Chapter II
Chapter – II

Survey of Kamala Das Criticism

The general trend of Kamala Das criticism, by and large, has been to regard her either as a ‘confessional poet’ or as a feminist writer. My endeavour in this thesis is to show how Das has strategically used the mode of confession in her poems to unburden the psychological weight of her perceived victimization. Studies relating to ‘Kamala Das as a confessional poet’ are not many and they are mainly of referential type. And a survey of Kamala Das criticism confirms that so far no critical study on Kamala Das has dealt with the issue of confession as a strategy in her poems.

Virgin Whiteness: The Poetry of Kamala: An Interpretation Das by Devindra Kohli, published in 1968, is one of the earliest criticisms of Das’s poems. He finds Das a ‘personal poet’ and “. . . her poetic world is constructed upon the explorable conviction that she cannot betray the world which she can see and hear” (2). While analyzing Das’s poems, Kohli doesn’t undervalue biographical information; rather he thinks that being a confessional poet, the poems of Das cannot be properly judged without suitable reference to her personal life. The dichotomy in Das’s poems between body and soul, the sensual and the ascetic, the carnal and the spiritual, the wakeful reality and the dream is presented in this book. At the same time Kohli suggests that there is always an urge for transcendence in the poems of Das:

. . . there is an attempt to ‘put my private voice away’ and to portray a larger panorama of experience transcending her personal moods and
feelings. The technique is almost always one of assuming a vaster identity and self as in Whitman or Tagore. (14-15)

Kohli’s study of Das’s poems, however, doesn’t lead to the deeper understanding of Kamala Das as a confessional poet.

K .R. S. Iyengar’s Indian Writing in English, first published in 1962, is supposed to be the first well researched history of “Indian Writing in English”. The 1962 edition does not, however, include any discussion on Kamala Das. In the second edition published in 1973 Iyengar includes Kamala Das in the chapter under the title “The New Poets”. He introduces Das as “the most aggressively individualistic of the new poets” (677). His analysis of Das depends on the solitary volume of collection of poems, Summer in Calcutta (1965), which was published at the time of publication of his book:

The title-piece in Summer in Calcutta scatters its fall-out of heat, sweat and weariness over the entire volume. Even the imagery painfully recurs. Summer heat, urban modes; vital heat, urban sophistication; the contrast between the desire and the spasm, the dream and the reality—Kamala Das explores this theatre of enervation, this vestibule of unresolved tensions. (677)

Das’s poems speak of a deep sense of frustration that might have occurred due to the unsatisfying love and the unfulfilled desire in Das’s life. According to Iyengar these poems fail to satisfy the “calm of fulfillment”:

Under the Indian sun, although sensuality lures irresistibly, yet it fails to satisfy; feeling and introspection but sound the depths of the oceanic sense
of frustration; and the calm of fulfillment eludes for ever. Love is crucified
in sex, and sex defiles itself and again and again. (sic) (677)

Fulfillment in love doesn’t seem to appear in these poems. However, this discussion
seems incomplete in itself as the mature works of Das are not included for discussion.

Nevertheless, Iyengar labels Das as a ‘confessional poet’ (678) but he has not
developed that aspect of Das. Rather he thinks that her autobiographical poems are
unable to portray her original self and she sometime deviates from her focus as a true
seeker of love:

Nevertheless, something is kept back—the ultimate ‘She’ is kept back
from the reader. Whatever may be the truth about the “still small voice”
within; the speaking voice seems to have no use for calculation, tact or
subterfuge. The images are icy, stony, steely, dark . . . and are meant
perhaps to insulate the true self from the surface life. While her sensibility
seems to be obsessively preoccupied with love and lust, it finds love
invariably petering out to lust, and lust merely eating to the point of
nausea. (679)

However, he finishes his discussion with a positive hope and accepts Das as a “new
phenomenon” who dares to exhibit her very personal moments which undoubtedly caters
to the “feminine sensibility”:

There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglican
poetry- a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu. Kamala
Das’s is a feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate
the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world. (680)
In an important essay published in 1980 “Kamala Das as a Confessional Poet”, E.V. Ramakrishnan places Kamala Das in the tradition of American confessional poets. In course of the essay he analyzes few poems of Das to show that her poetry bears many features of confessional poetry. He also points out that the free verse technique adopted by Das has, “perfected a way of treating the most intimate experience without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos” (202). He further adds: “Her frank admissions and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional about them and are perfectly in keeping with the nature and themes of Confessional poetry” (202). He however, observes that compared to her American counterparts Das’s poetry “lack in the unifying stream that has to run through various shifting moods” (207).

