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.