Chapter - I

Introduction

Kamala Das as a creative artist progressively involves herself into the modern fundamentals of thought and action: scepticism, opposition, and criticism. Ever since Frederick Nietzsche envisaged these three characteristic properties of modern thought and action, many revolutionary ideologies like the leftist philosophy and the feminist revolution in the European countries came to the forefront. Kamala Das successfully poetises the modern Indian feminine psyche's violence and rebellion in accordance with the celebrities of the twentieth century Western women's liberation movement, like Simone De Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. Being an Indian, Das progressively introduces the Indian woman's predicament by taking into consideration four prominent aspects differentiating women: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Her sensibility is filled with agonizing circumstances of feminine predicament and the resultant anxiety and angst. This anxiety and angst eventually transform into violent poetic outcries which are directed towards a society that constantly and continuously cold-shouldered the feminine sensibilities, and violated the freedoms and aspirations of women. In the context of modern India hers is a unique poetic innovation and experiment of superimposing the violent and revolutionary ideas of the Western women's liberation movement upon the Indian women's world of rigid and unbending traditions.

Kamala Das, in fact, is concerned with the exclusive problems faced by women in general in the context of the traditional life-giving institutions. When it comes to the question of taking issues and conducting a quarrel with man and his
masculine preoccupations, Kamala Das is certainly justified in her violent fury against the autocratic manner in which man behaves in his relations both with woman and with nature. Needless to say, certain amount of self-centredness, hypocrisy, envy, and hate entered into the ego-centric province of man, and it is very difficult to say since when he started becoming a grudging rival of the very essence of femininity. As a matter of safe conjecture, it is Renaissance man duly appended with egocentric individualism that progressively contributed for a kind of authoritarian manner of taking decisions and executing them. This authoritarian manner of man reached its pinnacle towards the end of the nineteenth century. This male-centred authoritarian dogma had to be met with opposition and criticism. The feminist cause itself emerged as a rival critical social phenomenon and took the form of a furious liberation movement. Kamala Das partakes herself in this process of liberating women by way of openly declaring her grievances and concerns about the self-centred nature of man in being an authority for himself without analytically understanding the relative importance and prerogatives of woman as a person and as a social being.

Very often Das's poetry prominently verges upon making a sort of concerned confessional declarations about the superior credentials of woman in nature and about the equal credentials of hers in the matters concerning social and cultural contexts of existence. Das prominently believes that in nature's strict parameters femininity occupies a very important place of superiority because nature has entrusted woman with greater responsibilities and with higher credentials in evolution in awarding her the status of an essential base. So her grievance is based on the fact that this
naturalistic superiority and supremacy of woman was never allowed to take the form of a culture by man and his crushing tendencies of authoritarianism. This subdued existence breeds in woman a typical manner of being a critic in opposition of all that goes in the society in the name of traditions. In this context, she acts like an interior grudging paramour with the prime purpose of setting the things right in the structural complexities of social systems. Therefore, feminine property in a given society always acts as a concerned critic in order to set right man and his egocentric autonomy. Kamala Das enhances this feminist feud by way of poetically expressing the true texts and contexts of Indian woman and her suffering because of the authoritarian onslaughts of the post-Renaissance man. Her entire poetic property has since been an evidence of her unique personal temper and temperament.

A. The Ordeal of Kamala Das

Kamala Das is of the opinion that given the opportunity of freedom and transparency in thought and action, Indian woman too can come out of the seemingly unassertive and submissive calm and quietude of her world, and go hand in hand with her Western counterparts in aspiring and exacting for a dignified status for women rather than putting up with the humiliations of sexual exploitations and subservience that they undergo in the Indian social milieu. What she violently pleads for is a possible understanding between man and woman as equally interdependent personalities struggling to measure each other's personality mutually in an atmosphere of what the Christian fathers call agape or Christ-like charity. The modern mechanized and industrial life-styles do not allow a place for that agape. So her real rebellion is against the modern 'botched culture' (to borrow the expression of
Ezra Pound), which does not allow interpersonal free and frank transparency in the affairs concerning the mutual joys and sublimations of man and woman as partners in life. The categorical distinction and differentiation between man and woman as naturalistic creatures put man as a self-serving conservative agent, serving his own purposes and cold-shouldering his feminine counterpart into a state of negligence and unwanted state. As Das says in the poem “An Introduction,” against woman’s longing for a transparent and sympathetic interpersonal relations, the man “is tightly packed like the / Sword in its sheath” (OP 26). Again, as she says in “The Old Playhouse,” he unsheathes the ‘sword’ only to serve “his love in lethal doses” (OP 1).