In 1981, another important book Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das written by Anisur Rahman, was published. He finds Das as one of the few significant poets in Indian Writing in English. He admits that in Das’s poems one may not find the varieties of life but at the same time the readers accept Das as a poet having originality and freshness in Indian Writing in English (xi). This originality issues out of the representation of uninhibited expressions of intimate life in her poems. Rahman says about the title of his book:

... I have found out that as she expresses herself without inhibitions and in a direct, poignant tone, she achieves a form in her poetry which may adequately be called “expressive”. Her poetry has been viewed in this perspective and certain parallels have been drawn to show that she writes with striking individuality and freshness of her own. (xi)
He labels Das as a confessional poet and groups her with her American counterparts like Plath and Sexton. But at the same time he is not unaware about the uniqueness of Das being an Indian variety in this genre:

But, Kamala Das, among all the poets in the confessional genre, stands in splendid isolation owing to her eminently personal note. Shaking the pan-Indian feminism, she writes of her private anguish in an effortless manner. This may adequately be called her expressive form. (2)

The above words confirm that Das is not a feminist writer in the popular sense of the term. Rahman goes on to point out that Das’s feminine sensibility is to be found in her attitude to love:

Kamala Das’s feminine sensibility, then, is not to be explored in her frank confessions of her sexual life or in a detailed description of female organs. It is expressly manifested in her attitude to love, in the ecstasy she experiences in receiving love and the agony which she feels when jilted in it. (4)

Rahman sees Das ultimately as a love poet. When she is jilted in love she finds shelter in the mythical figure of Krishna, the ideal lover. He discusses the representation of female body in the poems of Das and links this to her instinctive emotional response to love: “Her approval to the matters of sex is purely instinctive. She seeks to sanctify the flesh in a bid to establish an emotional liaison with her partner” (41). He identifies Das’s confessions as a process of purgation in which Das “. . . kills the dragons of experience and achieves a sublimitated state” (17). Rahman defines poetry as a redemptive tool and
he situates Das’s poems in that perspective, but the study does go into the details of this aspect.

In *A History of Indian English Literature* by M. N. Naik, published in 1982, Kamala Das is acknowledged as a poet having “individuality and power” (210). While acknowledging the poetry of Kamala Das as confessional Naik observes that her poetry obsessively mulls over love, sex and the body’s wisdom (209). While pointing out that many of Das’s love poems have a Browningesque dramatic quality her excessive harping on sex diminishes the aesthetic quality of her poems: “The intensity of her utterance sometimes results in a lack of verbal discipline, and her constant harping upon sex cannot escape the law of diminishing aesthetic returns” (209). Naik however is positive in his final analyses of Kamala Das as a poet and acknowledges her as a bold poet having a ruthless honesty (210).

Bruce King’s *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, published in 1987, is considered to be an important critical study in the field of Indian English Poetry. According to him Das writes in a “colloquial and open manner about herself, her moods, her love, her marriage, her grandmother and the cities in which she lived” (113). He points out the difference between Das and other contemporary poets and some of her predecessors in making the poet-persona very intimate to the readers. While he traces a link between Das and the confessional poets he observes: “The poems show that through her sexual confessions her writing has made her a self-conscious celebrity and she plays up to it, often bragging and celebrating” (153). One may infer from the above words that Das uses the mode of confession as a manipulative device to achieve a celebrity status. He, however, does not probe into the details of confessional poetry and Das’s relation to it.
An Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry, edited by C.D. Narasimhaiah was published by Macmillan in 1990. In the “Introduction” to the book Narasimhaiah acknowledges the ‘daring innovativeness’ (11) of Kamala Das as a poet. Interestingly enough he mentions, “She is perhaps the only Indian poet who owes little to Yeats or Eliot and trusted to her own resources and to her culture. . .” (11). He however doesn’t mention anything about Kamala Das as a confessional poet. He observes that in case of Kamala Das her poetic impulse gets the better of social conventions (12).

In 1993 an anthology of Indian poetry in English was published by Macmillan publication. The collection entitled Indian Poetry in English was edited by Makarand Paranjape. The list of poets ranges from the beginning to the current; from Derozio to Imtiaz Dharkar. Paranjape has appended a well-documented ‘Introduction’ focusing on a vast area spanning from the ‘origin’ to the ‘contemporary’ period of Indian Poetry in English. With a painstaking effort he has sketched the characteristics of different ages in Indian Poetry in English. Kamala Das has been placed in the phase which is marked as “Modernism (1950-1980)”. While discussing about this phase Paranjape points out certain traits. Primarily the emphasis has been given to the shift of the mind-set of the modern poets who are mostly post-Independence writers. At the same time the influence of important modern English poets and critics like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, I.A. Richards and F. R. Leavis on the Indian English poets were unavoidable. They entered into a new era. Paranjape notes, “The first major characteristic of the modernists was a rejection of the past” (20). And in the ‘rejection of the past’ the entire new generation of poets found themselves totally alienated. Having gone in opposition to the idealism and romanticism of their predecessors, they wanted to set the tone in the real, unsentimental voice of
everyday language. They introduced ‘a bold, new frankness’ (20) into their poetry: “they explored human sexuality and wrote about it with confessional candour” (20). Paranjape finds this confessional style in the poetry of Kamala Das. He finds in her poems some unprecedented issues like castigation of male who abused her. She has delineated this aspect in her writings by the continuous ripping off of personal elements. In post-independence era a new voice was established. Paranjape observes another important issue taking shape in these poems. “A tension between the English medium and the Indian experience” (21) gradually became the foundation of these poems. Das has been given importance in this anthology where she is appropriately evaluated as a modern ‘voice’ in Indian English Poetry.

