ("The Old Playhouse")

And again:

> ...For those such as me the awful
> Vulgarities of the final rites are not
> Quite right, the slow unwrapping of the carcass,
> The many paltry human details that must disgust
> The aesthete, the flabby thigh, the breasts that sag,
> The surgery scar, yes, it would indeed be
> Of no bloody use....
>
> ("Death Is so Mediocre")

In the following lines Das presents physiological details with rather startling candour with a concealed postcolonial feminist agenda to expose patriarchal expectations about woman as quintessence of physicality:

> Gift him all,
> Give him what makes you woman, the scent of
> Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
> the warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
> Endless female hunger....
>
> ("The Looking Glass")

The general obsession with the body in Das is in a way reminiscent of the French feminist aesthetics of l'ecriture feminine as epitomized in an assertion by Madeleine Gagnon:

> All we have to do is let the body flow, from the inside; all we have to do is erase, as we did on the slate, whatever may hinder or harm the new forms of writing; we retain whatever fits, whatever suits us. (1980, 180).

However, the resemblance is only superficial. When the dictum of the exponents of l'ecriture feminine is "write the body", Das's seems to be "write the body—write it away." To the former the body is often an end in itself; to the latter just a means:

> I throw the bodies out,
> I can not stand their smell.
> Only the souls may enter
> The vortex of the sea.
> Only the souls know how to sing
> At the vortex of the sea.
> .....
> Bereft of body
> My soul shall be free.
>
> ("The Suicide")

Or even obliterate it:

> I shall some day see
> My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
> Just a skeletal thing....
>
> ("I Shall Some Day")

Crossing the confines of one's body is certainly not easy; it is an arduous task but without this the full worth of living cannot be realized. The idea is fleshed out by the following poem:

> When you learn to swim
> do not enter a river that has no ocean
> to flow into, one ignorant of destinations
> and knowing only the flowing as its destiny,
> like the weary rivers of the blood
> that bear the scum of ancient memories,
> but go swim in the sea,
> go swim in the great blue sea
> where the first tide you meet is your body,
> that familiar pest,
> but if you learn to cross it
> you are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe,
> for, even sinking would make no difference then....
>
> ("Advice To Fellow Swimmers")

The two contrasted phases of reality are represented by the river, symbolizing the temporal, and the ocean, symbolizing the eternal. Of course the natural preference of the poet is for the latter. The desire to merge into the "great blue sea" parallels her search for the right man who has the capacity to understand the needs of her soul.

Indeed, as has been discussed elsewhere, Das's concepts of love and transcendence are alien to the Western feminist

consciousness. The poet evinces her characteristic Indianness when she identifies the lovers with Radha and Krishna, who acquire at her hands distinctly human qualities. This can be seen in poems like "The Cobweb", "Radha Krishna", "Maggots", "Vrindaban" and several others, a subject to be taken up in the next chapter. The male body that ultimately imprisons her female consciousness is the body of her divine lover Krishna:

> 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
>
> ("Krishna")

However, the idea cannot be carried too far as there is an inherent danger of its getting hijacked by the revivalist discourse with its renewed interest in the Aryan ideals of womanhood and celebration of domesticity.

To the disappointment of the Radical Feminists Das emerges as an androgynous artist like Virginia Woolf who found her idea corroborated by a remark made by Coleridge on first September, 1832 that every great mind is androgynous. But androgyny is also an oriental concept as evident from the concept of *Ardhanarnariswara*, *Shiva* and *Shakti*. The underlying idea is that unless there is a healthy coexistence of the male and female principles the artistic mind is incomplete and, therefore, artistic

creation, like biological creation, is not possible. In fact according to Jungian psychology the human personality itself by its very structure and make-up has a male and a female aspect to it: the animus and the anima. Das takes up this idea in her poem "The Doubt":

When a man is dead, or a woman,
We call the corpse not he
Or she but it. Does it
Not mean that we believe
That only the souls have sex and that
Sex is invisible?
Then the question is, who
Is the man, who the girl,
All sex-accessories being no
Indication. Is she
A male who with frail hands
Clasps me to her breast, while
The silence in her sick room, turning
Eloquent, accuses
Me of ingratitude?
And, is he female who
After love, smoothes out the bed-sheets with
Finicky hands and plucks
From pillows strands of hair?

Gender is at the level of behavioural traits and the male and the female aspects in the human personality often become inseparable. It can also be one of the grounds of the rejection of the male/female binaries. From another point of view it can be seen as resulting in the mutual neutralization of the two principles during artistic creation which often transcends gender. Thus gender becomes a matter of individual voice and style. This is also the view that Das seems to share with Joyce Carol Oates according to whom "The serious artistic voice is one of individual style, and it is sexless." (Ruthven, 1990, 105).

It must be pointed out here that the poet's androgynous consciousness is also rooted in a humanistic and melioristic vision of life and art. It is consistent with the implied agenda of the postcolonial discourse to champion the cause of the victims of various oppressive structures of power. She rejects in the most unequivocal terms the binary male-female opposition posited by the Western Radical Feminists. This kind of disjunctiveness, the sense of mutual exclusion makes the Western feminist consciousness appear negative in character to Das and hence arouses her resentment. Thus, despite some very trenchant remarks made by her poetic personae and characters, the overall stance of Das is in no way anti-male:

> Feminism as the Westerns see it is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because

> I have loved my husband and I still love my children, who are sons. And I think from masculine company I have derived a lot of happiness. So I will never be able to hate them. (159).

It is obvious that Das is equating Western feminism with Radical Feminism which makes her guilty of a basic reductionism. By rejecting the male-female divide Das gives a more positive connotation to feminism which emerges to be essentially of a humanistic kind. A similar stance is articulated by Margaret Lawrence in one of her interviews to Margaret Atwood:

> I'm 90% in agreement with Women's Lib. But I think we have to be careful here...for instance, I don't think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be re-educated with the minimum damage to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers...we can't live without them, and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well. (Woodcock, 1974, 23).

Indeed, it is only as a humanistic movement that feminism can survive. Feminism as a politico-socio-cultural movement with the sole objective of achieving man-woman equality is bound to be limited because already there has been a significant narrowing of the gap between the sexes. It is this perception of the term that

aroused Virginia Woolf's resentful scepticism about the very concept of feminism:

> What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word "feminist" is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means "one who champions the rights of women". Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. (1977, 117).

Das's feminism encompasses a much broader area. It explores and critiques every form of marginalization. The basic notion being that one can be marginalized not just due to gender but also due to colour, caste, race, religion, class, ageing and even language.

My Story begins in a colonial setting when India was still under British rule. As a sensitive child the poet realized that as an Indian she was being neglected and relegated to the background only because the colour of her skin was not white. She and her brother were tortured by their white classmates only "for wearing under the school uniform of white twill, nut-brown skin" (*MS* 2). The repeated use of the lexemes "neglect", "pampered", "hated", "white" and "brown", especially the way she has tried to juxtapose the opposites is indicative of the poet's painful awareness of her lot as compared to that of her white classmates like Shirley who carried

up the bouquets when the dignitaries arrived. She writes: "When the visitors came the brown children were always discretely hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company" (*MS* 3). The remarks highlight the glaring difference in treatment meted out to the white and brown children. Thus, the Europeans became the Other to her. They filled her mind with the feeling of inferiority which became her lot because by comparison she was "dark". Perhaps this is why colour imagery is so abundant both in her poetry as well as in her autobiography. Or. as Iqbal Kaur observes:

> She makes a frequent and consistent use of the colour adjectives (especially the adjectives "white" and "dark") and hardly ever misses the description of the fair-complexion or the dark-complexion. Even in her moments of mystic ecstasy, she does not fail to note the colour of her God's skin. (1990, 31).

She refers to "his dark limbs" and "the dusk of his skin" and calls him "the dark God of girlhood dreams" (*MS* 190). The implication is that a girl with "swarthy skin" was allowed to have only dark gods. Kaur talks at length about the poet's inferiority complex in her discussion of *My Story* and ascribes it to her colour complex. But a note of caution must be sounded here for Kaur accepts the narrative voice at its face value. The book in fact is more concerned to expose the way the false sense of inferiority was inculcated in the protagonist in her childhood. The colour of the skin is presented as a

major determinant because one's sense of superiority or inferiority is determined by one's colour. Her work reveals a morbid awareness of the fact that dark complexion brings nothing but rejection, not only by the white colonialists but also at home. It is significant that the poet-autobiographer "ate" her meals not just with her "fingers" but with her "brown" fingers, instead of with knife and fork. The colour adjective reflects her acute obsession with the fact that colour should receive such importance in society. *My Story* reveals the poet's/persona's sustained awareness of her "swarthy skin", her plain features with repeated reference to the brown colour of her complexion. This awareness is manifest in expressions like:

> My grandmother was worried about the duskiness of my skin and rubbed raw turmeric on Tuesdays and Fridays all over my body before the oilbath (*MS* 38)

And:

> Our relatives praised my thick tresses but mumbled unkind things about my colour (38).

The sense of inferiority that the protagonist felt owing to her brown complexion as a child is also evident from the following excerpt:

> It was obvious to me that I did not at all match the grandeur of the marquee and the garden. The backdrop

demanded a more elegant bride, one who was glamorous and beautiful. (90).

However, the visibly reactive position of the persona in respect of the colour of her skin is abandoned with the attainment of maturity and with the growth of her postcolonial consciousness. The assertion of the brown colour of her skin in "An Introduction" with the adjective being preceded by the modifier "very", emphasises the poet's distinctly proactive attitude.

Marginalization due to class is a global reality and a major preoccupation of Das in whose work gender-consciousness is hardly separable from class-consciousness. As will be seen in Chapter five she is as much a spokesperson for the poor and the down-trodden. The first poem in her Collected Poems Volume 1 is about the poor Andhra labourers who devote their lives to building houses for the alien rich and in this act they appear as "cicadas in brambled foliage":

> The cicadas in brambled foliage
> Naturally concave. So also these
> Men who crawl up the cogged scaffoldings
> Building houses for the alien rich.
>
> ("The House Builders")

The image "cicadas in brambled foliage" is extremely powerful and the apprehension of their lives is sensitive. The image is also

designed to evoke the atmosphere of the industrial metropolis. There is an underlying pathos and an irony in the fact that the rich for whom these humble men risk their lives remain alien and the two will never come close to each other. The theme of ethnic violence and racial discrimination is taken up in the Colombo poems written during the poet's visit to that island in the early 80's while discrimination on the basis of caste finds treatment in "Honour".

A more disconcerting form of marginalization in Das results from the loss of gender at the biological level leading to a corresponding loss of gender identity at the cultural levels as in the case of the eunuchs. "Dance of the Eunuchs" is one such poem that is more about the loss of identity and the anguish consequent upon it:

> It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
> To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
> Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
> Jingling....Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with
> Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced
> and
> They danced, oh, they danced till they bled....

This is a poem of high contrast. The outward extravagance of the eunuchs is only a sad commentary on their inner poverty and emptiness caused by sterility. Indeed the dance is in no way an expression of emotion but a mechanical gesture, a routine activity to

earn a living. Everything is so unnatural and artificial about their behaviour. With their natural barrenness the eunuchs become images of death and rottenness of which they sing. The dismal reality that surrounds them makes their songs melancholy:

> Their voices
> Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
> Lovers dying and of children left unborn....
> Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
> And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.

The pathos lies more in the situation they represent; it is not created by their voices that were not gentle but "harsh". Unable to give or experience fulfilment of any kind, vacuous from within, they could only "writhe in vacant ecstasy" and all their gestures were nothing but just "convulsions". The idea of death and rottenness is accentuated effectively by the features of their emaciated body and the idea reaches its climax in the comparison of the body of the eunuch with "half-burnt logs from/Funeral pyres":

> They
> Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
> Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
> Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
> Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed, still;
> All were watching these poor creatures" convulsions.
> The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning

And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....

It is a Waste-Land-like situation that the eunuchs represent. As is evident from the above lines their inner vacuity is echoed by even nature in the sudden and unusual thunder and lightning. The "meagre rain" does not come with its natural power to rejuvenate and lessen tropical heat. It is as mechanical as the "convulsions" of these poor creatures; it can only smell of dust in attic and "urine of lizards and mice". It is her persistent humanity that stands out. This is what is called encyclopaedic feminism or "utopian feminism", to use a term coined by Julia Kristeva. It positions Das as a Third World Feminist with postmodernist leanings. Most of the issues taken up by her as a Third World Feminist are eternal realities and hence make her feminism more universal and less culture-specific.

A close study of the evolution of Das's poetic consciousness will show that her gendered subjectivity is very strong in the first three of her poetical collections viz. *Summer In Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). This phase has some very "feminist" poems like: "An Introduction", "In Love", "The Freaks", "The stone Age", "The Descendants" and "The Old Playhouse", rooted in the male-female binaries, displaying at the same time a very ambivalent attitude towards sex. The fact that these are the most anthologized of her poems testifies to their merit and popularity. One should, however, take cognizance of another equally important fact that these poems

embody only one of the many voices of Das. This is the voice of sensuality, responsible for the plethora of stereotypical interpretations of her work.

Das's contribution to the formation and evolution of a postcolonial, Third World feminist consciousness requires greater attention and a more objective assessment. By overemphasising and overrating the element of lust and physical love critics often tend to isolate the poet from her broader historical context. This kind of stereotypical interpretation can be ascribed to the fundamentally biographical methodology adopted by most of her critics.

The writings of Das impress her perceptive readers as a critique of all the various structures of power which are oppressive, corrosive and discriminatory. Her views on gender are more objective than those of her Western counterparts. She talks more about women because women are more oppressed and exploited than men. Her obsession with the body is functional in lending a feminine flavour to her style, consistent with the objectives of a feminist poetics; the hidden message, her sustained endeavour is to transcend the body. What one encounters in Das is an oriental dialectics of the body and the soul. In her realization of the past she is also aware of the thin dividing line between decolonization and revivalism; between justice to women and injustice to men; between feminism and misanthropism. Her role in the Indianization of English, her commitments to the marginalized and the overall

widening of her vision of life and art, grant Das a significant place in the topical context of postcolonial feminism.

CHAPTER IV

ALIENATION AND THE SEARCH FOR LOVE

> I am a writer, and in their eyes a dangerous freak, a flightless bird that employs its wings only in its dreams. I am the one on whom the garlands fade, such is the heat of my loneliness.

> There is a love greater than all you know
> that awaits you where the red road finally ends
> its patience proverbial; not for it
> the random caress or the lust
> that ends in languor.
> Its embrace is truth and it erases
> even the soul's ancient indentations so that
> some unknown womb shall begin to convulse
> to welcome your restructured perfection.
>
> (K. Das)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the diverse modes in which the alienated poetic self of Das engages in a hectic search for love. These modes are the roles in which the "shifting self" manifests itself. The inevitable alternative to love is death and hence the two coexist on the poetic canvas of Das. The poems show a major preoccupation with the distinction between love and lust that very frequently acquires death-like associations in her poetry. Just as the footfalls of death are heard in the intense moments of love, so

death is presented in a dialectical relation with life. The two are seen as coexistent in a natural cyclical process. Attempts are made to trace the poet's development from her experience of alienation through her quest for love, basically as a performer, to her realization of death and the burgeoning of life.