In fact the whole poetic rebellion in Kamala Das is just a way of recording her protest against a culture that has rendered both man and woman into mutual non-entities in being life-partners. Generations of traditions and conventions verbally dubbed women in a state of passivity and, in course of time, quite innocuously and ungrudgingly women reconciled to their so-called state of passivity, and gradually got conditioned to the strategically proposed systems and traditions. Justifying Das’s concerns as a feminist poet, K. Satchidanandan rightly observes:

She [Das] refuses to glorify the historical past . . . . She rejects the patriarchal value system that is based on egoism, greed for power, expansionism, hero-cult, violence, war, mindless exploitation of man and nature, the misuse of intelligence and the supremacy of reason and theory over sensitiveness and experience. (16-17)

Kamala Das’s poetry, with its absolute transparencies of what it means by being a woman, particularly as a life partner, creates in man a sort of stirring
sensibility. Her poetry just initiates a fret and fever in man to revalidate his rigid, uncompromising stance on woman. It is here that she becomes a precious poetic voice bent upon rectifying everything that went wrong for centuries together in a man-made world that does not really offer any substantial progress in being human. The real progress of humanity does not lie in its material gains, and personal profits thereof; the real nature of living beings in a gregarious set needs a concern and consideration for others. If only man compounds in himself the basic idea as to how it looks like being the other in all the interpersonal transactions and commerce, there is scope for a humanistic harmony. Such harmony is the most desired state according to Kamala Das. At the same time, she also fervently pleads for recognition of the uniqueness of woman as an all-encompassing compassionate entity in a given society. This plea for recognition of woman's uniqueness, since she proposes to the same in most clear terms added with a sense of emotional fury, often provokes in the readers a sort of immediate initial response of discord. But in her poetry she simultaneously provides a rational and realistic proposition concerning the state and status of women in the Indian system; and, after a calm and cool thinking, the readers whole-heartedly consent and conform themselves to what she says as something quite sensible, even laudable.

Das's poetry is more and more informed by the use of conversational language, a prominent manner of performing in the accentual verse pattern and verse libre 'free verse'. The very technique of Kamala Das's poetry is associated with challenging tonalities full of angst born of looking at woman as a mere tool or mechanical instrument. Das spells out her anguish over this gender dichotomy in
unequivocal terms with such intrepidity and audacity as was hitherto unheard of in the Indian women's literary traditions. In the following lines of the poem "The Old Playhouse," she expresses this anguish very powerfully:

You called me wife,

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and

To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf. . . . (OP 1)

The expression 'You called me wife' is very important because of the implied social compulsiveness on which the husband-wife relationship stands, for nothing transpires between the two hearts. The 'magic loaf' and 'dwarf' metaphors are very powerful, which are indicative of man's fulfilling woman's survival necessities and woman's dwindling of personality. It is the collective psyche of women speaking out from a sudden awakening. If so, Kamala Das's real rebellion is against a culture that has instituted every socially interactive counter on the inherent principle of gender dichotomy. With her accurate poetic temper she identifies herself with the whole humanity, and conducts her poetic activity in such a manner that she would gain for herself the honorific credentials of being a citizen of the world. Her poetic fight on behalf of women is not at all narrowed down to the Indian context alone. In the whole world, the manner in which women are discriminated and sidelined for centuries together pained her a lot. In the poem "The Suicide" she expresses this pain over women's historical role:

I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife. (D 2)

Posing what she is not and pretending what she is expected to be is precisely acting. The same agent ['You'] of the lines ‘You called me wife’ of the “The Old Playhouse” (OP 1), here forces her to pretend to be a ‘happy woman’ and a ‘Happy wife.’ It is here that she painfully realizes her loss of identity. She is not only compelled by the civilization and its patriarchal agents to wear the garbs of many roles, but is also not allowed to express her dissent over this imposition (‘I must act the role / Of happy woman / Happy wife’).

Kamala Das freely borrows most of the forward-looking ideas concerning women’s liberation from the European avant-garde feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. In spite of the fact that her poetic temperament tilts towards the liberation of women, her natural credentials for poetry is because of her abundant love for life, liberty, and progress. In fact it is these factors along with her longing for happiness and joy that render her into a rebel when she finds that the heartless social mills of religion, tradition, morality, and conventions ruthlessly crush the genuine naturalistic credentials of feminine supremacies. The urgency that pervades over her poems springs from the firm belief that life is only one, and that it is meant to be much happier. The slipping away of the ‘only one’ without granting the naturalistic perquisites is all the more painful. In the poem “The Seashore” she expresses her pain over this passing away of life without awarding the aspired
fulfilment: "I sense / The tug of time, I see you go away from me / And feel the loss of love I never once received" (BK 33). The poetic fervour of Kamala Das’s confessional rhetoric here is comparable to that of Sylvia Plath. Kamala Das had an urgency to speak out her mind freely and frankly. In this process, she involves herself in poetic creativity quite fearlessly. Her missionary zeal for poetically compacting the exclusive concerns of women is really commendable.