G.J.V. Prasad in his book *Continuities in Indian English Poetry: Nation, Language, Form*, published in 1999, deals briefly with different aspects of Kamala Das’s poetry. Incidentally he mentions citing Kamala Das’s own observations that she does not belong to the confessional school of poetry (85). He, However, acknowledge that Kamala Das creates “a space for the modern woman’s dilemmas” (87). He further says:

... it is undeniable that she heralds a new confidence and felicity in the use of English and confidence in directly dealings with sexuality, and extends the India of Indian English poetry.(87)

*Many Indians, Many Literatures: New Critical Essays* edited by Shormistha Panja was published in 1999. The book included essays by scholars examining the varieties and possibilities of Indian literature. In an essay entitled “Imagined Communities: Collective Aspirations in Contemporary Indian Poetry” K. Sachidanandan writes about Indian women poets with an intention to deconstruct their work from feminist perspective.
Though India has always a wide range of Women poets from ancient times, he points out that the term ‘feminist poetry’ is a very recent phenomenon:

However, a committed feminist poetry that emphasizes difference in terms of gender and seeks to rewrite the patriarchal discourse and challenge the phallocentric order of things is a more recent aesthetic phenomenon in India. (49)

He contextualizes Kamala Das in this perspective where a trend is set to rewrite the myth relating to the marginalization of women and to establish a parallel mode of writing which revolves round the female body:

These poets are engaged in revisionist mythmaking and the establishment of a parallel semiotics centred round the female. . . .Together they seek a libidinal economy and a new politics of desire that can reconstruct the male-dominated world on the basis of love, freedom and equality. (49)

In 2000 N.V. Raveendran published *The Aesthetics of Sensuality: A Stylistic Study of the Poetry of Kamala Das.* It is an attempt to analysis Das’ poems employing the device of stylistics. This work may be seen as a deviation from the ongoing trend of study on Kamala Das. It focuses on the fusion of stylistics and sensuality in the poems of Das.

As K. Ayyappa Panicker says in the ‘foreword’:

He (N.V.Raveendran) has, however, used stylistics here as a means of exploring and explaining the poetics of sensuality thereby bridging the gap between language and linguistics on the one hand, and poetry and stylistics on the other. (iii)
The author himself lays down his hypothesis in the ‘Preface’: “This book attempts to unravel the art and thought of poet Kamala Das, using the tools of stylistics and allied disciplines” (n.pag.). Exercising stylistic features in the poems, Raveendran successfully locates the personal world of Das which simultaneously celebrates corporeal love. The author observes this as ‘aesthetics of sensuality’. This aesthetics, having a universal appeal, brings Das very close to her readers. This book very convincingly manages to correlate stylistics and poetry. But simultaneously this study is far from locating Das as a confessional poet:

Kamala Das’s poems may have similarities with the poems of the American confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. But similarity is no sign of influence and in this study no attempt is made to place Kamala Das among the American confessional poets like Anne Sexton whose name has almost become synonymous with the genre. (120)

Raveendran believes that confessional mode of writing is not a unique one and confession can only bring shame to the writer:

Hence, confessional poetry is not a modern phenomenon sprung in America. It existed in the past in one guise or the other. Further confession alone is not poetry; it should have lyrical qualities also if it should be recognized as poetry. Here, Kamala Das’s poetry is not viewed from the confessional angle and so no attempt will be made to compare her poetic work with Anne Sexton’s or Sylvia Plath’s. (121)

In Indian Writing in English, Vol. 8., published in 2000, N. Ramadevi in her essay “Kamala Das and the Confessional Mode” draws a parallel between Kamala Das and her
American counterparts, “Just as the American Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton she exploits the confessional mode in order to discover the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood” (35). This is true from the point of view of Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” where there is also the ‘peeling off’ of the layers to reach the ‘nakedness of bone’: “peel off the napkin / O my enemy. / Do I terrify? . . .” (9-11) or in Anne Sexton’s “The Truth the Dead Know” which includes lines like: “It is June. I am tired of being brave” (4). So it is easy to place Kamala Das’s poems like “Sunshine”, “Cat”, “Composition”, “The Introduction” etc in this genre. Very personal moments expressed in these poems helps the poet, specially a female poet, to expose her suppressed self placed in a subsidiary position in the hierarchy of gender in our social system. Ramadevi has discussed the origin and reason behind the development of Confessional poetry. She goes on to analyze some poems of Das and traces the characteristics which lie at the bottom of confessional poetry—loneliness, despair, compassion and self-pity. The portrayal of the ‘sad woman body’ beaten and relegated to nothing recurs in Das’ writings. In this essay, Ramadevi asserts Das’s attempts to rise up above this self-humiliating process: “In Kamala Das’s poems, the quest for identity of a woman as a woman goes a long way in making the self out of various disjunctive psychosomatic pressures. . .” (40). It was a desperate attempt among the confessional poets to establish their identity. This continuous search for self is an important off-shoot of confessional poetry.