The strength of Das is so much attributed to her love poetry that she is often called the queen of erotica. She has indeed written extensively on love and passion; she has very few poems in which words like love or lust do not figure. But to those readers whose notion of love poetry as a subgenre is shaped by poets like Donne, the Rossettis, Swinburne, Morris and others, Das may prove challenging. The experiences in Das's love poems cannot be assessed at their face value. She writes of the pains and wounds of love, of the final disillusionment, and very seldom of fulfilment in love. Love is a mere dream to be sought for in the world of fantasy and myth. These love-less poems are elegies on the death of love, against which even a marriage, often drab and banal to the persona, is no insurance. Trapped in a loveless relationship with an insensate husband, the poetic persona escapes from the "primary world" or the real world, into the "secondary world" which the poet fills with fantasy, as discussed in the first chapter.

Das's poetry revolves around a hectic search for love. Indeed, what distresses her most is that too often lust is passed off as love. As she asserts with characteristically bitter candour, "a woman can get into a man's heart only through his loins". She admits that it is

an ugly remark and then adds that "it tells an ugly truth that cannot be put in gentler words" (*Asiaweek*, 12 Nov 1976, 46, 31). Das appears to be more of a naturalist in her treatment of love and human relationship because she has a penchant for the minutest details. An acrid note of disenchantment, born of a tension between love and lust, characterizes the poetry of her earlier phase.

The profound anguish in Das's poetry stems from her experience of alienation from early childhood. This plunges her into an acute identity crisis. As one can gather from *My Story,* the speaker is alienated as a child from her father, a symbol of domineering patriarchy, from her mother, who all the time lay on her stomach writing poetry and had hence no time for the children; from her classmates and teachers at the English Boarding school in Calcutta. She presents her brother and herself at the beginning of her autobiography as the children of loveless parents. "Gradually" she says, "our instincts told us to keep away from the limelight" (*MS* 5). By "limelight" is also implied affection, the desired focal point of every child. This anguish of alienation gives birth to sad poems written at a very early age about dolls that lost their heads and had to remain headless for ever. Subsequently the poet feels isolated from her own Nair community that failed to recognize and throughout misunderstood her. Over and above, her forced premature marriage alienated her from her grandmother and the Nalapat house, her ultimate shelter. Thus the marriage marks the second phase of her alienation. When union begins to mean only physical union and nothing else and lust comes in the guise of love—"the skin's lazy

hunger"—the female persona feels betrayed in every possible way. Often alienation generates profound loneliness that becomes one of the most recurrent themes of her poetry. Interestingly enough, loneliness is often given a visual presentation and is almost invariably associated with whiteness: "At three in the morning/I wake trembling from dreams of a stark white loneliness,/Like bleached bones cracking in the desert sun was my loneliness..." ("Ghanashyam"). In "Punishment in Kindergarten" she finds her loneliness is shared by the lonely white sun: "No need to remember/That picnic day when I lay hidden/By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun/Standing lonely in the sky". As a child she is, however, alienated in the company of the "white children". Significantly, the "frock" which her father buys for her and which she dislikes is also "white": "I disliked the white frocks which my father bought for me and wished to wear silks of different colours" (*MS*). Her mother too was forced by her father to wear "white khaddar". Thus into the morass of loneliness she sinks and continues to sink ever after. This alienation is basically emotional and spiritual. It becomes further intensified by the poet's experience of humiliation and domination as discussed in the preceding chapter. Humiliated at the boarding school by the Britishers and at home by the brutally domineering husband, she becomes a psycho-pathological dwarf: "Cowering beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and/Became a dwarf" ("The Old Playhouse").

Coerced into a state of total alienation, the personae find their very survival threatened. What is at stake, however, is not physical

but spiritual survival. She can write away the body, undo it psychologically. She can cast it away like a worn out, outgrown garment of the soul that by virtue of its immortality will always find a new dwelling place, a new container, many such new garments. She declares she wears the "body without joy" ("Gino"). It must be "de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded/To reach the supreme indifference of the bone" ("I Shall Some Day"). This view of the terrestrial life and the soul and the struggle for spiritual survival is consistent with the Hindu doctrine.

Alienation hastens the poet's premature cultural transformation from a child into a woman. "An Introduction" cameo's the poet in the very process of metamorphosis:

> ...I was child, and later they
> told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
> Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.

The unself-conscious adolescent is forced to take note of the change coming over her:

> I had a house in Malabar
> And a pale green pond,
> I did all my growing there
> In the bright summer months,
> I swam about and floated,
> I dived into the cold and green

I lay speckled-green and gold
In all the hours of the sun,
Until
My grandmother cried,
Darling, you must stop this bathing now
You are much too big to play
Naked in the pond.

("The Suicide")

The voice of the grandmother is nothing but the cold command of culture inflicting untimely womanhood upon a girl still exhilarating in an Edenic world of innocence. The child's naked body is waiting to bear on it the whip-marks of hegemonic patriarchal culture. This illustrates Madam S. Beauvoir's oft-quoted remark that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. With her childhood left behind but innocence still lingering on, the persona enters her conjugal life with some legitimate expectations and dreams:

> I had expected him (the husband) to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life (*MS* 87).

Her actual experience totally belies all her fond expectations. What is more, she is shocked beyond measure by her husband's open display of homosexual advances in her presence. In this act of ignominy the speaker sees the rejection of her very womanliness:

> When
> I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
> For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
> Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
> But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
> The weight of my breast and womb crushed me . I
> Shrank
> Pitifully.

The incident is narrated with similar poignancy in *My Story*. The near-identity between the prose account and the poetic presentation testifies to the veracity of the incident and to the intensity of the concomitant trauma:

> At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. they behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they showed me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after some time, my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt then a revulsion for my

womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through. (110).

She finds her self-esteem bruised and her very soul flagellated by patriarchy. She begins to find her "woman-body" repulsive but she cannot discard it; she cannot change it so she decides to change her appearance and abandon sari in favour of shirt and trousers, signifying convention and rebellion respectively:

then...I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness....

But tradition has its own ready-made roles for the woman. As Harrex puts it: "Many of Kamala Das's poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who attempts to free herself, sexually and domestically, from role bondage sanctioned by the past," (1986, 163). The dilemma in Das is compounded and intensified by the conflicting but inevitable roles that she has to play as a creative writer and as a wife/mother/daughter. The poet finds herself oscillating between these roles, with her existence divided and her self fragmented. The predicament arising out of this dilemma is ventilated in the following quotation from one of her autobiographical write-ups:

> I am positive that if I had been unmarried, I would have been a better writer. I feel the intrusion all the time. Trying to be a good wife and a daughter really inhibits me. I have to resort to play acting. People say, "Oh you have everything." I don't. I don't have the freedom to be myself; the person that I am among those strangers who know me only for my work. At home there are strangle-holds...(In *Savvy*, Dec 1990).

Any kind of protest by her against such role bondage is bound to arouse the resentment of the watch-dogs of culture: "Dress in saris, be girl,/Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,/be a quarreller with servants." Significantly enough, these are roles exclusively associated with domesticity; the list deliberately excludes a writer that the speaker already is. Writing must take precedence over every other consideration in life as she recalls in her autobiography:

> ...it had become clear to them that I had become a truth-addict and that I loved my writing more than I loved them or my own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my doting husband and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was, a writer. (*MS* 211).

As a "truth-addict" she becomes an eyesore to her relatives. The categories are formulated in conformity with the harsh

prescriptions of a phallocentric culture. The speaker must fit in with these categories or else face ostracism and notoriety: "Fit in. Oh belong, cried the categorizers." Implied in these "categories" is also a rigidly stipulated restrictive behavioural pattern which is equally repugnant to the speaker:

> Don't sit
> On walls or peep in our lace-draped
> Windows,
> .....
> Don't play pretending games.
> Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
> Nympho . Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
> Jilted in love....

However, these negative injunctions can hardly alter the behaviour of the speaker/poet who has determinedly risen in defiance of the worn-out norms of convention. Indeed, the entire poetic career of Das is a spirited defiance of the coercive commands of the "categorizers". The poem articulates, among other things, the sustained social pressure on the poet to choose a name and accept the socially sanctioned role which becomes almost synonymous with the name: "Be Ammi, or be Kamala. Or better/Still, be Madhavikutti. It is time to/choose a name, a role..." ("An Introduction"). The poet is Ammi to her husband as well as to her very close friends; Kamala to the readers of her English-language poetry and also to her parents and other relatives including her

favourite grandmother; and Madhavikutti to the readers of her fiction in Malayalam. The three names of the poet represent three highly diversified types of role—though they are not without common grounds—and three major sources or areas of roles in her drama of selfhood. These names often represent contradictory roles and make contradictory demands on the poetic performer. For example, most of the social diatribes are directed at Madhavikutti because she is supposedly the most "notorious" of the three! And many of her favourite persons like her grandmother did not know that Kamala and Madhavikutti were one and the same person:

> I think I was compelled to choose a name because I did not want to embarrass my conservative family. I knew that I was a misfit within my family. I think I practised writing as people practise a secret vice. Like boys going to the bathroom to smoke. Especially, I did not want to hurt my grandmother who was my favourite human being. And I don't think she knew that I was Madhavikutti till she died. (*IL 155*, 1995, 148).

Evidently, life and art make conflicting demands on the poet. It requires her to play conflicting roles. But she would like to play the roles of her choice. These are roles assigned to her by creative imagination and, therefore, must take precedence over those inflicted upon her by society through the medium of a name which is nothing but an abstraction and hence inconsequential to the poet.

The poet's rejection of a name finds a more comprehensive treatment in her poem "Spoiling the Name" which was published along with "An Introduction" in *Summer In Calcutta*:

> I have a name, and had it for 30 years
> Chosen by someone else
> For convenience, but when you say
> Don't spoil your name, I feel I
> Must laugh, for I know I have a life
>
> To be lived, and each nameless
> Corpuscle in me had its life to
> Be lived?.

The poet mocks at the meaningless pride associated with a name. Its superficiality lies in the fact that it is chosen for mere "convenience." Like the stereotypical roles, the name is chosen by somebody else and is, therefore, in no way a component of the poet's authentic identity. A name is just a word, abstract and amorphous. The idea is reminiscent of Shakespeare's famous words: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet." The superfluity of a name contrasts with the beauty of the urge to live. Consistent with Das's aesthetics of opposition, the poem presents a contrast between surface and depth, shadow and substance, appearance and reality, death and life, its "sweet-soundingness" and the bitterness it generates in the poet. Gift of life is far more precious to the poet than the gift of name, which is projected as an intruder in her celebration of life:

Why should this name so
Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room where I go to
meet a man
Who gives me nothing but himself, who
Calls me in his private hours
By no name. Why should I remember or bear
That sweet-sounding name, pinned to
Me, a medal, undeservedly gained, at moments when,
all of
He is ablaze with life?

A lyrical situation is presented in a rhetorical mode and the tone is one of sustained derision. In the lines that follow a name evokes a sense of heaviness, a burden that the poet is constrained to carry around, creating a death-in-life situation:

...You ask of
Me a silly thing, carry
This gift of a name like a corpse and
Totter beneath its weight
And perhaps even fall—I who love
This gift of life more than all.

The highly suggestive corpse simile brings the argument to its acrid climax, for name is seen not just as an unwelcome load that the poet must jettison in moments of exhilaration but also as having death-

like associations. In the surrender to her name the speaker senses a cessation of life because name, by further implication, also suggests loss, or at least curtailment of freedom which is so precious to the poet. In this sense names can also be a nuisance like words: "...But I tell myself, words/Are a nuisance, beware of them, they/Can be so many things,..." ("Words"). Of course the context of the warning is quite different. The poem is very much in the manner of the Metaphysical school of Donne and the far-fetched comparison between gift of name and a corpse is redolent of a Metaphysical conceit.

Das's obsession with role-playing has a distinct bearing on her poetry as a whole that acquires a dramatic quality: the image of theatricality is integral to her poetry. One of her finest poems as seen above is titled "The Old Playhouse" while another is called "Drama." Furthermore she images herself as a tragedienne as seen in the following lines:

> It was soon my turn to be the
> Tragedienne, to take vague steps,
> Black-gowned, black-veiled,
> And wail, and beat my breast
> And speak of unrequited love.
> I am wronged, I am wronged,
> I am so wronged.
>
> ("Drama")

The effect is achieved by putting to use important theatrical devices. The poetry as a whole has a dialogic structure and many of the poems can, in fact, be seen as dramatic monologues as most of them have imaginary addressees. Theatricality is interwoven with the idea of dissembling. Life is seen as performance and the self as performer. The speaker in many of these poems is an actress, a "tragedienne" in black gown, black veil, burdened with painful roles and her steps often guided by compulsions. The poet as a little girl also loved acting—"when I first entered the stage" Das writes, "....I shed all wraps of shyness and began to sing in a clear cool voice" (*MS* 36). The role she played was that of the Moghul queen Noor Jahan.

Nair women totally depersonalised by authoritarian patriarchy are repeatedly imaged as playthings. A young aunt of hers wrote poetry to Krishna and became totally paralysed: "she lay like a broken doll, a pale faced toy" (*MS* 16). She tells us her own parents "considered us mere puppets" (*MS* 77). According to Vincent O'Sullivan , the self is distorted by the roles it is assigned. As is the case with many performances, the motive here is survival, particularly spiritual survival. This multiple role-playing can also be seen as multivocalism in the poetry of Das in consonance with the notion of the "kaleidoscopic self" as discussed earlier.

A fair measure of sensationalism associated with Das results from her descriptions of and references to the naked female body, including her own:

I've stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice.

("Loud Poster")

The price for this has been anger, ostracism and notoriety. A close reading of her poems would, however, show that nudity as a concept is psycho-philosophical. It implies the loss of the empirical self, the "average social identity" to which she refers in one of her poems entitled "Siesta". It is a firm refusal to be defined by and contained in superficial the layers which the poet on her poetic pilgrimage, must "peel off." For "by peeling off my layers/I reach closer to the soul/And the bone's supreme/Indifference, ("Composition"). This ultimate exposure is also the final escape. The "peeling" of layers is an upward journey to spiritual survival, to be a part of the worldly cycle. Thus when alienation envelops her complete being and her identity as a woman gets irretrievably lost, in a state of creative resignation the poet begins to alienate her self, perhaps the autobiographical self: "I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself (*MS* 182). The autobiographical "I" is transformed into the transcendental "I."

Indeed, the first layer to be "peeled off is the layer of social identity with the label of a virtuous and submissive Indian woman committed to the protection of "family honour". The second layer to be peeled off is the layer of clothes, the garments of the body. This

is psychological denuding which is described by the poet as the "striptease of the mind". This idea finds a parallel, as discussed in chapter two, in the medieval saint-poet Akka Mahadevi who reputedly discarded clothes in an attempt to rise above the body. Although they share a common idea Akka is said to have actually wandered naked in search of her Lord while Das conceptualises nudity as something metaphorical and psycho-philosophical. However, in both cases nudity can be seen as an attempt at self-transcendence. The idea also struck Yeats who said: "There is greater enterprise in walking naked".

