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.