A. N. Dwivedi in his Kamala Das and Her Poetry, published in 2000, has included a particular chapter, “As a Confessional Poet”, to analyze Das’s poetry from the point of view of confessional mode of writing. He states: “Kamala Das, who is a
confessional poet, writes in the mode and pattern of several ‘new’ American poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath…” (40). Then he discusses the origin of the term in relation to the history of American Confessional Poetry. He brings out the distinguishing nature of this style which keeps poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound on the opposite of these poets (40). The difference remains between subjectivity and objectivity. Then he concludes: “… keeping in mind the above specification about confessional poets and poetry, it wouldn’t be wrong to portray Kamala Das as a confessional poet in truest sense of the term” (41). Through the rest of the chapters he minutely analyses some important poems and quotes certain important lines to show from Das’s collections how Das’s poetry characteristically reflect the aspects of confessional mode of poetry.

In the year 2000 a new approach to Indian Writing in English was adopted in *The Waffle of the Toss: A Sociocultural Critique of Indian Writing in English* written by M. Prabha. She has made a criticism of extratexual affairs of the writers by contextualizing them in their socio-cultural milieu. She clarifies it in the “Preface”:

… in the case of IWE, extratextual factors, generally ignored or bypassed, deliberately or otherwise, by university teachers and the media, invariably creep in. Since these elements overwhelmingly determine the writers’ inclusion/exclusion both from the IWE canon and the campus curriculi, they become the focus of my study. (vii)

She doesn’t want to limit her study concentrating on the mere works of a writer, “To my mind, it is essential to excavate the part of a writer before he is taken up as a subject of study, the writer’s personal life is as much for public display as his name and work”
(viii). What she says in the ‘Preface’ becomes a determining factor in the criticism of Das’s works which according to her might have been proved less important under the microscopic serious criticism:

So, when the sex-loaded poems of Kamala Das were thrown open to the public, both reviewers and pedagogues went gaga over them with rave reviews. She became an unprecedented literary curiosity, marketing her salacious commodity with élan. Confessional poetry was already in vogue in the West, with the likes of Sylvia Plath in Britain and Anne Sexton in America. Form the traditional romantic stuff of Sarojini Naidu, the ‘bedroom-bardistry’ was a real change for the hungering Indian male. All her outpourings pertain to the pelvic region, which readily becomes a talking point in a cocktail circuit. (224)

She alleges Das of promiscuity; according to her, Das’s poems primarily aim at sensationalizing the reader and do not have the real merit to be called worthy poetic compositions:

Das became overnight the paparazzi’s dream girl, so to say, one who preempted Shobha De in verse, purveying the scarlet carnalities of the biz-folk. Several of her poems are puerile adolescent fragments which should not have been published at all. (225)

Das’s poems seem to her very immature. The personal element in the poem remains too personal and does not speak of women in general:

Her corpus is a series of tantrums thrown up by a girl whose favourite doll has been crushed. It does not constitute the utterances of a mature woman.
She does not speak for womankind, but only for herself. No one denies the legitimacy of biography impinging upon a poet’s work. The problem is that behind the façade of nostalgia lies the arrogance of her pedigree, ‘the property and propinquity of blood’— the feudalistic Nalapat House, her mother, her grandmother, and her great grandmother. (226)

Writings of Kamala Das are vehemently undermined by M. Prabha.

In the 2nd vol. of *Musings on Indian Writing in English*, published in 2005, Sharada Iyer has published an essay on Das entitled “Spilt-Self in the poetry of Kamala Das” in which she looks at the confessional mode of writing as a continuous interaction between creation and destruction in our life story, “Confessional poets court death and disintegration as well as psychic wholeness and insights. This tension between two opposites is reflected in the constantly shifting moods of confessional poetry” (215). Conflict between two extreme opposite objects gives rise to the theme of this type of poetry. Then she demonstrates her point by critically analyzing ‘Composition’ and other poems:

‘Composition’ embraces such diverse moods as passionate attachment, agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust and inhuman bitterness. Images of deep involvement in the physical act of love are followed by those of physical rotting, disgust and sickness in poems like ‘The Old Playhouse’, ‘In Love’, ‘Gino’. (146)

Iyer sees confessional poetry as a collection of various moods and moments of poet’s personal life. In case of Kamala Das, Iyer tries to assemble different episodes from Das’s colourful and critical life.
Feminism and Postfeminism, a book by Kanwar Dinesh Singh published in 2004, discusses some contextual issues regarding the modern Indian women poets writing in English. Feminism, as an umbrella term, has brought together all those postcolonial writers writing on such particular issues. In this book, Kanwar Dinesh Singh takes a step ahead and tries to chart out the ‘post’ feminist attitude. He observes a certain change in the general outlook of the contemporary women writers, “... the study becomes more attention grabbing when we find a drastic change in the choice and treatment of themes by the new Indian poetess at the turn of the century, at the dawn of the new millennium” (“Preface” N.pag.). We have come across a long way since the beginning of the postcolonial era. We have entered into a new century. With the introduction of a new millennium, there have been some modifications in the thoughts of Indian women poets who previously:

... very rarely touch upon the themes of sexuality, sexual difference, gender conflict and identity politics. They rather turn to nature, home, family, children, parents and certain social issues, instead of voicing the anguish, anxiety, anger or frustration over these relationships with men, our fiascos in marriage, love and sexuality, and war over suppression of identity in a patriarchal set up. (“Preface” N.Pag.)