Secondly, nudity in Das is symbolic of the state of innocence in the human consciousness, often with pre-Lapsarian suggestions. This idea can be further highlighted by her paintings which are nudes. Nudity becomes one of her major themes and a recurrent motif in her writings as well as her paintings which significantly enough, belong to the current phase of her career. This refusal to abandon the idea even at this advanced stage of her life, is rooted in a distinct vision of the body and the soul which she articulates in very clear terms:

> I have never found anything obscene in God's creations. I am very fortunate that I have this vision of God's creations as beautiful. There is no question of obscenity at all. I"d love to paint the human soul, but the soul is like clear water. Without a container, you cannot show it, can you? I think the human soul's

barest container is the body." (*The Sunday Observer* 20 Nov 1994, 8).

Whether she employs words or colours, her vision is the same.

Linked with sensuality is death which, along with the idea of sickness and disease, is hauntingly present in Das. On her poetic canvas death is juxtaposed with lust and sexuality that makes her as much a poet of death as of love and passion. Death is set above lust and sexuality in which she apprehends the death of her soul. Indeed, the failure of her search for love very often releases her contrary urge to embrace death:

O sea I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead, just dead.

("The suicide")

This is precisely why one hears in the background of her sex roles the reverberations of death:

when mouth on
Mouth I lie, ignoring my poor
Moody mind, while pleasure

With deliberate gaiety
Trumpets harshly into the
Silence of the room...At noon
I watch the sleek crows flying
Like poison on wings...and at
Night, from behind the Burdwan
Road, the corpse-bearers cry "bol
Hari bol"

("In Love")

A dichotomy is deliberately posited between sexuality and the speaker's "moody mind". It is implied that indulgence in sensuality causes the cessation of the finer activities of the mind; the poet sees a haunting image of death that gets interwoven with sensuality. The nature of this kind of sensual pleasure is imaged as being "harsh" or coarse, a quality that finds an auditory reaffirmation in the use of the verb "trumpets". "bol hari bol" is an auditory image of death that also lends a native hue to the poem and its context. The overall cultural framework of the poem is incompatible with this native expression. Das quite often blends dissimilar discourses in a single poem which is in many ways redolent of Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" or "polyglossia". Similarly In "The Wild Bougainvillaea" there is a complete fusion of sexuality with death and rottenness. The effect is achieved with the help of imagery that is basically olfactory:

I walked through the streets beside
The sea, where the barges

Float, undersides rotting in the garbage
Rot, and the dead fish rot,
And, I smelled the smell of dying things and the
Smell of rotting
Dead, I walked on streets where the night-girls with
sham
Obtrusive breasts sauntered
And under yellow lamps, up-and-down wandered
Beaming their sickly smiles
at men....

The rotting undersides of barges, dead and rotting fish, dying things and the "night girls" with "sham" and "obtrusive breasts" suggesting perverse sexuality, are brought under one and the same poetic umbrella making sexuality totally inseparable from death and rottenness. Even the smiles of the prostitutes are "sickly" and the pallor of sickness and disease is suggested by "the yellow lamps" under which they "saunter" as pathological temptresses. Her obsession with flesh makes the street girl corpse-like:

Near the sea behind Cadell Road
They burn as joss-sticks
The poor men's bodies
Those dark, thin corpses
All bound with strings of tube-rose
And the brilliant marigold
We saw them bring one, last Sunday

An hour after our
Tea time, scented up
To smell like a low-paid
Street-girl

("The Joss-sticks at Cadell Road")

The obsessive juxtaposition of sexuality and death results from the need to transcend physicality and look beyond the "chilling flesh":

obsessed as we are by our
physicality, restrained,
by the eyes" inadequate power
to perceive beyond the farthest
precincts of truth, if only the
human eye could look beyond the
chilling flesh, the funeral pyre's
rapid repast and then beyond
the mourner's vanquished stance, where would
death be then, that meaningless word
when life is all that there is, that
raging continuity that
the wise ones often recognize as God?

(Annamalai Poems, IV)

Life is seen here as a vast continuum that lies beyond the "chilling flesh". The vast phenomenon of life is pitted against the life of an individual that ends with death. Death nevertheless, as the poet says,

promotes its own kind of life through the maggots. Das sees death only as a condition in which the component cells of the perishable body disperse and return to the elements from which they come and then enter into new combinations, new forms. This brings us to the third layer that the poetic pilgrim must peel off. It is the body itself that is presented as the garment or container of the soul that must ultimately be "de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded" or "discomposed" into its constituent cells. The old "systems and arrangements" perish and the new ones are created. It is an unending process. In other words, the essence is immortal but the "systems and arrangements" are mortal:

The ultimate discovery will be
That we are immortal,
The only things mortal being
Systems and arrangements,
Even our pains continuing
In the devourers who constitute
The world. 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.
Only my freedom being

The freedom to

Discompose.

("Composition")

This is the poet's concept of immortality that is in consonance with the underlying undying principle or the *Brahman* as expounded in the *Bhagwadgita.* As is evident in Das's poetic universe death often heralds a new beginning and is in a perpetual coexistence with life. The idea is also reflected in her treatment of nature. As will be seen in "Afterwards" in the next chapter. Characteristically, nature in this poem is presented as a cyclical pattern of life and death and the two coexist in a continuing process. In every gesture and in every move, life and death reside, playing a tug of war in a rhythm of coexistence, because:

Life's obscure parallel is death. Quite often
I wonder what I seem to do is living
Or dying. A little of each is in every
Gesture. Both my mind's and my body's. Inside
My throat the inward breath combats the outside
But within. The built-in terrors of my mind
Swoop down on me from the treetops at dusk and in
The kitchen's unlit corners large birds of prey
Perch with rustling claws and an all-knowing gaze.

("Life's Obscure Parallel")

Thus, in this natural cycle death is not finality. It is also a beginning. Here the poet is not talking about the Hindu cycle of death and rebirth but a natural process:

> Through a corpse's eye glazed to visor death peers
> Out at the living. At least it lives on to cool, to rot and
> Fill the hollows with fat maggots that sprout like toadstool without
> Notice. On the epitaphs at graves lichen grows the fastest
> As do scabs on wounds, yes, death promotes a kind of life...
>
> ("White Man With Whiter Legs")

As suggested above, what seems to end is an individual life which implies to the poet mere "systems and arrangements". "Discomposition" implies the idea of being metamorphosed into the other more potent forms of nature, the state of being in everything by being nothing. "Discomposition" is mistaken for "Decomposition" by almost all the critics of Das including Anne Brewster. Kirpal Singh has written a full-length paper on the poem "composition" entitled "Kamala Das and the Problem with composition". He makes only passing references to this key word and fails to come to its actual meaning.

Having failed to find true love in the human world the poet turns to the Radha-Krishna myth which receives a highly

innovative treatment at her hands. Her frequent references to Radha and Krishna make many of her critics see a sustained religious strain in her poetry. Some critics, like Vincent O'Sullivan, call her a religious poet while others equate her with Mira and locate her in the Indian bhakti tradition. I.K. Sharma and M.L. Sharma advocate this view. According to I.K. Sharma:

> Beneath the explosive poetry of Kamala Das, which is so much talked of and which is so well-known, there flows a subterranean stream of bhakti heading towards its known destination, (1981).

It is certainly a valuable interpretation, useful in its own way. Most of these critics tend to regard the bhakti tradition as monolithic and homogeneous which is certainly not the case. Indian bhakti tradition is quite diversified and the "bhaktas" (devotees) display contradictory attitudes towards the deity. By North Indian standards Das cannot qualify as a devotional poet. Accordingly critics like Fritz Blackwell refuse to place her in this tradition. Das makes only literary use of religious concepts, asserts Blackwell: "I feel her concern to be literary and existential, not religious; I think she is using a religious concept for a literary motif and metaphor," (Journal of South Asian Literature Vol. 13, Nos 1-4, 1978, 9-14). This is admittedly true. But when one considers her prolonged obsession with the Radha Krishna myth and her experienced intimacy with Krishna, as

evident from her autobiography as well as her poetry, one is persuaded of the sincerity of her faith. Her confession in this regard puts the issue almost beyond any doubt:

> But illogical that I am, from birth onwards, 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 my imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure. Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all women, did she not have his incomparably beautiful body in her arms.... We do not have him physically to love us; we have to worship a bodyless 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? Now in middle age, having no more desire unfulfilled I think of Krishna as my friend, like me grown wiser with the years, a householder and a patriarch. And illogically again, I believe that in death I might come face to face with him. Then the shehnai can begin, the birds can sing, the river can start its lullaby, for another of his brides would have come home. (*Femina*, 6 Jun 1975, 19).

The passage presents a demythicized Krishna, consistent with the poet's essentially anthropomorphic vision. Krishna is imaged as a friend, a lover/husband and as a householder and a patriarch. What

is significant here is that he and the poet share the same human platform with a deliberate annulling of status difference. The intensity of the relationship is conceived and described in sexual terms. The union with the "bodyless" Krishna can only be attained through "the secret entrances of the body" as the poet puts it. This is also a defilement of the body which becomes a humbling experience for the soul and a necessary precondition for such a union. Hence her assertion: "Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change"(*MS* 194). Obviously the confession cannot be taken at its face value and may equally be the voice of the fictional persona. It is easier to establish the correspondence between Akka and her work because the internal and the available external evidence pointing to her autobiographical positions do not conflict. She was a practising saint and her vacanas are records of her mystic search for her Lord. But in the case of Das there is no relation between the two types of evidence, specially about the delineated sexual adventures. External evidence is in favour of a total divorce between the poet and the person while the internal evidence, the narrative voice, makes such a separation impossible. However, whether it be the poetic persona or not, the narrative position cannot be ignored. Whatever the differences between Akka and Das as discussed in chapter two, the nature of their search is remarkably similar. It is a poetic pilgrimage from the body to the bodiless, from the form to the formless, from the finite to the infinite, from the temporal to the eternal. The "defilement" of the body does not signify indulgence or involvement in the corporeal or the carnal but an escape from it, an

undoing of it: "...I shall some day see/My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,/Just a skeletal thing" (Das: "I Shall Some Day"). The quest for the bodiless is borne out by the following excerpt from Das's prose writings as quoted by M.L. Sharma in his article entitled "Road to Brindavan": The Themes of Love in the Poetry of Kamala Das:

> I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed like a blue lotus in the water of my dream. It was to get closer to that bodyless one that I approached other forms and lost my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination. (1980, 164).

Das's view of this life as performance is redolent of the Shakespearean idea that the world is a stage and its inhabitants are mere players:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players:
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts.
>
> (*As You Like It*, 2, VII)

In the essentially tragic drama of selfhood that Das's poetic pilgrimage represents, the poet's union with Krishna is delineated, in her poetry as well as her autobiography, as a redeeming finale. Shattered and disillusioned by human bondage the poetic persona

finds herself in a mystic communion with Krishna. It finds a highly imaginative and theatrical presentation in *My Story:*

> Free from that last of human bondage I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Thereafter he dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat crosslegged before a lamp reciting mantras in His praise. (*MS* 195).

It would be naive to delve into the autobiographical veracity of the passage. It is an imaginary dialogue between the speaker's soul and God. It is the surrender of the finite to the infinite, of the soul to God. The recurrent image of the poet's mind as an old playhouse suggests the terrifying state of alienation and ennui that can only be alleviated by her union with the Lord. He comes in a moment of intense spiritual crisis and metaphorically fills the hollow mind of the persona with "His sweet voice".

The contrast between the seasonal and the eternal, the temporal and the permanent, shadow and substance is brought out in

the poem "A Man is a Season". It is a contrast between the eternal, the archetypal lover and the imperfect and evanescent human lover:

> A man is a season,
> You are eternity,
> To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins
> Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
> You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
> Seek ecstasy in others' arms. But I saw each
> Shadow cast your blurred image in my glass,

Krishna is the ultimate substance and the human lover just the shadow. The price for this knowledge is wanton exposure to experiences, often unpleasant and humiliating. As discussed elsewhere, the defilement of the body is a way of obliterating it in order to merge with the bodiless. But the poet cannot discard the finite and the temporal, for in the finite she apprehends an image of the infinite; the "substance" glimmers in the shadow. God leaves and makes visible a potent fragment of himself in His creation and hence a complete separation of the finite from the infinite, of the shadow from the substance is not possible. The idea is reminiscent of the famous lines from Blake:

> To see the world in a grain of sand,
> And heaven in a wild flower;
> Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
> And eternity in an hour.

The need to obliterate the body results from the poet's constant awareness of its perishable nature consistent with the Hindu philosophy of the body, the self and Brahman as contained in the Bhagavad Gita:

> Bodies are the perishable, self is the imperishable....
> There is another unmanifested, the undying reality,
> Which does not dissolve though all beings dissolve.
> (89 & 90).

In Das human ties are seen as being accidental and confined only to this perishable body and hence inconsequential. The soul's union with God is the only kind of bond that is permanent. It is to this that the poet aspires:

> In actuality who is he (the husband)? Who am I? Who are these three boys who call themselves my children? We are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal, and perishable. The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes I shall surrender to His desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and

then become part of Him. Then for me there shall be no return journey....(*MS* 196-97).

In her urge for union with Krishna the speaker possibly identifies herself with Radha who to her is the archetypal beloved and a symbol of the human soul yearning for union with God that is Krishna. It is the supreme urge of the soul to dissolve, to melt in His divine embrace so that nothing remains but He:

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 at the core
Krishna; I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You...

("Radha")

The elemental fluid imagery with its obvious sexual overtone suggests that the way fluid is absorbed in the earth the soul is absorbed in the divine Being, the only indestructible entity. In the intensity of her relationship with Krishna, the poetic persona as a

literary incarnation of Radha finds herself imprisoned in the body of her Lord. This surrender of freedom is also her supreme delight:

> 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...
>
> ("Krishna")

The sense of intimacy and friendliness with Krishna is a part of a distinct tradition of *Bhakti* poetry that was popular in Maharashtra and Karnataka in the Medieval Age as represented by Jana Bai and Akka Mahadevi respectively, as discussed earlier. Tharu and Lalita highlight some of the striking features of this tradition. It is fascinating that despite chronological polarization Das can be so close to those poets in her treatment of the Radha-Krishna myth. An excerpt from the introduction to the path-breaking book by these critics will shed further light on the attitude of the saint-poets to Krishna:

> The devotee cajoles, chides, woos, rages against God, who is a personally chosen husband/lover to the bhakta imaged as wife/lover, and the mystic union is often imagined in sexual terms. In fact status, masculinity, scholarship are seen as obstacles to bhakti. (Tharu and Lalita, 1993, 58).

Radha and Krishna are just too human lovers, with the result that some critics find it hard to identify Das's Radha as a devotee. The typically human traits of Krishna and his consort are admirably brought out in the following poem entitled "The Cobweb" as well as the ones cited above:

Do not look into Radha's eyes O friends
For her soul lies dead inside
As cobwebs block the doorways, unused,
Grief now mars her lonely eyes
He has been gone for years, that Krishna who
Once was hers alone. Perhaps
Another holds him now, a lovelier and
More fortunate one. And yet
Poor Radha must live on for life is long...