In this respect the first phase of women poets ranges from 1965 to 2000. 1965 is the year of publication of Kamala Das’s first volume of poems, and Singh considers her undoubtedly the pioneer in introducing the modern Indian feminist thought in Indian English poetry. She has been portrayed as the rebel against the patriarchal domination. Her poems embody the same outlook. While doing so she has adopted the manner of self-
exposure. Singh comments, “Das’ poetry for the most part is autobiographical and conational in nature” (47). He finds Das’ mode of confession as a candid attitude encouraging her to establish a protest against the conventional social system controlled by men.

In 2005 appeared Irshad Gulam Ahmed’s study on Kamala Das. In Kamala Das: The Poetic Pilgrimage, Ahmed charts out the literary journey of Das keeping in focus cultural as well as social point of view. In the “Introduction” he tells us why Das has explored her personal life in her works:

Das’s attempt to achieve a sense of completeness through writing that 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. (16)

Ahmed in this book does a wide study on genealogical and feminist issues related to Das. He is able to contextualize Das, irrespective of minor negative criticisms, as a true post-colonial Indian English Poet. At the same time while analyzing some poems by Das, Ahmed points out the conversational tone in Das:

What is immediately striking about these lines is the directness of the speaking voice and the addressee 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. (34)

Ahmed finds Das’s poems dramatic and the mode of “role playing” appears as a natural consequence. According to him ‘role playing’ becomes an obsession with Das: “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” (86).

Ahmed’s study shows that the dramatic quality of her poems helps her to mask her real
self.

In 2005 another important book, *Feminism and Sexual Poetics*, by R. J. Kalpana
was published. In this book she has endeavoured to set up a feminist theoretical
framework which provides the Indian woman poet an identity to transcend the gender
bias traditionally nourished and nurtured by our patriarchal system. In the ‘Introduction’
she mentions those women poets who through the ages carry on the tradition of folk-
poetry. In these poems women have a continuous search for their roots. Like their male
counterparts, their poems equally reflect contemporary socio-political activities. While
discussing the poems of Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharkar, Suniti
Namjoshi and Eunice de Souza, she makes her purpose clear: “My aim is to integrate
women’s marginalized poetry into mainstream poetic ethos” (12). In this respect she
analyzes the works of Kamala Das in detail in the first chapter titled “Endless Female
Hunger”. She starts analyzing Das’ poems by introducing her as a ‘flamboyantly sexual
poet’ (16). She accepts her as a pioneer in exposing female body in Indian poetry written
in English. Das’s poem appears shocking to traditional censors. To Kalpana this shock is
not the outcome of injured traditional man-woman relationship portrayed in the poems,
but due to the breaking down of “. . . all protective barriers of politeness that isolate one
human from another, and are the touchstone of civilized patriarchal society” (17). She
explores the unhappy marital life of Das where the unending male lust destabilizes the
sacred institution of marriage. Kalpana in her endeavour to understand Das’s ‘sexual’
writings has ventured to probe into the realm of patriarchal supremacy which manipulates women to undergo a derogatory existence assuming “the role of the all-giving, all-accepting nurturer (18)”. She finds Das’s poems as a protest against this stereotyped concept. Candid exposure of female body and the unconstrained revelation of personal life in her poems ripped off the veil of fairy-tale conjugal life. This approach might label Das as a ‘feminist’ writer but Kalpana finds Das independent of any particular ‘ism’

Das has ventured into areas unclaimed by society and provided a point of reference for her colleagues. She has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very honest woman. (28)

In 2008 came out a pioneering book, *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*, edited by Arvind K. Mehrotra. Rajeev S. Patke, a contributor to this collection, sketches a very brief account of Kamala Das’s life and work in his essay “Poetry since Independence”. He accepts Das having the deepest impression on her contemporary time and achieving an important place by writing about the present condition of women in society:

Her poetry spoke with fierce and unsparing honesty about the difficulties of being a woman and a life in a time and for a culture which had trained women to a long tradition of silence. (283)

While discussing Das’s writing as confessional and steeped in the description of female body, Phatke tries to disapprove the allegation that Das is obsessed with sex:

. . . yet it would be a mistake to suppose that she is obsessed with sex and marriage and social roles. What she is intent on is honesty of impulse, and a sense of direction to the flow of her wants and feelings. (284)
He acknowledges Das as a pioneer poet practicing for the cause of Feminism:

Her poetry may be narrow in focus, careless of decorum, unremitting in its intensity, reckless in its emotional abandon, lacking in irony. But there is no voice more direct in Indian poetry in English. It shatters more careful virtues into debris, offering simply the vulnerability of its own candour.