("The Cobweb")

Thus the poet deliberately refrains from creating any kind of mystic aura about the love experiences of Radha and Krishna, the way, for example, Sarojini Naidu does in her poetry. The following poem is taken from Naidu's second volume of poems entitled *The Bird of Time* in which Radha is imaged as a typical devotee of Krishna. The poem is less personal than those of Das despite the fact that the poem is in the first person while those of Das are in the third person:

I carried my curds to the Mathura fair...

How softly the heifers were lowing...
I wanted to cry, "who will buy, who will buy
These curds that are white as the clouds in the sky
When the breezes of Shrawan are blowing?"
But my heart was so full of your beauty, Beloved,
They laughed as I cried without knowing:
Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda!...
How softly the river was flowing!

I carried my pots to the Mathura tide...
How gaily the rowers were rowing!...
My comrades called, "Ho! Let us dance, let us sing
And wear saffron garments to welcome the spring,
And pluck the new buds that are blowing."
But my heart was so full of your music, Beloved,
They mocked me when I cried without knowing:
Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda!...
How gaily the river was flowing!

I carried my gifts to the Mathura shrine...
How brightly the torches were glowing!
I folded my hands at the altar to pray
"O shining ones guard us by night and by day"—
And loudly the conch shells were blowing.
But my heart was so lost in your worship, Beloved,

They were wroth when I cried without knowing:
Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda!
How brightly the river was flowing.
("Song of Radha the Milkmaid", *The Bird of Time, 1912)*

Naidu's poem is more contrived and less spontaneous than those of Das. Syllabic regularity and rhythmic control take precedence over intensity of emotion. In fact there is a kind of cloying sweetness about the whole poem created by the manipulation of cadence. However, the poem is called a "song" and a song makes its own demands on the writer. Although both Das and Naidu belong to the twentieth century and both have drawn upon the tradition of Indian devotional poetry, particularly the *abhisharika* (a woman going to meet her lover braving the elements and risking her life and social acceptance), the two poets have nothing else in common. The most conspicuous difference lies in attributing sexuality to the Radha Krishna bond. The business of Naidu's poem is to refrain from the slightest touch of the erotica with the clear implication that the divine and the carnal are to be held in antithesis. On the other hand in Das sexuality is intrinsic to the poems as a metaphoric device to convey the height of intensity of the union between soul and God. As seen above, Das exhibits amazing parallels with the ancient poets instead of her more immediate predecessor—a fact that makes poetic ancestry a complex issue.

By virtue of their mythical value the divine figures become powerful metaphors for archetypal love and the divine sexual congress symbolizes transcendental bliss and sublime fulfilment. The ultra-physical nature of the relationship between Radha and Krishna that forms the basis of many of Das's poems should be seen as a convenient metaphor for the inviolable bond between the soul and God as elucidated by the following poems:

> This becomes from this hour
> Our river and this old Kadamba
> Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
> Souls to return someday
> To hang like bats from its pure
> Physicality...
>
> ("Radha-Krishna")

Or:

> 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?
>
> ("The Maggots")

The underlying theme of these poems is that the soul's surrender to the desire of God and its union with Him far transcend social taboo and recognition. Even infidelity becomes redundant. Indeed, the elaborately delineated infidelity of the speaker to her husband in *My Story* as well as the poems of Das parallels the infidelity of Radha as she too was after all somebody else's wife and hence an adulteress in a more literal sense. Thus, although Krishna motif in Das serves an ostensible literary purpose and can be seen even as a literary strategy, it is in no way inconsistent with the strain of *bhakti* that one may be inclined to find in Das's poetry.

The supremely fulfilling experience of Radha and Krishna is denied to the mundane pseudo-lovers, capable of "unleashing" "nothing more alive/ Than the / Skin's lazy hunger," (The Freaks). In the human world by contrast, particularly in the institution of marriage lust is often passed off as love and the woman is invariably made a victim of sexual politics leading to profound anguish and the urge for withdrawal:

> Dear night, be my tomb.
> It is hard to believe
> That I only lost,
> Lost all, lost even
> What I never had.
> Life is quite simple now—
> Love, blackmail and sorrow....
>
> ("The Substitute")

The moody sea of memory "thumps" against the shore of her consciousness in an unwelcome manner. This is a painful memory and hence intrusive in character. It is triggered off by a gnawing sense of loss coupled with the anguished realization that love is nothing but "blackmail and sorrow." It could be the loss of the speaker's inner identity disfigured by the compulsions of role playing. This leaves the persona with the impossible craving to withdraw into a condition, a void where thought and memory can be warded off however temporarily. One such condition is sleep even if it be "banked/ in the heart of pills":

Love-lorn,
It is only
Wise at times, to let sleep
Make holes in memory, even
If it be the cold and
Luminous sleep banked in
The heart of pills, and he shall not
Enter,
Your ruthless one,
Being human, clumsy
With noise and movement, the soul's mute
Arena,
That silent sleep inside your sleep.

("Luminol")

The poem is a sequel to the earlier extract. Here the intrusion takes a human form and the obvious reference is to the husband-figure of the persona. His vices make him repulsive to the speaker. Her very consciousness is battered by his presence. Just as Keats seeks escape through oblivion and death, so Das seeks escape into sleep and perhaps even death. In this mute arena of the soul the poet is sure of obtaining freedom from "noise and movement." But, for the plaything that the woman has become in her husband's hands, there can be no privacy, no freedom. In "The Stone Age" he is addressed as "an old fat spider, weaving web of bewilderment" and urged to be "kind" because he is "ruthless" in his dealings with the woman. With his "web of bewilderment" the spider-like husband succeeds in completely annulling the reasoning capacity of his wife. He further causes her to be totally drained of all emotion; he reduces her to a real plaything, "a bird of stone" "a granite dove". The oxymoronic metaphors "bird of stone" and "granite dove" also embody a subtle contrast between the diametrically opposite personality traits of the woman and her husband—she the dove, he the granite; she the bird, he the stone.

The poet is obsessed with the soul and seeks to obliterate the body. The husband, however, is obsessed with the woman's body and would like to obliterate her soul. The diametrically opposite points of view are presented in her poem entitled "The Herons":

On sedatives
I am more loveable
Says my husband
My speech becomes a mist-laden terrain
My words emerge tinctured with sleep
They rise from the still coves of dreams
In unhurried flight-like herons
And my ragdoll limbs adjust better
To his versatile lust...he would if he could
Sing lullabies to his wife's sleeping soul
Sweet lullabies to thicken its swoon
On sedatives
I look more loveable
Says my husband....

It is a painfully ironic situation in which the speaker finds herself. The poem is a poignant exposure of the woman's alienation from her own body on being abused. Despite her refusal to be treated as a mere body, she does not find herself socially equipped to prevent it. Her search for Krishna is a search for the bodiless. Outside the orbit of her relationship with him, she is only a prisoner, a convict. Her own female body is the cause of her bondage and hence she rejects it. The male body holds her captive and damages her self-esteem; hence she must break its ramparts and come out of it. The poet sees the male body as a prison. Her ultimate freedom lies outside its confines:

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its sneer.

("The Prisoner")

Indeed, the poem is an extended conceit of the imprisonment of the female mind. However, the woman-persona is not alone in this kind of suffering. Her predicament is shared by many others of whom she is only one of the descendants. The awareness makes her philosophy of love and worldly life pessimistic. The collective experience of disenchantment and disgust with life and society finds bitter expression in the title poem of the second volume of her poems: *The Descendants:*

We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
Exchanging some insubstantial love and
Often thought we were hurt, but no pain in
Us could remain, no bruise could scar or
Even slightly mar our cold loveliness.

Like "Herons" "Descendants" also sets out to expose the perverted male equation of a woman with her body. Men's total insensitivity to the female sentiment and emotion manifests itself in their almost necrophilous enjoyment of the female body. Indeed, to these men a

woman can be "lovely" even without an iota of feeling or emotion as suggested by the oxymoron "cold loveliness". The love is "insubstantial" because it is only a performance, "a sad lie". The poet writes: "my love is an empty gift, a gilded/Empty container, good for show, nothing/Else...." ("The Captive"). Hence there is no question of a genuine union. The woman is not emotionally attached to the man but only "nailed" to the lethal bed just as Christ was nailed to the cross:

> We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not
> To crosses, but to soft beds and against
> Softer forms, while the heaving, lurching,
> Tender hours passed in a half-dusk half-dawn and
> Half-dream, half-real trance. We were the yielders
> Yielding ourselves to everything.

This is the agony of endless compromise to which women have been subjected since time immemorial. The notion of petrifying uncertainty and her tantalizing position in society is remarkably brought out by the poet's choice of compound epithets like half-dusk, half-dawn, half-dream, half-real. She is the passive recipient of all that culture has in store for her. She has no authority over her own body; it is patriarchy that must decide on its purpose:

> It is
> Not for us to scrap the walls of wombs for
> Memories, not for us even to

Question death, but as child to mother's arms
We shall give ourselves to the fire or to
The hungry earth to be slowly eaten,
Devoured....

The only thing that is certain is death. The speaker's surrender to death is compared to the child's instinctive surrender to its mother: "...as child to mother's arms/We shall give ourselves to the fire...." In her lifetime she has been a victim of sexual hunger, perennially devoured by concupiscent men; in death she is devoured by the maggots. Men with their necrophilous perversity are brought close to the maggots. Hence the poet's rhetorical question: "...Who can say/For certain that we are superior to the maggots that/Eat us in the end?" ("White Man With Whiter Legs") In an acrid posture of uncompromising resentment and resignation the poetic persona, Casandra-like, sounds the note of doom for her female descendants. The poem ends with her climactic outburst of pessimism:

None will step off his cross
Or show his wounds to us, no God lost in
Silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
Claim us, no we are not going to be
Ever redeemed, or made new.

("*The Descendants*")

The speaker's nihilistic attitude is conveyed by the repetitive use of the negatives: "no", "not", "none". She chooses to speak representatively preferring the first person plural to the singular in a rather uncharacteristic manner. The use of "we" points to the fact that the design of the poem is to be general. It is a scathing commentary on the plight of women. The rather morbidly tragic vision presented by this poem is one of the most important voices, but certainly not the only voice, of Das's poetry. The poet's disillusionment finds a more controlled and cryptic expression in her poem "A Request". It is one of her most structured poems and can be seen as an elegy:

When I die
Do not throw
The meat and bones away
But pile them up
And let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth on this earth
What love was worth in the end.

Alienation and search for love are central to the poetry of Das. Evidently the two are in an antecedent-consequent relationship. It is a search that is incomplete and eternal. This requires her to venture into new territories and perform contradictory roles, as she advances in her poetic pilgrimage. She gives an innovative mould to the Radha-Krishna myth that adequately expresses her vision of

ideal love. Quite often she refers to the vanity of worldly life that generates so much of gloom in her poetry. Her vision of life as a continuum is not tragic though her vision of worldly life is. The two are very often confused. "Growing up" she says, "and not death, is the tragedy of life" ("Composition"). Quite contrary to the charge of obsession with physicality, she asserts the need to look beyond the "chilling flesh" and hence to transcend physicality.

CHAPTER V

INCARNADINED GLORY: THE MELIORISTIC VISION

> "He (the poet) is responsible for humanity, even for the animals, he must see to it that his inventions can be smelt, felt, heard"
>
> (Arthur Rimbaud)

Camouflaged in the aura of erotica that surrounds Das lies a robust melioristic literary sensibility that demands greater critical attention. A sustained undercurrent of reform runs through the entire gamut of her poetry and prose. The basic thrust, the underlying unifying spirit is one of amelioration. The poet's melioristic sensibility manifests itself in most cases in the rejection of every form of violence, political, social or sexual. Knowingly or unknowingly, Das initiates a commendable tradition of the "literature of nonviolence". Her "love poetry" in the ultimate analysis, voices her rejection of sexual violence. Her other poems like "Afterwards", "The White flowers", "The Fear of the Year", "The Flag", "Inheritance", "Terror" and the Colombo poems castigate violence that is legitimized in the name of nationalism, patriotism, religion and race. A desire for moral and spiritual edification and for universal brotherhood runs through all these poems. The fervent urge to champion the cause of the oppressed and the underprivileged squares with her oft-asserted egalitarian

principles. Contrary to the prevailing critical opinion, attempts have been made in this chapter to show that whatever Das's themes may appear to be, her sensibility is fundamentally melioristic. The technique adopted for this purpose is one of satiric exposure. This sensibility also embodies the "private voice" of Das that becomes more and more audible with the passing of years.

For further discussion of Das's poetry of nonviolence, the meaning of the word "violence", specially as applicable to Das, needs to be spelt out. The root meaning of violence comes from the Latin *Violentia,* meaning vehemence, a passionate and uncontrolled force, the opposite of a calculated exercise of power. Traditionally, the word meant "to prevent some object, natural or human, from its "natural" course of development" and "to exceed some limit or norm" (*War or Peace? The Search for new Answers,* ed. Thomas Shannon, 1980, 106) even the political theorists of the 18th century—Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu—agreed that violence could not regenerate people or society. They specified in unambiguous terms the limits to the justifiable province of violence. Since Marx, however, there has been a visible tendency to link up revolution with violence. However, as Michael True puts it:

> This is quite understandable, given the proliferation of technological weapons in this century, but this association is not inevitable and deprives us of the tradition prior to Marx, the tradition that radical social

change was possible without resorting to violence, as it was then understood. (1980, 106).

This is exactly what Das's message is: that social change is possible without violence. Too often the message is hidden between the lines and eclipsed by the sexual facade. The latter ranges from "the typewriter's click," the "sad lie/Of my unending lust", "the skin's lazy hunger" to "a grand, flamboyant lust" ("The Freaks"). In other words, the sex roles are to be ascribed to the performing self. Indeed, there is a need to penetrate the layers of the erotica in order to listen to the "private voice" of the poet:

I have put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech; I
Click-click, click-click tiresomely into your
Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of
Me, I go on and on, not knowing why....

("Loud Posters")

This voice of the poet is often rendered inaudible by the "million" voices of the poetic personae. Thus, the poems often express a cosmic human concern. Many of her writings have a very clearly stated agenda to save mankind. This is emphatically stated in one of her interviews to P.P. Raveendran. Supporting the ban on Rusdie's *Satanic Verse,* she said:

> On my list of priorities peace would come first, and literature only second. I would not mind if all the writings that have been produced in this world one day get burnt if it can ensure peace. The ultimate aim of literature and art must be to establish peace on this earth." (*IL 155*, 157).

It is highly significant that Das's first major poem "Afterwards" is a scathing attack on violence. The theme of an unhappy transition from past to present with a foregrounded contrast between the two is to be found in this poem. As ascertained with the help of the poet's biographical details, this is her first major poem that was composed in her early teens and was published in *Asia* PEN magazine in 1948. Even at that tender age Das was a pacifist. She felt the need to expose the rabid nationalism that inevitably resulted in global homicide. This is a poem of topical interest as it has as its subject the first nuclear holocaust of 1945, which marked the end of the Second World War. It was written before Das's marriage and is therefore not addressed to "one of her sons" as Nabar believes. The "son" is in fact imaginary and represents, as Nabar points out and the context reveals, the new generation after the holocaust. Nabar's reading is fairly consistent as far as the context of the poem is concerned. It is, however, a highly complex poem that resists a simplistic approach.