Her iconoclasm has led to her work being misread as sensationalist, just as it has lent itself to the cause of feminism. The confessional aspect of her work has made her seem like an Indian Sylvia Plath. But Das is driven less towards suicide than love, and in its wake all mishaps and misunderstandings are ultimately accepted without regrets. (286)

Jayakrishnan Nair’s book, *Cutting Edges: Biology of Experience in the poetry of Kamala Das*, published in 2009, is one of the effective researches made in recent times to delve into the deeper psychological turmoil responsible for Das’s literary creation. Nair has presented this violent agitation. In the ‘Preface’ he says:

This work is a concentrated study on Kamala Das’s treatment of her psychic violence in her poetry. Here it becomes pertinent to clarify that in the whole work, the word ‘violence’ is taken as a syndrome representing a sort of metaphysical rebellion, anger, and angst, manifesting itself as vehement poetic fury with the help of powerful images and symbols. Violence as such can be understood as fallout of inexpressible emotions and the ensuing suffocation. (viii)
This mental disturbance has caused a personality crisis jeopardizing Das’s life and forcing her to take recourse to attempts at suicide. Nair explores Das’s personal crisis as a universal one and he, simultaneously, traces out the protest hidden in the works of Das: Kamala Das as a feminist poet realizes the personality crisis of the Indian women strategically perpetrated and perpetuated by the unbending patriarchal traditions, and she violently reacts to this situation. In the characteristically unrelenting Indian socio cultural milieu, where any surface commotion does not percolate very easily, particularly when it is against traditions and conventions, Das makes a poetic revolt by way of introspectively pondering upon the unfortunate state of existence in which Indian women conduct themselves. (37)

This unending revolt against the violence set up by conventional social system brings out the ‘feminist’ hidden in her. Nair in the “Introduction” comments: “In the foregoing pages, an attempt has been made to examine the uniqueness and significance of Kamala Das as a modern feminist poet in the Indian context” (32).

Nair also points out that despite Das’s feminist stance she is not a hardcore feminist; rather she is for a balance between the two sexes as far as their social spheres are concerned:

Thus, the entire poetic property of Kamala Das turns out to be an incessant and interminable fight between man and woman. This does not mean that she is pleading for feminine domination. On the other hand, she is just advancing a poetic proposal for man to come for an equal consideration of
the earnest naturalistic, social and interpersonal needs for companionship of each for each other. (66)

Another pertinent point Nair explores in his study is the confessional aspect of Das’s writings. Here he focuses on the psychological revelation of the personal “I” which in its turn represents the collective consciousness.

In 2010 a collection of essays, *Gender Issues: Attestations and Contestations* edited by Rajul Bhargava has been published where an attempt is made to organize a discussion on gender issues which has gained considerable significance in the post feminist era. In the ‘Introduction’ Bhargava discussed about the writings by women in the Indian subcontinent. Those writings seem to be a departure from the main stream male writings and focus on the universalization of their shared and lived experience in this patriarchal society. Kamala Das is reviewed in this light. In “The Spilt-self in the poetry of Kamala Das”, an essay included in this book, Manojeet says:

Kamala Das emerges as a major post-independence poet and is simultaneously a postcolonial and a feminist one. Looked at in this way Kamala Das is a representative Indian Woman poet who in her own individual manner tries to decode the Indian sensibility, particularly from the point of view gender-bias perpetrated because of a pre-dominantly patriarchal system which forms the core of Indian social life. For a writer like Kamala Das feminism is a powerful tool to awaken and strengthen the marginalized, the oppressed and the under-privileged women in India. (121-122)
Then he goes on to point out that Kamala Das is a confessional poet of the first order. Reading her poetry is to experience a “. . . mighty drama of conflicting emotions being enacted in the theatre of her soul. The reader thus is granted a peep into the recesses of her soul where there is nothing forbidden, nothing ugly” (122).

In 2010 another important work, *Kamala Das: The Indian Monroe: Feminist Perspective*, by Hongsha Phomrong was published. In this book Phomrong has been able to penetrate into the subject of identity-crisis in Das’ life. We already know that the disturbing marital life subsequently diminished the glory of her womanhood. Her beaten soul could only be repaired through her poetic sensibility. She ventilates her agony and anger in her poems. Phomrong properly points out:

Her writings constitute both an act of protest and self-determination. Though her creative writing did generate hostility among the relatives, and sometimes even among friends, she went on it doggedly sustained by the feeling that it was through her writing that she could achieve her true being. (4)

From a feminist point of view Phomrong tries to search out her ‘true being’. Through the frank revelation of her intimate moments and disclosure of female body she is expressing her protest. A detailed study of European Feminism has been done to situate Das in the feminist tradition. Like her European counterparts, Das is also regarded as a confessional poet: “She is often grouped under the group of confessional poets. She has succeeded in going into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of the feminine mind” (5-6).

In 2010 another collection of illuminating essays on Das was published by Pencraft International. Devindra Kohli has edited this collection entitled *Kamala Das:*
Critical Perspectives. This study considers Das from multiple perspectives i.e. feminism, post-colonialism, spirituality, carnality, recreation of myth and awareness of history.