The poem contains obvious ambiguities. The ambiguity results mainly from the poet's excessive use of deictics, particularly

personal pronouns like "I", "we", "you" and "they". There are allusions but the context provides hardly any clue to them. However, the sustained "vagueness" in the poem can also be seen as way of legitimizing the reader's role in the poetic process—from poetic creation to interpretation. This is rather uncharacteristic of Das's poetry as a whole because she quite often tends to spell out the details instead of allowing the situation to speak for itself, mainly when she resorts to the narrative mode in a lyrical situation. The poem "Afterwards" exposes the vanity of the human intellect and questions the very notion of scientific progress. For, after all, the "cleverness" of the human race becomes the cause of its own "doom":

Son of my womb,
Ugly in loneliness,
You walk the world's bleary eye
Like a mote. Your cleverness
Shall not be your doom
As ours was. I will tell you why.
Just a while ago, this place
Was ours....

It is not the usual contrast between past and present as in "The Millionaires At Marine Drive" or "My Grandmother's House". The contrast is between the states of the world before and after the lethal explosion and hence the title of the poem: "Afterwards". The addressee of the poem "You" is that solitary individual who is

constrained to walk the desolate streets of the world alone because the poet imagines the metaphoric "son" to be the only survivor after the devastation. To the Romantic poet the individual was beautiful when alone. His loneliness was a condition of his choice, a state to which he could withdraw in moments of creative introspection. His aloneness was a positive condition that found a spontaneous expression in art: "alone she cuts and binds the grain/And sings a melancholy strain." Imbibing "the bliss of solitude," Wordsworth "wondered lonely as a cloud". In "Afterwards" on the contrary the "son" is "ugly in loneliness" because this loneliness is the result of the destructive intelligence of a race of which he too is a descendant. He is like one of the innocent victims of Original Sin. Hence, this loneliness is a negative condition, a death-in-life situation, which will exact its own bitter price. Since the holocaust was a manifestation of a cosmic hate, the "son" must learn to subscribe to a culture where there will be no love, no companionship:

> You have to be happy now,
> It's easier when alone, go ahead,
> There is no song to break your
> Somnambulistic tread.
> Caught in this yellow disc of light,
> You turn, like a guilty rat,
> And draw your rocky home over you
> Like an irremovable shell.

The image, "yellow disc of light", is a visual presentation of the explosion. The prevalent imbroglio and the state of the world as a mere assembly of intolerant people force on the addressee a cloistered existence signified by the forceful image of a snail-like withdrawal and escape in the last two lines of the above extract. Indeed, the underlying idea is that the world can be made beautiful only by love and human fellowship, by the uncorrupted values, by simplicity and innocence of its inhabitants; and over and above, by keeping the magnificent creation intact:

...You should have seen us race, fly
Thread-wise across the turquoise sky
And talk of love, music, science
And beauty. Lovers held hands
And watched the eagles fly
Too near the sun and fall,
Children were told not to lie
And it was normal for a girl to sigh
Over a dying bird; we learned kindness
As we learned our books, yes.
There was no sign at all of what was
Coming then, the earth was
Sagging heavy, fruits were sweet
And ripe, fishes died on their bait,
And as a little girl, I watched
My brother squat beside a hedge
And slowly blind a beetle

The thorny twig in those little
Hands went quickly red-tipped.
The insect curled its legs and died.
I felt sad, but my tears I tried to hide.
That was what I was, your mother,
Son....

The difference between the pre-explosion and the post-explosion states parallels the difference between the pre-Lapsarian and post-Lapsarian states of man. The ambience of abundance and fullness of these lines sharply contrasts with and highlights the ennui of desolation and emptiness of the earlier lines. The deictic first person pronoun represents several voices and speaks from shifting positions: of a mother who "burns as wick to light" her "children's way" ("Until the Break of Dawn"), the poet, a mediator between the two generations, a contrite representative of the old generation, a chorus-like commentator on the bleak transition, and a detached observer. The "son" as a representative of the human race has been rendered as insignificant as a "mote", a grit because his ancestors' "cleverness" (signifying mechanical intellect) has pernicious consequences. In the lines "...Your cleverness/Shall not be your doom/As ours was..." the "cleverness" of the old generation and that of the new are contrasted because "from us to you was a gigantic leap." In this leap the poet sees a purgation of the intellect that must shed its mechanical layers and evolve into a more constructive faculty, imbued with compassion and love. This kind of "cleverness" shall certainly not be his ("your") "doom". The

"world's bleary eye" refers to that condition of bewilderment and alienation that is the inevitable result of the world's short-sightedness and ill-conceived notion of progress. "Bleary eye" is also an allusion to the lethal dazzle and the gamma ray of the bomb because the eye is made "bleary" by "the yellow disc of light". The poem is full of sensory images of brightness and dazzling light like: "yellow disc of light", "a savage red", "sun-blinded bats", "the harsh yellow moon". These visual images become within the given context metonyms for death and destruction by intense glowing heat, generating what Eliot calls "incandescent terror":

> The dove descending breaks the air
> With flame of incandescent terror;
> Of which the tongues declare
> The one discharge from sin and error.
>
> (Four Quartets)

As is obvious, Eliot's lines were also inspired in a similar way by one of the air-raids during the Second World War, three years before the nuclear explosion. It is not a coincidence that "terror" rhymes with "error" because in both the poems "incandescent terror" is attributed to a deep-seated error in the human intellect. As a result of this error "...we/Wet the poison to our lips, content to be/Curers, we judged the sinners/And killed them...." ("Afterwards") It is also an act of grave "sin" because the unleashed "terror" implies not only homicide but extermination of life as a whole. Ironically all this is done in the name of nationalism.

It is a manifestation of a misdirected sense of idealism and patriotism:

> They ask me, is this the one we died for? We?
> We who made gigantic dreams
> Of peace. We who had whims
> And fancies fit for gods,....

"They" and "We" in the above lines refer to those innocent and often well-meaning individuals, particularly soldiers. They perish as canon-fodder at the hands of cunning politicians who enkindle in them an illusory sense of purpose and martyrdom. As a result of this legacy of gory memory the "son" undergoes a metaphoric desiccation:

> What are you with vacuum in your mind,
> Too dry for growth, just a rind we left behind.
> With no memory to kindle sadness
> In your eyes, no dreams of feminine smiles
> To excite your open-mouthed sleep.

Dazed and disillusioned, shorn of sentiment, passion and dream, he must inherit this decimated earth. He may be just a particle of dust on the boundless canvas of time. But history must move on and he must play his part:

> The earth we nearly killed is yours

Now. The flowers bloom again,
But a savage red; it takes
Time to forget blood or the quick gasps
Of the dying. And the sudden pain.
But the sun came again and rain.

It is a pattern of coexistence and contrast. The lines are arranged in a death-life sequence. The agony of genocide is partly relieved by blooming flowers but their "savage red" takes the reader back to the sanguinary past. Death by poisonous gas of the lethal device is effectively conveyed by "quick gasps of the dying" but at once the horror is eclipsed by the life-giving sun and rain. Left on his own man is powerless, totally incapable of controlling the consequences of his own mindless suicidal acts. Ironically, he must wait for his ultimate solace that can come only from nature.

In Das one does not find elaborate descriptions of nature; she is not a poet of nature in the traditional sense of the term. She nevertheless makes extensive use of nature and natural objects for very different purposes. Firstly, it embodies a silent commentary on the human situation. Nature by its cold indifference and unaffected course vis-à-vis all the upheavals and turmoil in the human world suggests that if at all man's actions have any meaning it is only within his own narrow circumference. On the vast canvas of man and nature these are of no consequence. Indeed, the difference between life and death matters to man but not to nature:

At times

A storm sinks some ships or a quick typhoon devastates a town

But nature aware of life's intent does not care to seek

Anyone's pardon, it sees no difference between the living

And the dead...

("White Man with Whiter Leg")

Secondly, natural growth or vegetation is used to express the passage of time. Both the ideas can be illustrated with the help of the following lines from "Nani": "The shrubs grew fast. Before the summer's end/The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway/And the walls." In the fast growing shrubs and yellow flowers one can also sense a visual representation of the passage of time. Regardless of what goes on in the human world and indifferent to man's acts of violence and destruction, nature never alters its course:

...Fear was in the air

As the corpses smouldered,

Fear and a stench sweet as

That of raw cashewnuts,

Roasting. The sea did its

Duty as usual at

The Galle Face Green, without

A sign of shock or pain

It patrolled the empty shore.

("The Sea At Galle Face Green")

The poem will be taken up for a more detailed discussion in the context of racial violence. The sensory, particularly olfactory, character of the imagery specially stands out in the above lines.

The theme continues in "The White Flowers". The poem is more simply structured and the poetic canvas drastically narrowed down to the drawing-room of the poet. The "baby-son" refers to Das's youngest son Jaisurya. He was born in the year 1965; so the "war" refers to the Indo-Pakistan war of that year:

Today I shall weave white flowers into my baby-son's
hair
For the guests are coming up the stairs
Talking of war, bloodshed and despair.

Today I shall pour no whisky, I shall serve wine.
In glasses cold like dead man's palm
I shall serve blood-red cherry wine.

Imagery is Das's undisputed forte as is evident from these lines. Death and bloodshed are represented this time with the help of visual colour images; one recalls "the savage red" of "Afterwards". "Wine" becomes a metaphoric synonym of "blood" and even the glasses are "cold like a dead man's palm". Violence often

masquerades as patriotism. Which is why nationalism cannot be above humanity:

> They talk of India in strong beautiful voices. With fresh
> Blood they shall love her, I know, most lovingly
> And burn as incense, living flesh.

The macabre presentation of death takes popular nationalism to a point of complete absurdity. The impact is achieved once again by juxtaposing opposites such as fresh blood/love her, incense/living flesh. The horror of the situation is effectively evoked with the help of choice of language. What is the impact of it all? Who are the actual victims?:

> In mud-walled houses far away, old mothers weep
> Who washed their son's khaki uniform and pressed them
> They weep even while they sleep.

The bitter irony lies in the fact that those who plan and are responsible for the massacre, the politicians, remain untouched by it. It is the common innocent people, represented by "the old mothers," who suffer; they are the only losers in every possible respect. Thus, fear is in the air and it lingers on in the depths of the human consciousness; the poet sees no escape from it. This can be seen from the following lines from "The Fear of The Year":

...for fear has wrapped us all; even
In the freedom of our dreams, it
Thrusts its paws to incarnadine
The virgin whiteness,....

Audible in the last two lines of the excerpt is an echo of *Macbeth:*

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine.
Making the green one red.

(Act II, Sc. 2, 60-64)

In both the extracts fear has penetrated the layers of consciousness and settled in the unconscious. In Das's poem the experiencing subject is only a passive victim and hence in his case it is an experience of unalloyed fear. By contrast Macbeth is diabolically active in engineering the source and cause of his fear which is inseparable from guilt. His blood-stained hand, capable of incarnadining even the "multitudinous seas," is an elaborate metaphor for the enormity of his crime. In "The Fear of the Year" the simple individuals on their own are seen as being often uncorrupted and blameless, qualities most powerfully expressed in visual terms by the metaphor "virgin whiteness". It is a metaphor with exceptional suggestive power. There is a brilliant manipulation of colour contrast for the purpose of poetic impact as well as

communication of powerful thought. "Virgin whiteness", along with innocence also suggests a kind of angelic purity, a condition of being undefiled and stainless. Anthropomorphically "fear" is transferred from the abstract plain to signify beast-like human beings who through ingeniously designed modes of violence send around waves of fear among people and destroy their innocence and purity by dragging them into the network of carnage and destruction. Hence, "the virgin whiteness" is "incarnadined"—innocence is devoured by monstrosity. The result of the global hatred and intolerance is described by the poet in very concrete terms. The following description of an air raid and wanton dropping of bombs is in a way reminescent of a similar raid in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It picks up the theme of "Afterwards":

> ... so that we
> Perceive the flying steel hands sow
> Over mellow cities those dark,
> Malevolent seeds and the red,
> Red, mushrooms hotly sprout and grow
> On an earth illogically
> Stilled, and silenced, dead, dead, dead.
>
> ("The Fear Of The Year")

The passage shows a sudden shift from metaphor to metonym. On the whole Das exhibits a greater penchant for metonyms than for metaphors in her poetry. Through a chain of three metonyms: "flying steel hands", "dark malevolent seeds" and "red red

mushroom's" the poet gives a vivid picture of the flying aeroplanes, the lethal device and its explosion with the resultant "incandescent terror" and death. Death becomes all-pervasive; its reverberations fill every corner:

> Summer's catchword was always,
> Always destruction; and this
> Year's, wrapping us like some
> Prickly mantle cried kill, kill,
> All that was, till a while ago,
> So dear, so beautiful, yes,
> Perhaps the malevolent
> Alchemy of the city air
> Aided us, turning gold to
> Lead, so that the familiar
> Caressing hands unshaped the clay
> And swiftly formed a death-heath.
>
> ("Summer 1980")

It is a fierce irony that so much of destruction and killing goes on in the name of the national flag. This obvious perversion finds one of the bitterest exposures in Das's poem "The Flag". The poem is a scathing attack on hollow patriotism. It exposes the ever-widening gap between the grand ideals associated with the National Flag and its colours on the one hand and ubiquitous bloodshed and sickness, starvation and discrimination on the other:

Dear

Flag, look, beneath you, the scarred limbs of this
city sprawl, scarred, so

Emaciated—and yet how grandly
The ornaments gleam!

The neons wink, the harlots walk, swaying
Their wasted heaps, the

Rich men dance with one another's wives and
Eke out a shabby

Secret ecstasy, and poor old men lie
On wet pavements and

Cough, cough their lungs out. Yet, there is whisky
On the breath of winds

And channel No. Five, and the cooking's
Smell....

The technique is once again the same: juxtaposition of opposites; operating by contrast but subtle satiric exposure gives way to open statements whose poetic value lies mainly in the deftly handled rhythm and poetic parallelism. The nonviolent strain of the lines consists in the poet's criticism of social inequality that coexists with

bloodshed, perverse sexuality and degeneration and impoverishment of Indian culture. What ails the poet most is the vast chasm between the rich and the poor. This concern permeates a significant body of her writings including the following:

> In India as in other parts of the world the rich and the poor behave as if they were denizens of two dissimilar planets. The poor are all-pervasive. They lie in the pavements or sit under trees eating banana peel. At times in the gutters they squat, ferreting out edible offal. But the rich ones do not see them, just as the poor do not see the rich. There is no meeting-place for the rich and the poor. (*Femina* February 23-March 7, 1985, 48).

It is an outburst of righteous indignation. As a piece of social criticism the poem suggests that human ideals must be tempered by reality. In themselves they are nothing; they are mere abstractions and hence must be abandoned:

> It is time to say goodbye to your charms dear flag, to your old
>
> Meaningless pride, to your crude postures of
> Honour, to the lies

Your colours tell, to the false hopes you did
Extend, to your old
Macabre dance in the blueness of our sky.

This is poetry for humanity's sake. The poem is a fierce indictment of callousness and indifference to the problems of others, specially the unprivileged. The poet attributes it to man's pathological obsession with materialism and narcissism. The poet feels that the ideals must be restructured and symbols must be reconstructed. Be it literature, a literary symbol, a concept, a revolution or any kind of human endeavour for meaningful social change, it must have its roots on the earth. This realistic vision is also manifested in the following extract from one of her interviews: "But no revolutions come from above. Only vultures come from above. You know everything should come from the earth. Something healthy, should have roots on the earth, roots into the earth" (*IL* 155, 160). The fact that the flag is always held aloft and its "macabre dance" is confined to the "sky" is suggestive of its complete alienation from the land that it represents. The glaring social polarities could not have been expressed more forcefully than by pitting the scarred, emaciated limbs of the city against gleaming ornaments and ailing pavement-dwellers, dying and rotting babies against the rich men "who dance with one another's wives" "and Channel No. Five". The flag is "poor", that is, in a pitiable state because it is in no way responsible for its isolation; it did not leave the "earth" or forsake reality. It is man who has been distancing himself from its noble ideals of peace, purity and sacrifice. These have traditionally been the

lifeblood of Indian culture and civilization. "The Flag" as a poem of address, an apostrophe, embraces the two parallel territories of violence: that of hypocritical patriotism and social unconcern.

Equally, if not more, rampant than patriotic violence and misdirected nationalism is social violence. It takes the form of exploitation—both economic and sexual—of the deprived and the down-trodden. Although there are many poems which focus on this subject, the discussion will be confined to three of Das's poems: "Honour", "Nani" and "Toys".

"Honour" is a poem of disconcerting revelation about the poet's feudal Nair ancestors. They are imaged as base and bestial, who at night "took to bed the little nieces" of their low caste tenants, ravished and murdered them, then threw them into pools and wells. During the day they watered the hypocritical plant of honour. The poet unveils the ugly secrets of these ancestors whom she holds guilty of the most heinous crime against humanity. They masquerade as protectors of family honour and pass in the eyes of society as "honourable men". Das expresses her disgust for those depraved relatives in a similar tone of bitterness ad revulsion in *My Story:*

> They had grown up as components of the accursed feudal system that prevailed in Malabar until two decades agoand had their own awesome skeletons in the cupboards of the past. Being members of affluent

joint families, they had had ample leisure to nurture their concupiscence, feeding it with the juices of the tender daughters of their serfs and retainers. They feared that I would write of their misdeeds, of the accidental deaths in the locality and of the true immorality which take shelter nowhere else but in the robust arms of our society (*MS* 211).

This opening of the corpse-filled Nair cupboard exposes the poet to the wrath of her community and earns her ostracism. The tone of the poem as a whole is bitterly ironical:

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 little nieces, and pregnancy,
A puzzle to the young toys, later thrown into wells and ponds
From which they rose like lotuses and waterlilies, each with
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 laws that punished no rich, only the poor

Were ravished, strangled, drowned, buried at midnight
behind snake shrines
Cheated of their land, their huts and hearts, oh the
poor were such
Laugh-raisers, such comedians on the lush, lush stage
of that
Feudal age, how we laughed, how we held our
stomachs and laughed
When the poor Moplah, young and newly wed, was
handcuffed and dragged off
To Choughat on a charge of murder, even dead and
rotting
The wench was alluring,...

Like "The Flag" this is a poem of large polarities which constitute the very structure of the poem. It embodies powerful social criticism contrary to the allegation that Das's poetry lacks social concern. The jolting hypocrisy of the ancestors, the flagrant discrepancy between their appearance and reality, the polarization in their value system, are conveyed with the help of juxtaposed opposites like: plant/pyre, day/night, nieces/toys, thrown into wells and ponds/rose like lotuses and waterlilies, dead/living, laugh/guffaw, rich/poor, lush stage/feudal age, wed/handcuffed, dead and rotting/alluring and by implication, honour/dishonour, laugh/cry, comic/tragic/grin, justice/injustice, appearance/reality. This is Das's oppositional aesthetics. Characteristically, sexuality is closely associated with death and violence, reflected in a highly suggestive diction. In this

poem and in many others, the effect is achieved by choice and clustering together of dynamic verbs like "ravished", "strangled", "drowned", "buried", "dragged", all of which belong to the same semantic field of violence in the context of the poem. The impact is further heightened by the manipulation of jarring consonant clusters and heavily stressed syllabic pattern of the line, bordering on the staccato. The violent nocturnal activities of the Nair ancestors are adequately brought out.

Das's tirade against sexual exploitation and violence continues in another of her poem "Nani". It is based on an episode in the poet's childhood. It is about the tragic suicide of an unmarried pregnant maid of the Nalapat house. The poem strongly resembles "Honour" in theme but differs from it in form and structure. Both are poems of satiric exposure of the poet's feudal ancestry. However, in "Nani" the perpetrator of the crime is not specified as in "Honour." The context clearly suggests that the victim was driven to ending her life by the same Nair ancestors who "ravished", "strangled", "drowned" and "buried" the little nieces of their servants. Both the poems create a grotesque situation by giving a comic twist to death:

> 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 success of these lines consists in their power to create a macabre effect. Pathos is combined with a fierce irony. This is the irony of performance. This is one of the most vital and crucial themes of Das's poetry: the woman as a performer, a role player. Das's poetry abounds in images of performance—toys/puppets. Woman has always been treated as a pleasurable object by patriarchy. In Das's poetry as well as in her autobiography the husband's enjoyment of sex is presented as mechanical and selfish: "He was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal, simply and without exhilaration." She is conditioned to perform her roles as long as she lives. The poet takes the idea to its bitter extreme by implying that even with death Nani's role as an entertainer does not end. Even her corpse must give some pleasure to the living before it is cleared from the scene. When alive Nani was a puppet to the adult; when dead she becomes a puppet to the children who cannot see through her grim acrobatics. Nani can be seen as an archetypal victim of male tyranny.

The three lines that follow are foregrounded by their rather out-of-the-way religious diction. The dead maid is all of a sudden transformed into a goddess and the privy into a shrine. This is an act of self-redemption on the part of the poet who was a child when Nani died and hence too young to do anything for her. But now in

her poetic world she erects a shrine as tribute to her innocence and purity: "...The privy, so abandoned, /Became an altar then, a lonely shrine /For a goddess who was dead...." When the world distances itself from vital truths, the poet finds herself painfully "abandoned" along with the privy, in a posture of alienation. The "shrine" is of her making; its loneliness is hers too. The sense of martyrdom is ascribed to the dead "goddess" because Nani sacrificed her life for the protection of the family's honour. Conversely the poet's Nair ancestors protected the "honour" of the family by burying at midnight the strangled victims of their concupiscence.

Despite the poet's endeavour to keep Nani alive in memory she cannot prevent her from sinking into oblivion. This time her aspersion falls upon her beloved grandmother. Indeed, the shrine is to be located in memory and with the maid's expulsion from it the shrine becomes "empty":

> 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?

Kolhi gives a rather literal and simplistic interpretation to the grandmother's reaction when he says: "Time moves on and the

incident is forgotten by the grandmother but not by the poet". This is certainly not the case. The grandmother is guilty of evading the truth because it is unpleasant. This is also the view of Nabar's. The evasion is a direct consequence of the "designed deafness" which implies deliberate sealing of one's senses against unwanted truth, leading to Nani's expulsion even from memory: "With that question ended Nani."...At this point in the poem the narrative mode stops and a reflective turn begins. The poet reflects on the universal human propensity to evade the truth and thereby to evade all responsibility. Indeed, very few human beings possess the courage to set a wrong right. The grandmother is one such representative individual. "...Each truth/Ends thus with a query...." The existence of a truth lies in its being perceived and accepted. It must be pointed out here that the "query" should not be accepted at its face value. In fact it is not a query at all. The grandmother's intention is not to get an answer but to eliminate the poet's question by a counter-question. It is only a verbal strategy in an interrogative form in order to enforce the "designed deafness":

> It is this designed
> Deafness that turns mortality into
> Immortality, the definite into
> The soft indefinite. They are lucky
> Who ask questions and move on before
> The answers come,....

In the context of the poem truth is related to human survival; its recognition is the prerequisite for the protection of humanity. At this stage the poem becomes a critique of escapism and of unconcern for the underprivileged. The shirkers are sarcastically referred to as "wise ones". It is their worldly wisdom that keeps them safe in a world of complacency fortified against queries and doubts. "The blue silent zone" becomes a metaphor for the ambience of complete escape from reality; "...those wise ones who reside/In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubt". They have great potentials but these cannot come to fruition in that "blue silent zone". These latent human capabilities must be nourished by the reality of the human world to which Nani also belonged. As a result peace of some kind will certainly come their way but it will only be "clotted peace":

> For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
> In life, like music in the koel's egg,
> Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree...

To Kolhi the poem ends

> in an abrupt manner with the poet admiring the "clotted peace" of the dead. Perhaps the poet identifies herself with the dead, but paradoxically the imagery which evokes the peace of the dead belongs not to the world of the dead but to the living and continuing

> world of life in the embryo, passion in the veins, and life-blood in the soil. (Kolhi, 1973, 108).

Kolhi's interpretation ignores the context of the poem as a whole. The context of these lines is provided by "the designed deafness" of the human beings with their natural preference for "the blue silent zone" where doubts and queries pose no threat. Kolhi seemingly overlooks the irony in these lines. The poet is speaking in a tone of sarcasm and irony. She is not admiring the "clotted peace" of the dead and she is not identifying herself with them. She belongs to a world where questions must be answered at all costs and the truth of whatever kind must be faced and acted upon. The peace of her quest resembles the smoothly flowing, clear water as opposed to "the clotted peace" that the "wise ones" experience. However great potentials may be, if they are not allowed to manifest themselves, they mean nothing. The "wise ones" in their "blue silent zones" are like "music in the koel's egg." Both must come out in order to become meaningful. Nabar gives a rather balanced interpretation to the concluding lines when she says:

> The music in the koel's egg, the lust in the blood, the sap in the tree, if not allowed to manifest themselves, are really symbols of vitality but of a kind of life-in-death. Hence the peace "the wise ones" experience is "clotted", not smooth or unblemished. (Nabar, 1996, 71).

The theme of decadence of the moral values figures in a number of poems including the much later "Toys". While "Honour" and "Nani" focus on the decay of these values in personal life "toys" exposes through powerful images the degeneration of moral values in both public and personal life. This is a poem of acute social consciousness in which the poet bemoans the death of patriotism and the emergence of the new race of slogan-mongers:

> Doomed is this new race of men who arrive
> With patriotic slogans to sow dead seeds
> Doomed are their empty gestures and, doomed, their
> Proud ancestor who mourns in shame through their
> mouths
> At the ritual's end....

The newfangled patriotism can sow only *dead seeds* because it has nothing better to offer; it has nothing to do with the true spirit of nationalism and love for the nation. The slogans are mere *empty gestures* and the *dead seeds* sown by the self-styled patriots can only generate hatred and violence. They are equally depraved in their personal life. They have no qualms about playing with the lives of innocent women who are to them mere toys. These men make them victims of their lust and then force abortion on them:

> The womb weeps blood
> How much kinder to remove this outdated
> Growth, to bury it inside the earth and let

The maggots breed in its hollow than let it
Remain in the worthless
Body of a toy.

"The womb weeps blood" because abortion is cruelly inflicted on the victim. A mere toy in the hands of these "honourable" men, she has no say in what is done to her own body. The "growth" is "outdated" precisely because these patrician rapists consider all such ideas as caring for the new-born and giving it a chance to live "outdated". The utter helplessness of the victim and the absolute callousness of her debauched victimisers are conveyed through an extremely bitter idiom.

Das's stay in Sri Lanka in the early 80's marks a turning point in her literary career. The spectacle of homicide and arson radically alters the mode of her poetic praxis. For it makes her realise the need to extricate her melioristic sensibility from the web of fantasy and sensuality. Accordingly her poetry of this phase is characterized by freedom from eroticism. In her first three collections— *Summer in Calcutta, The Descendants* and *The Old Playhouse*—the poet's humanistic meliorism is visibly eclipsed by other more sensastionalized strains. As corroborated by her numerous prose writings of this period, Das journeys back to her real, autobiographical self, veiled so far in the mist of fantasy and myth. As an "emotional revolutionary", she now takes upon herself the urgent task of dedicating herself to the cause of humanity. However, her socio-political concerns are restricted mainly to her

prose writings and public speeches in which the Shelleyan dictum "Love of love and hate of hate" becomes her guiding motto. Thus in the writings of this phase one can find the real autobiography of the poet.

Das's righteous indignation stems from the ever-increasing violence and crime perpetrated in the name of race and religion. The altruistic self virtually swoops down upon those responsible for this ubiquitous mutual hatred. This brings us to the Colombo poems expressive of a distinctively philanthropic vision. They are an instance of life transmuted into poetry and of the artistic credo that literature is for humanity's sake. Referring to her experiences on that island and to the poems written during her stay there, she says:

> Colombo I had to write because I was there those two years when things were going wrong .I had watched people being killed so that those poems had to be written, certainly, and that was the time when I felt that I must write about what I saw around me. I am also chronicler. A writer is not merely a lyrical poet, but is a chronicler of events that happen around her. I was a witness to the event when a neighbour was done to death.(152).

In these poems Das takes up the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka that becomes for her a metaphor for collective violence. These poems tell of "what man has made of man". Right from her first

poem "Afterwards" through the Colombo poems to the ones written more recently like "Terror", "If Death is Your Wish" and "The Daughter of the Century" one finds the poet growing more and more bitter in her indictment of the wanton misuse of human potentials mainly by the intellect.

The theme of decay of the old and grand monuments has always been common in poetry. "The Sea at Galle Face Green," however, is about the deplorable role of human beings in transforming a resplendent city into the equivalent of a "half-burnt corpse". The poem begins with a consolidated image of arson; the opening simile announces the macabre dance of death generated by ethnic discrimination: "Like a half-burnt corpse was/That splendent city/Its maimed limbs turning towards/The smoke-stained sky...." Nature is often indifferent to the vicissitudes of human beings, as seen in several of her poems including the concluding lines of this poem. However, in the lines that follow, even nature rises in protest as manifested in the cessation of the life-suggesting movement in the natural world:

...and
Even the small leaves of
The katurmuringa
Stopped their joyous tremor
While the sea-breezes blew.
No birdsong in the trees

The atmosphere is characterized by the grimness of a graveyard in which the music of nature is suspended and "only the stomp of boots" is heard. These boots are "Worn" most ironically "by the adolescent/ Gunmen" who are innocent and are only "ordered to hate" the Tamils. Ethnic violence is a vortex into which even the little children are dragged. In a state of exasperation and disgust, the poet asks:

> But how did they track
> Down the little ones whose
> Voices rose each morning
> With the National Flag
> And its betrayed lion,
> An affectionate beast
> A king of kings, laid down
> By his son. How did they
> Track down the little ones
> Who knew not their ethnic
> Inferiority?