More or less in these articles there is the acknowledgement of Das as a confessional poet. Anne Brewster in her “The Freedom to Discompose: The Poetry of Kamala Das”, while discussing different poems having the common trait of ‘personal exposure’, says:

This image of exposure- the peeling off of layers and the image of nudity- recall the commonality of this trope in American confessional poetry, such as Sylvia Plath’s signature poem on suicide, “Lady Lazarus”... (91)

Brewster continues her analysis on the necessity of such intimate disclosure and justifies Das’s “revelation of personal experience” as a psychological necessity:

Exposure is often a raw-nerve experience for the poet. It is linked to painful memories. The experience of nakedness arises from the explicit revelation of personal experience and psychological specificity. Das explains her unhappy experience of love in terms of her personal psychology... Like Plath and other confessional poets Das employs a frank, conversational tone. (91)

In another essay “Mixed Metaphors”, Krishna Rayan mentions the importance of ‘listener’ in the act of ‘confession’ and goes on to point out that in the poetry of Kamala Das there is a bold expression that goes against ‘the cotemporary literary mores’:

Whether the emotion expressed be spontaneous or induced, real or fictive, the presence of the listener or reader is implicit in the act of expression; in Jacobson’s model of the speech event, the addressee is indispensable. As we know, in Christian practice, the term ‘confessor’ means both the
person who makes the confession and the priest who hears it. In all
confessional writing, therefore, communication must be achieved, and this
involves accessibility, coherence, unfoldedness. The dominant
characteristics of Kamlaa Das’s poetry accordingly are explicitness,
emphasis, lucidity, elaboration and fluency, and as the poems in the
selection show, she has, over the years, preserved these resolutely in
defiance of the contemporary literary mores. (112)

The indispensability of the listener in confessional poetry is clearly pointed out by Rayan,
as in such type of poetry, according to him, communication between the speaker and the
reader must be established.

In another inspiring essay “Whose Voice is Where? On Listening to Kamala
Das”, Vincent O’Sullivan, while discussing Das’s autobiography My Story as “total
embarrassment”, expresses his doubt regarding the authenticity of such events in Das’s
life: “One suspects, to begin with, that when she speaks—as she so often does—of her
commitment to truth, it is not always literal truth that Das has in mind” (144).

O’Sullivan’s essay deals with the dominant presence of Radha-Krishna myth in Das’s
poems and the discussion does not focus on the confessional aspect of Das’s poetry.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim in her essay “Terms of Empowerment in Kamala Das’s My
Story”, focuses My Story as a site where the conventional practice of patriarchy is
deliberately and vehemently attacked with an intention to subvert the hierarchal position
of male/female in our society. In doing so Das adopts the mode of autobiographical
writing:
... it compels our reading because it offers, among other things, a critique of the victimization of women in a patriarchal society. The autobiography is itself a gesture enunciating the empowerment of the female when she speaks in protest, in rejection, in an infinitely recessive "desire" within a powerfully restrictive psychological matrix. (173)

This autobiographical writing of a woman, according to Lim, consequently weaves a converse panorama of feminist thought which is undeniably anti-patriarchal establishing a 'counter-discourse':

Her autobiography reshapes both our consciousness and our unconscious, by means of its raw, experimental edges. The internally persuasive dialogue of her autobiography shares characteristics with the kind of writing described as "écriture féminine" in Western Literature. The enabling myth of matriarchal origin; the genealogical constructions of chaste spinster writes; the sociopolitical critiques of arranged marriages, child brides, and loveless middle-class marriages; the portrayals of male abuse of women as sexual objects and prey; the narrative of emergence of woman as subject and writer—all these form a counter-discourse to the later confessional closure. (186)

In the same year, 2010, after the death of Kamala Das, a bio-critical work was published by Merrily Weisbord. It came out as an outcome of the author’s decade-long friendship with Das. This book *The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das* is an attempt to delve into the hitherto unknown events of Das’s life. She talks about “role playing”. While Weisbord asks Das how she has “unshackled”
herself from traditional, patriarchal morality, Das mentions that she has to take recourse to the persona:

She tells me she had been cheated out of a normal life, so she had to create a persona through whom she could celebrate life. “She was the one I wanted to be and could not, so I thought I have to do the things expected of her—loving intensely, meeting her lover. I detached myself from the body and watched this persona move to wards this lover, observing myself in the role of lover, the role of a woman loved, as though I was another person. Then, I began to make it real. She and I merged into one, and it became easier for me because then it wasn’t as if I was fantasizing, I only wrote what happened. It was real”. (39)

It becomes very clear from Das’s own remarks that the mode of “role playing”, that Das adopted, has always been a conscious effort on her part. In another conversation Das says to Weisbord in the same vein: “I did not want to deny being one and confuse her. I was ready to play the role. When I play a role, I grow into it” (40). This issue of ‘masking’ comes up in the conversation between Weisbord and Das. Somewhere it confuses Weisbord. She says: “If I’m really a fake, as I expect I am, always wearing a mask, but never really a mask, it is the real me taking part in a masquerade as the real me” (181).

For Das, the need to mask her becomes so evident that oftentimes it becomes inseparable from her. Weisbord very skillfully digs out this persona:

I’ve heard Kamala, compare the world she creates through writing to “shadow” and the external world to “substance”, describing how both worlds can coexist within her. But these poignant identity shifts blur the
distinction between “real” and “masquerade”. She seems to be saying that her “naked mask”, her vulnerable openness, is just another mask. Yet when she defines “naked mask”, she says “this person with tears in my eyes”. It seems that for her the real and the masked are indivisible. (181)

However, in her memoir Weisbord says that Das is using the confessional mode as a means of ‘role playing’.