As also seen in "Nani" and other poems, Das is fond of asking questions which resist answers of any kind. The questions expose the ignominy and irrationality of war and state-sponsored patriotic violence. In a tone of sarcasm the poet says: "It was a defect/That made us the land's inferiors;/A certain muddiness in the usual red,/Revealing our non-Aryan descent" ("A Certain Defect in

Blood"). In the organizers of this state-sponsored homicide Das sees an image of Hitler and his dire cruelty:

> Hitler rose from the dead, he demanded
> Yet another round of applause; he hailed
> The robust Aryan blood, the sinister
> Brew that absolves a man of his sins and
> Gives him the right to kill his former friends.
> The dark Dravidian laid his three year old child
> On his lap,....
>
> ("After July")

She sees the incarnation of Hitler even in the native salesgirls at the shopping centres in Colombo: "...but when at last/I reach the cashier's counter, the salesgirls/See through my guise, and their cruel mouths bleed/When they make attempts to stab me with a smile" ("Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo"). K. Satchidanandan comes up with a very revealing reading of these poems when he says that the conflict between fair Hitler and the dark Dravidian is a repetition of an earlier mythical war fought in Sri Lanka between fair Rama, who was also an Aryan, and dark Ravana who was a Dravidian. As a matter of fact Das's poems show a deep awareness of this conflict in her obsessive juxtaposition of dark/brown/nut-brown and fair/white.

Her sympathy is not confined just to the Dravidians. She castigates in her poem "Delhi, 1984" in bitterest terms the state-

sponsored terrorism unleashed on the innocent Sikhs in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984:

> The turbans were unwound, the long limbs
> Broken and bunched to seem like faggots
> So that when such bundles were gifted
> To their respective homes the women
> Swooned as their eyes lighted on a scarred
> Knee or a tattooed arm....

If such an act enjoys the sanction of the scriptures then the scriptural chant is nothing but a lunatic's guffaw:

> The scriptural
> Chant sounded like a lunatic's guffaw;
> Any God worth his name would hasten
> To disown these dry-eyed adherents
> Of the newest cult....

The adherents of the new cult of terrorism are "dry-eyed" and insensate. The poet mocks them because their vigour lies not in their loins" but in their guns:

> ...and this brand new cult
> Spawned by an uneasy era turns
> Out its own dry-eyed adherents, men whose
> Vigour must repose not in their loins

But in the guns they tote. They shall not
Populate this earth but shall cleave it
Into two....

("If Death Is Your wish")

These "adherents" are mere pawns in the hands of Machiavellian politicians; they are the "paid marauders" and the walking symbols of death and sterility. Thus, terror becomes all-pervasive and is once again conceived in animal terms:

Fear
Is our leader, leading us into
High exitless hills standing tall
As a mountain goat upon the snow, and
All the languages paralysed
On our tongue. We recollect the ones
In jail and envy them their freedom
To be. We wear service masks night and
Day, between their metal and our skin
The sweat stinks of rot and pus....

Fear as a mountain goat suggests the manner in which mankind is hypnotically led by this new cult to a precipice. Das as an uncompromizing pacifist cannot accept the fact that war can solve human problems. To her war itself is a problem and needs an urgent solution that only lies in putting an end to it. These perennial

problems threaten humanity and make her unhappy. She shares her feelings over them with Iqbal Kaur in one of her interviews:

> Once I have accepted unhappiness, it is like a dark ocean seen at midnight. It is a dark ocean within. I have accepted it and it remains within me. I am unhappy because every where people are trying to make others unhappy—not merely the people I knew or touched or talked with but the people who are my cousins in the human race. I am unhappy because of the animals that get slaughtered for no fault of their own. I am unhappy for the human beings who get slaughtered, bombed. We have reached an unhappy stage in life, all of us. It is true, and our country is going to suffer more, I feel. Who has got the right to be happy now knowing that right around the corner this new cult of terrorism is flourishing—a cult which will attract our children. They will not have any other religion. They will gravitate towards terrorism because it means power although short-lived." (*The Tribune*, 19 Jan 1992, 5).

As per Rimbaud's prescription, Das clearly feels responsible not only for humanity but also for animals to such an extent that she begins to relegate imaginative literature to a secondary position. At this point in her life she cannot accept the literature that does not contribute something substantial to society. Which is why every

poem of this phase is highly focused in its communication of ideas, even if at the cost of poetic excellence. There is a remarkable fusion of thought and feeling in these poems. They demonstrate that a "lyrical poet" and a "chronicler of events" may not always be at variance. When some of these poems are compared with her earlier ones one notices a more chiselled style, a greater economy of words and compression of ideas. Furthermore the poems, especially those written after her husband's death, show a mark of sharp decline in poetic vigour and spontaneity.

As a champion of a venerable poetic tradition of nonviolence, Das presents a critique of the hegemonic culture with its retrograde value system. Her instincts militate against every form of oppression and inequality, irrespective of gender and class. In this melioristic vision one may detect the "private voice" of Das, a resonant voice of sanity and love.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In ten minutes how can I sum up
This life, this voyage on uncharted
Sea, this flight over radarless ports
This endless worship at plundered shrines
This love transformed into mere pain and
This emptiness that hangs from brackets
Of withered arms, the strangers who have
Come to wipe my tears, the oyster's ache
For the pearl it has lost, the scent of talc on
Baby-skin tended three decades ago
Still lingering on. Change the world with
Rhetoric? Never; cynicism
Takes the driver's seat for time perhaps
Personified as stillness, all its
Fury gelled, tanned. Life spreads its moulting
Wings to sicken me but do not judge
Me harshly, I am your kith and kin
I gathered your laments into a song.

(Das: "Summing Up")

Kamala Das who soared to eminence in the sixties and took the literary world by storm remains a major literary personality even today. S. Iyenger rightly called her "a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry" and called her poem "An Introduction" "a minor classic". A measure of her popularity is that she figures in almost all the important anthologies of Indo-English poetry and critical surveys of Indian writing in English. She is on the curricula of a considerable number of colleges and universities in India and abroad. Her global recognition is attested by her nomination for the Nobel prize for literature in 1984. She is also the first Indian recipient of the Asan World Prize for Literature in the same year. By virtue of her lyrical grace and lucid diction, coupled with a unique poetic personality, she has been able to establish an unfailing bond with her readers. She displays a profound capacity "to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday", to echo Coleridge.

She transcends the barrier of sex. Her creative consciousness reveals its essentially androgynous and even trans-sexual character despite her sexually charged idiom. She talks more about women because they are more oppressed and exploited than men. Thus, there is a great deal more in Das's work than just sex and physical love—an aspect overemphasized by some of her critics. Overexposure of sex is only a literary strategy with her. It is for generating in the reader the desired sense of disgust for the reprehensible aspects of human behaviour that she uses overemphasis.

Her poetry represents an incessant quest for love and identity—perhaps an identity that is misplaced. Marriage is seen by the poet only as an intrusion in her creative life. A sense of loss comes out when she says: "I am positive if I had been unmarried, I would have been a better writer." (1990). Contrary to the general opinion, she has found as an artist sex debilitating. She explains her attitude to it in a characteristically candid manner: "Sex saps you, which is why I took celibacy some 15 years back. Because that is the only way I can write, by keeping my vitality intact." At another place she says: "Love is certainly not sex". All the statements taken together, along with many others, constitute Das's "private voice". But then how do we relate it to her multiple "public voices"? If this is her attitude to sex, marriage and love then why did she write the way she did? We are heading for a multi-voice theory of her poetry. One may consider her own answer to the question: "I began writing the way I did because I wanted to write away my disgust for sex....A woman-writer, whatever she leaves incomplete in her life she feels compelled to complete in her writings, all that we never wanted to face in our real life."

Writing to her is, therefore, a psychic necessity, an antidote to loneliness and betrayal. She cannot imagine a life without creativity and wonders what she would have done if she had not learnt to write in one of her Anamalai poems:

> If I had not learnt to write how would
> I have written away my loneliness

or grief? Garnering them within my heart
would have grown heavy as a vault, one that
only death might open, a release then
I would not be able to feel or sense.

(No. III)

About those who do not write she says: "Those who do not write, retain nothing of life, ultimately. Life runs through their fingers like fine sand". As Rehman observes, like a seismograph she records every tremor of experience. She writes with a sense of double commitment: commitment to her inner self and commitment to the outside world. This is what Satchidanandan calls Das's "aesthetics of complementarity." The former is the source of her introspective and reflective poetry, her poetry of self-discovery, self-scrutiny and even self-flagellation. It can for the sake of convenience be called the poetry of her "private voice". The latter has two dimensions: the first reveals the poet as a "chronicler of events" who holds a mirror up to the world of violence and corruption; the second reflects the dissolving identity of the poet into numerous selves and the autobiographical "I" completely merges with the archetypal "I". This second dimension of her commitment to the external world reveals her public voice. She can be strident, admonitory and prophetic, sparing none.. No experience can be embarrassing to the creative self for creation takes place in a state of void which in Buddhist philosophy implies pure thought, pure consciousness, a tabooless vacuum.

The versatile creativity of Das manifests itself very interestingly in her poetic praxis. There are a number of poems which have as their subject the all-devouring nature of her sensibility. In these poems her creative process finds a thematic exposure. One such poem is "Forest Fire". Fire is a powerful metaphor for the devouring nature of the poetic sensibility. Just as the forest fire consumes everything that comes its way so does the sensibility in question:

But in me
The sights and smells and sounds shall thrive and go
on
And on and on. In me shall sleep the baby
That sat in prams, and, sleep and wake and smile its
Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers, hand
In hand, and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of sun in me, the street-lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, the
Wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl coloured
Skirts and sing sad songs of love, the wounded moan,
And in me the dying mother with hopeful
Eyes shall gaze around, seeking her child, now grown
And gone away to other towns, other arms.

("Forest Fire")

To most of Das's critics "Forest Fire" is only one of her many love poems and the poem is interpreted along this line. As is obvious

from the excerpt, the poem is also an essay on literary composition and the poetic process. The poem lists all the themes that one finds in Das's poetry, right from the baby in a pram to the old mother and the dying. Harrex makes similar points in his discussion of the poem:

> Before external reality can be rendered, she argues, its objects—baby, pram, lovers, old man, street-lamps, cabaret girls, wedding drums, eunuchs, the wounded and dying—must be possessed and devoured by the poet's sensibility, must be personalized, so that images of their reality live on, objectified, in the world of poetic imagination. (168).

In other words, poetic composition presupposes internalization of external reality. These objects of reality await their poetic transmutation and nourish the poet's sensibility.

As discussed in the introduction, the ceaseless activities of the poet's mind make him different from the rest of human beings. Das implies that poetry is a creative reaction to the "pressures and torrents" which the ever-active mind of the poet brings to her. Even when the body sleeps her mind is immersed in creation. It keeps leaping up like a "grey hound", making poetic creation largely a nocturnal activity:

Mind,
Lean grey hound,
Awaking
And leaping up
When I lie
A dead heap upon my bed
Down
Doggie, down,
Merciless
Your claim
That nights fed on the moon
Are yours
While days
Fed on the sun
Are the body's
To play out
Its dreary wearying chores.

("Grey Hound")

The poem revolves around a single image that takes it closer to the Imagist Movement of Ezra Pound. The far-fetched nature of the comparison, the poet's mind being imaged as a hound, makes it a Metaphysical conceit. "Mind" obviously means creative mind and the "moon" is a symbol of creative inspiration, the poetic imagination in the manner of nineteenth century Romanticism. The creative mind is "merciless" because poetic creation is a strenuous and demanding exercise and it cannot be affected by the constraints

of the "body". It is significant in this context that Das does most of her writing during night. Thus, creation to her is an unending and continuous process. To quote her own words:

> For the creation that is literary there is no beginning or end. It precedes the writing and also follows it. It takes place in the mind nearly all the time during the waking hours. At times I suspect that even in sleep the mind is obsessed with its need to create. When you ripen for a poem and a poem ripens for its debut it gets born. There is no easy way to get it out, no miracle remedy for its delayed gestation. There is something primeval and magical in creation—be it that of a living creature or a perfect poem. (Answer to Questionnaire, 3 Feb 1988).

Unable to find comfort in her real life the poetic mind escapes into fantasy and myth. What is denied to the poet in the real world becomes attainable in the "shadowy" world. The two worlds, as is clear from earlier discussions, complement each other. Thus a major aspect of Das's creativity can be seen as wish-fulfilment. What imagination was to Coleridge, fantasy is to Das. It is a need of the creative psyche and the flight is unconscious and automatic: "We all fantasize. About God for instance. We imagine that something exists. Like that I imagined that there would be a friend who'd understand me, comfort me. But then, in real life nobody turned up," as she writes in *Sunday Observer*. If the literary form

suited to fantasy is romance in traditional literature then in Das this is romance of the liberated self. Thus in her poems and autobiography the descriptions of and references to extra-marital love-affairs are nothing but fantastic adventures of the searching self during its sojourn in that "shadowy world". Autobiography as a literary form is an imaginative representation of certain selected facts of life, and in so doing, the imagination at work in "*My Story*" and in a number of her earlier poems "distorts" and dissipates" (facts) in order to "recreate". The demolition of the empirical self needs to be seen as the necessary precondition for creative reconstruction. In this creative void she recreates herself:

> "We weave the fabric
> Of our art, settling and unsettling an ancient
> Design...."
>
> (Feline)

The notion of parallel existence of two worlds is reminiscent of Plato's theory of Ideas. This grants the poet an interesting posture of Feminist-Platonist—an idea that can best be illustrated by examining her treatment of the two worlds of lovers and two types of love experience. One is of myth, the other of imaginatively transmuted reality; one is archetypal, the other an imperfect imitation, a distorted reflection. The former is represented by Radha and Krishna, luxuriating in a serene state of fulfilment. The divine adultery is echoed and imaginatively re-enacted in *My Story*. The imperfect reflection of the ideal lovers can be seen in the more

mundane pseudo-lovers and the husband-figures, imprisoned in, and therefore, yet to be able to rise from the obscurantist "Stone Age" of domestic male tyranny.

Das's journey from Bombay to Kerala in 1980 came to mean a journey away from English to Malayalam and then from poetry to prose/fiction. She did write a number of poems in Malayalam but as an Indo-Anglian poet she found herself to be a total misfit, an alien in her own native land. This added to her loneliness and yielded her a new realization:

> Now when I went to Kerala as a writer who wrote in English, I realised I became lonely. I didn't belong there. There was no audience for my English poetry. Then I realised, for the first time, without an audience I would not be able to function at all as a writer (*IL* 139, 1990, 156).

Again after three years Das articulates this anguished perception generated by her experience of alienation and marginalization due to language:

> I have written poems during the past few months, but I find them to be of a lower standard. They are less spontaneous, and this is probably because I live here in Trivandrum where society has powerful inhibitions.... It is very difficult here for one to feel the

> taste of freedom. The poetry that I write here is a kind of inhibited poetry which I do not appreciate fully. ...There is no audience here for English poetry. (*IL* 155, 1993, 146).

The two extracts taken together emphasize two basic facts. The first concerns the poet's linguistic alienation experienced at various stages of her poetic development. Away from the English language she cannot have "the taste of freedom"; to her English is the uninhibited and uninhibiting medium of poetic communication. The language with all its socio-cultural components, enables the poet to shake off all her inhibitions and remain just Kamala, precluding the need for a mask or disguise provided by a pseudonym. But in her Malayalam circle with its "powerful inhibitions" she must assume a different identity and be called Madhavikutti.

The second fact relates to the audience as an integral part of Das's poetic process. She writes for an audience with stateable objectives. Hers is the poetry of address with an I-you/I-s/he addresser-addressee structure. The speaker is in most cases represented as being actively and often intimately engaged in a dialogue with an addressee who is almost always male. Her indictment is directed against this male addressee while the implied reader is taken into confidence. In the "love poems" we find the male addressee is projected as an offender or an exploiter taken to task in the presence of a vast community of implied readers treated as her confidants:

> Writing is very strenuous. And without having somebody in mind, I don't think that one can begin to write. Like for example, mad people talk to themselves. They always imagine a listener so it was easy for me to imagine a listener. This is not an unusual activity. (*The Sunday Observer*, 8 Nov 1987, 12).

An example of such a representative addressee is to be found in one of the most referred to poems of Das, "The Old Playhouse":

> You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
> In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
> Not the raw seasons alone, and the house left behind, but
> Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
> Pathways of the sky. It was not to gather knowledge
> Of yet another man that I came to you to learn
> What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
> Lesson you gave was about yourself.

The addressee could either be the speaker's husband or her lover. In creating a prison-like condition for the addresser the second person addressee is remarkably close to the addressee in the first section of "The Stone Age." The tone of intimacy between the addresser and

the addressee/reader is greatly enhanced by the quality of the speech that characterizes Das's poetry in general. One may particularly consider the suprasegmental features of her verse like the rapid shifts in tone and pitch, varying intonation patterns elliptical syntax, the vividness of a speaking voice and the overall informal conversational idiom.

In Kerala she has found her sensibility at odds with the prevailing Malayalam poetic conventions. This discovery has considerably curbed but not altogether stopped her poetic flow. Fired by a zeal "to adorn the Malayalam language" she has turned to prose fiction and painting. It has been more a matter of shifting emphasis from one literary form to another. She has not abandoned poetry. She cannot do so for poetry is in her blood. The reason for the relative marginalization of poetry is also economic for she is a writer by profession. Poetry can be a source of supreme joy to her but it cannot be a source of her livelihood in Kerala. This is a peculiar irony of fate, both for her as well as for poetry. Her resentment about her native poetic scene also stems from her distinct ideological position that she holds with respect to the very function of poetry as is obvious from one of her more recent observations:

> The Malayalam poets usually tend to use beautiful words and in their search for musical words what they wish to say gets forgotten—like throwing the baby with the bath-water. My mother is a noteworthy

exception. I believe in original thinking. (*IL*, "Reminiscences From Indian English", 113).

Implied in the commentary is the age-old debate about the function of poetry and the vocation of the poet and also about content versus form, message versus entertainment, thought versus feeling. What she resents about the "Malayalam poets" is their rather excessive stress on sonority; their apparent blurring of the distinction between music and poetry, the sacrifice of thought-content to musicality. A considerable quantity of contemporary Malayalam poetry still conforms to a very strong oral tradition of singing poetry. Indeed, a song privileges the sound over the sense. By contrast, Das's is the poetry of powerful thought, rising from the chainless mind of a chained individual. It is consistent with Rousseau's famous remark that man is born free but he is everywhere in chains. Poetry to Das is a primal necessity. She cannot allow its communicative power to be weakened or eclipsed by "choice of beautiful words".

After her return to her home state, the existential pressure begins to weigh even heavier upon her mind and her poetic sensibility shows some significant changes. In a large number of her more recent poems lust as the thematic focus gives place to violence and corruption in various fields. Such poems are, however, far outnumbered by those that reveal a sustained note of melancholy and pessimism that takes them closer to some of her earlier poems like "The Descendants", "The Substitute", 'Luminol" and several others. The difference lies in that the earlier ones, in one way or the

other, expose and critique sexual exploitation; the later poems like the Anamalai poems, "Home Is A Concept", "Smudged Mirror", "A Widow's Lament", "A Feminist's Lament", "Larger Than Life Was He" and "Stock Taking" are more introspective and can be seen as a climactic expression of the poets loneliness.

Anamalai Poems are a sequence of poems which the poet wrote (or rather spoke) during her sojourn in the Anamalai hills of Tamil Nadu following her crushing defeat in the Parliamentary election of 1984. She spoke these poems into a tape recorder while recuperating from the shock (a detailed account of the origins of these poems is given in *IL* 155). These poems stand in a sharp contrast to the earlier ones. They totally abandon the external world. They cultivate interiority and celebrate the self in the manner of the Tamil *akam* (interior) poems of the Classical times, as P.P. Raveendran rightly points out. What they unveil is the interior landscape of the poetic psyche. They show a kind of self-exploration and self-scrutiny she never attempted before. For lack of space only two poems may be sampled in addition to the ones discussed earlier:

> The longest route home is perhaps
> the most tortuous, the inward
> path you take that carries you step
> by weary step beyond the blood's
> illogical arrogance, yes,
> beyond the bone and the marrow

into that invisible abode of pain,
yes, that deathless
creation tethered to your self
and constantly struggling to wrest
itself free, tethered to your soul
as your shadow is to your form,
your Siamese twin no surgeon
can cut away from you. Other
journeys are all so easy but
not the inward one, the longest
route home and the steepest
descent.

(No. VIII)

Home becomes in the poem the arena of the soul. It is also "the invisible abode of pain" and a site of deathless creation. A work of art is conceived "in that invisible abode of pain" implying that only in a condition of pain and turbulence poetic creation is possible. The "deathless creation" though tethered to the self, is paradoxically in a perpetual struggle to free itself from the creator-self. This kind of creation can only be located in the region of the soul to which it is "tethered" eternally like shadow and substance—as inseparable as the Siamese twins. The process of introspection and self-scrutiny is the most difficult one. This is also a journey from the realm of the body to the arena of the soul.

Many of these poems betray an undeniable element of self-pity that often makes the depicted experience appear morbid. The poems are nevertheless saved by some vivid images, as for example:

> This has always been
> Someone else's world not mine.
> My man, my sons, forming the axis
> While I, wife and mother,
> Insignificant as a fly,
> Climb the glasspane of their eyes...
>
> ("A Widow's Lament")

On its own "insignificant as a fly" is a stock simile but in the last line with its transformation into an image of a lonely and neglected individual the conceit acquires authenticity. In fact very rarely one finds hackneyed similes in Das's poetry. In "Larger Than Life Was He" loneliness is combined with a sense of betrayal and guilt:

> In twenty weeks
> My grief gave way to faint stirrings of guilt.
> In the gauzy sleep of dawn
> I had not lain with him
> For fifteen years or more
> I had tried as satiated wives did
> To wean him of desire
> My celibacy flowed like a river in spate
> Between the twin beds in our room....

The poems of this phase also show a growing preoccupation with marginalization due to age. It is the anguish of being disowned and rejected by the loved ones:

> There were nights when I heard
> my own voice call me out
> of dreams, gifting me such rude
> awakenings and then
> expelling me from warm
> human love, unaccustomed
> fare for one such as I,
> a misfit when awake.
>
> (Anamalai Poems: II)

The urge for communion and reintegration finds a moving and sombre articulation in poems like "At Chiangi Airport" and "Home is a Concept". The old are referred to as "a displaced generation" who are in most cases seen by the poet as victims of their children's ingratitude and unconcern. As a Third World Feminist Das exposes the agony of alienation of the aged:

> ...The unwanted carry heavy bags
> And overcoats but the heaviest luggage
> They tote is pain. If home is a concept
> They shall not know it, if home is a group
> Prepared to love, the traveller has not known that

Group and never shall....

("Home is a Concept")

The theme of old age and the generation gap is treated in a number of her recent Malayalam poems. One of them is entitled "The River Named Time". Das translated into English impromptu on my request. It is more of a paraphrase than a finished poem and so unfit for a formal or structural analysis. Time is compared to a river and the past becomes "the great moody sea" of memories into which this river must flow and merge. The poet's mother "Amma" becomes a representative of the "displaced generation" embracing nothing but memories:

Not once but several times
Amma must have felt that she was swimming
With her children along that river
Named time, struggling to keep their heads afloat
But that was only a delusion. Her children
Stand on the other shore and Amma on this shore;
Forever and ever she shall be on this shore.
She fears that for a moment her eyes may shut themselves
Out of fatigue and those beauteous forms shall
Disappear. Amma, a tired one, the one who
Only embraces memories now....

The translation reveals the pathos of isolation concomitant with old age. "Amma" clings to memories, unaware of the vast chasm that separates her from her children. The metaphor of the two banks of the river graphically presents the generation gap. The banks are the two points in time at which the poet's mother "Amma" and her children stand. The impossibility of their reconciliation is brought out so effectively by this metaphor of the two shores on which the poet finds them standing.

As has been pointed out, in most cases the technique, the literary strategy adopted in her poetry and short stories, is one of satiric exposure, supplemented by often truculent and unequivocal statements in her columns and interviews. Exposure of lust alternates with exposure and indictment of violence of every kind with all its ugliness and ignominy. By rejecting patriotic violence she sets humanity above nationalism which are too often held in antithesis. Mounting belligerence and barbarity enjoin upon the literary artist the indispensable task of promoting national and international integration and peace. As Das says: "The ultimate aim of literture and art must be to establish peace on this earth". Mutual hatred and animosity, born of religious fundamentalism and ethnic strife, portend the extinction of the human race. To the poet all-pervasive hatred is the only enduring inheritance of mankind:

We ate
Our forefathers to gather vigour for living, Later

Our descendants shall perhaps eat us when their turn arrives, No,
We shall not be surprised, we are ordinary, no God seems
Too keen to preserve us. We mated like Gods, but begot
Only our slayers. Each mother suckles her own enemy
And hate is first nurtured at her gentle breast and each man's seed
Is pregnant with his death....

("White Man with Whiter Legs")

Or, as she bemoans the "incarnadined glory" of the riot-torn city, she brings to life the orgy of religious violence in "Inheritance":

Slay them who do not
Believe, or better still, disembowel their young ones
And scatter on the streets meagre innards. Oh God,
Blessed be your fair name, blessed be the religion
Purified in the unbeliever's blood, blessed be
Our sacred city, blessed be its incarnadined glory.

In this tirade once again lies her commitment to humanity that is for her far above nationality, race and religion. This urge to embrace humanity at all costs gives Das a special topical relevance today.

Das's concerns broaden considerably with the passage of time. She gradually disentangles herself from her gender identity. She extends her sympathies to all sections of society: the poor and the down-trodden, women and children, victims of war and ethnic strife, religious intolerance; victims of corruption, the minorities, fighters for justice and sanity, abandoned youths and even plants and animals. This widening of vision grants Das a comprehensiveness denied to a dogmatic feminist. Typical of this sensibility is her poem "Smoke in Colombo" which Das wrote while in Sri Lanka:

On that last ride home we had the smoke
Following us, along the silenced
Streets: lingering on, though the fire
Was dead then in the rubble and the ruins,
Lingering on as milk lingers on
In udders after the calves are buried,
Lingering on as grief lingers on
Within women rocking emptied cradles
They stopped us, a somnambulistic
Daze was in their eyes, there was no space
Between us and their guns, but we were
Too fatigued to feel fear, or resist
The abrupt moves
Of an imbecilic will....

This is life distilled into poetry. The poem is remarkably rich in subtexts and can suggest more than a voluminous account of homicide and arson can state. The poem positions Das in a broader historical context. The maternal similes represent a fervent appeal to preserve life and shun violence of every kind. It is an unobtruded poet-reader lyrical communication, transparent but profound. It is fine artistry aiding a melioristic vision of life.

With life taking precedence over art with the passage of time, poetry gets relegated to a secondary position and loses some of the robust qualities which her earlier poetry possessed. Speaking of the visible differences between the poetry of the earlier phase and the one written after 1980 she says:

> The recent ones have been actually controlled by reason and logic. So certainly they suffered. They are just poetry written by a lady, and there is no flutter of the wings there. It is a caged bird singing its songs. If you cage a bird its music will not be as good as it was when it was free. (*IL* 155, 146-47).

This detached self-analysis cannot be taken at its face value. The "caged bird" metaphor implies the mounting socio-cultural pressure on the poet's mind leading to the weakening, if not loss, of her unfettered imagination and spontaneity. Conversely, her ability to find such vivid metaphors even in a casual conversation testifies to her robust poetic impulse and her descriptive skills. It is evident

from the poems and prose extracts that Das excels in the art of description—description of facts, imaginary description and creative description—to use Robert Andrew's classification. Objects and ideas are transformed for a stunningly vivid apprehension so that with desolation setting in "the house was crouching/On its elbows then". The poet thought the windows were closing like the great grandmother's eyes; she heard "the pillars groan/And the dark rooms heave a sigh". Guilt-ridden she says: "I plucked your soul/Like a pip from a fruit" ("Blood"). In "Annette" beauty is seen "falling as chaff in old mirrors" while the skin of a poet "is yellowed/Like antique paper". The eunuchs were "thin in limbs and dry like half-burnt logs from/Funeral pyres" ("The Dance of the Eunuchs"). By contrast, the "drink" offered to the speaker in "*Summer in Calcutta*" is "but/The April sun,/Squeezed/Like an orange in/My glass" and "Wee bubbles ring/My glass, like a bride's nervous smile". In "The Lunatic Asylum" "An unshaded/Bulb shaped like a tear-drop/Hanging from the dead-white ceiling of the hall" and "The feeble rain throbs on the city's brow like migraine." ("The Blind Walk").

In her entire poetic career what stands out more than anything else is this unique capacity to put to poetic use the vast resources of the English language. It always remains her forte. This is also perhaps the most uncontroversial aspect of her poetic practice. As for her style, it is least artificial and most natural. Words virtually grow on her like leaves on a tree. As she says in her poem, "words":

All round me are words, and words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop their slow growing
From within.

.....

They grow on me like leaves on a tree,
They never seem to stop their coming
From a silence, somewhere deep within.

Past and ancestry, alienation and survival, love and death, innocence and experience, in their highly diversified forms are woven into the very fabric of the poetry of Kamala Das. Her strength lies in her ability to speak in many voices. She exposes herself to the diverse facets of life and her poetic pilgrimage is the story of a searching soul humanized by pain and turbulence. Her essentially tragic vision of the worldly life lends her poetry an elegiac character because, after all, as she says: "I gathered your laments into a song". Though for her "life spreads its moulting wings", her thirst remains unquenched and cries out: "...Rob me, destiny, if you must,/rob me of my sustenance, but do not, I beg/Of you, do not take away my thirst".

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