In 2010, Dinesh K. Shukla published *Poetry of Kamala Das: The Aesthetic Dimension*. This book tries to focus on the aesthetic aspect of Kamala Das’s poetry. This approach to Das’s poetry is a rather novel one. The book includes a ‘Foreword’ by Charu Sheel Singh which is quite useful in the understanding of Shukla’s approach to Kamala Das’s works. Shukla has shown in the poems of Das that how she has brought out her body in the forefront to destabilize the hierarchy set by patriarchal society. Aesthetics of Das’s poetry lies in this context:

Kamala Das believes in the exposition of her body for the figure is more important than any discussion about it. Man cannot boast of a body like that of a woman which is tender and strong at the same time, beautiful and lusty, ideational and real, living the binaries of life more successfully than man. Aesthetics of Kamala Das’s poetry is born out of her body, her instincts, her passions, her lust which she unhinderingly has for men. (xii)

The book is an attempt to place Das as a writer intending to judge human relationship on the basis of equality:
Kamala Das wants to redefine man-woman relationship on the pedestal of equality, empathy and co-existence. Any other kind of relation which subjugates and humiliates woman is fake and fraudulent. (39)

Shukla very carefully goes through the poems of Das and establishes her as a seeker of freedom:

In these poems Kamala Das has attempted to break the shackles and re-define horizon of freedom. Broadly she is an author of revolting feminism but a careful and meticulous reader can find underlying seed of harmony and coherence. (124)

The book is a systematic study of Das as a post-feminist poet who doesn’t believe in the western concept of feminism. Rather she upholds the Indian culture of inter-dependence between man and woman. However, Shukla does not discuss Das as a confessional poet in his study.

While describing salient features of “Confessional Poets” in the “Preface” to The Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das: A Study of their Themes and Technique, published in 2011, Seema Chowdhary points out the common perspective these poets share:

Notwithstanding their individualities, all confessional poets share certain common characteristics—viz., obsession with suffering, haunting sense of guilt arising from pride and sensuality, unhealthy family relations, sad details of married life or broken marriages, dissatisfaction with social bindings and norms, disillusionment with the material world, choking pain
of loneliness, and deep sense of frustration pushing them towards self-annihilation.(v)

This book, in actuality, is an attempt to make a comparison and contrast between the confessional writings of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. Alongside this, Chaudhury tries to locate the similarities common in both of them as confessional poets. This study has a detailed discussion on the origin of confessional poetry and its pioneering poets. Apart from discussing the features of this genre, Chaudhary does a commendable job by counter-criticizing the criticism that undervalues “Confessional Poetry” as just a piece of “sentimental and sensational” unburdering of personal whims and promiscuity:

. . . the greatness of confessional poetry lies in the poet’s capability to universalize that tortured inward-self. A sensitive poet is, as all confessional poets are deeply struck with the gap between the ideal and the real. It is here that the burden of disgust, despair and hurt psyche of the poet becomes a driving impulse for writing poetry. (6)

Chaudhary finds Das’s poetry as truly confessional where she speaks of her personal experiences with conviction:

Kamala Das as a true confessional poet writes about her own experiences, her likes and dislikes. She is very frank and sincere in her details. She frequently talks about her personal failures. In her expression she is very convincing and appealing. (88)

Chaudhary points out that by frankly expressing her maladies she achieves a state of purgation (95). Although the book tries to rationalize Das’s use of confessional mode in
her writings nowhere in this book the ‘mode of confession’ is considered as a manipulative device. This study rather confines itself in the findings of confessional elements in the works of both Das and Plath.

Books on Kamala Das are still flowing. In 2013 an edition of the uncollected writings of Kamala Das titled *Wages of Love*, edited by Suresh Kohli has been published by Harper Collins. The book, however, contains stories, plays, non-fiction writings and a few poems that have not been previously anthologized. Poems included in this collection are confessional in nature, although the editor has not mentioned anything about the precise nature of these poems.

However, for me the objective is to examine, in a brief way, as to how her poetry has adopted the 'mode of confessional poetry' to project significant issues which remained taboo in our society. Especially the humiliated and marginalized condition of women in patriarchal society was of great concern for her. But she is not a feminist. She herself has shown her aversion to that label which has often been attached to her works. But one thing is certain that the frank disclosures of intimate moments in her poems and in her autobiography as well are sufficient to term her as the first confessional poet in Indian Writing in English. Though many writers and critics have pointed out certain aspects of confessional elements in her poems, no one, as far as I know, has investigated in significant detail, the strategic use of such confessional elements in her poems. At the same time it is also true that such manipulative manifestations were present in the poetical literature in ancient Indian literature. I have briefly mentioned this in my analysis of poems from the days of Therigatha to Sangam period: but an extensive use of personal
experiences such as one finds in the poems of Kamala Das is unprecedented. A critical study of the entire gamut of her poetry shows that the aesthetic creed of Das evolved out of a perfect assimilation of the personal moments and their socio-psychological implications. The present study will attempt to make this point clearer.
Works cited