As far as what Kamala Das wants to assert through her poetry is concerned, she comes very near to the observations made by Western feminist liberators about the position of women in society. In the articulation of feminist concerns through literary aesthetic dimensions, thus, Kamala Das is not a beginner, but an Oriental linkage in the train of such strong European women writers as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, and such astounding feminist confessional poets as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath of America. A brief look at the evolution of women’s movement into a profound aesthetic formula of exacting feminine concerns, therefore, instantly becomes pertinent here.

B. Evolution of Feminist Literary Genre

1. Predicament of Women

As a matter of fact, the gender inequities are not associated with any particular race; this evil has travelled in space and time from the primordial period to the present day. Since human civilization itself has evolved incessantly ignoring the vital half of its race, i.e., women, the concerns voiced in the modern feminist writings are as relevant and momentous as the question of man’s existence itself. This fact has prompted Helen Cixous to say, “If women were to set themselves to transform
History, it can safely be said that every aspect of History would be completely altered” (487). Quite ironically, the sidelining of this ‘better half’ by generations together is head-on with the nature’s blueprint of evolution; nature trusts femininity, and bestows on it the maximum responsibility of advancing evolution towards progressive directions. Nevertheless, since the dawn of civilization, the male principle has been overacting itself as a phenomenal exploiter that sabotaged the female principle at all practical counters. In this context, the following words of Gerda Lerner on women’s predicament are worth quoting:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history, which are inappropriate to women. (qtd. in Showalter 470)

Whether or not it is because of ‘the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular,’ it remains a fact that the feminine consciousness is one of alienation, non-recognition, and loss of identity.

2. Towards Equal Dignity of Being-in-the-World

Woman becoming conscious of her natural rights is of recent origin. Freudian psychology with its emphasis on instincts, more particularly on libido (“sexual instinct”) gave a sort of open challenge and sanction for the transparency of the exclusive feminine concerns. In the West the post Freudians, with a prominent stress on primary activity, further hastened the feminist spoke-persons to give a call for the
liberation of women. The primary activity essentially concerns with self-preservation and preservation of the race. Needless to say, nature primarily depends on femininity in its choice of evolution and progress. For an introspective analysis, the traditional woman’s conditions in the context of family as well as society had turned to be that of a veritable slave without any independent and individual sanction of freedoms for her feelings, emotions, and desires.

Under the functional properties of democratic complexities that had entered in social life of late, a passionate desire for asserting equality as a given property for humanity entered into human psyche. The feminists, having felt the humiliation of male chauvinism and aggressiveness for centuries together, discovered for themselves a unique opportunity to give vent to their exploited and suppressed egos in exacting for equality even in the context of sharing the interpersonal male-female relations. Though the root of the feminist plea for equality lay embedded in the principle of humanism as propounded by the Renaissance writers like Thomas More and Erasmus, feminist introspection in terms of seeking a real and adequate identity for woman began with the eighteenth century European enlightenment, with writers like Mary Wollstonecraft. Her Book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792, was a milestone in this direction. Then, the pioneer nineteenth century feminists, considered radical for their belief in the equality of the sexes, included Emmeline Pankhurst in the UK; and Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the USA. Thus, with the advent of the Western women’s liberation movement, women progressively started pleading for equal dignity and equal prominence for women, more particularly in the familial context. Since these women revolutionaries
considered femininity as equally dignified, they started making a vociferous tract against men on behalf of women.

Thus dawned the era of man-woman strife and struggle. Equality and equal dignity of being-in-the-world was the original exacting ground for women. In course of time, woman gradually understood her naturalistic superiorities and supremacies as a prime creative agent in the progressive evolution of human Homo sapiens. This gave her an additional edge over man in the natural counters, and gradually she started vociferously asserting for her superiority and domination even in the domestic and familial environments. Though Feminism grew as an ideology alongside the concept of Humanism, feminist writings evolved as a literary genre at a later stage. Many women writers have contributed to this genre of literature, and through their articulations of feminist unrest, it has evolved as a cogent medium of expression of the modern feminine psyche with its fears and anxieties. Susheela Singh rightly says, "Through the long line of women writers who protested against the inequities from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft, and through Simone de Beauvoir to present day feminist thinkers, an outlook, a 'theory,' a feminist thought system evolves" (33). In fact it is the Twentieth century writers like Simone de Beauvoir of France and Virginia Woolf of England that made conscious analysis of the patriarchal traditions and conventions that go to defeat the ultimate purpose of woman in being woman. The feminist liberation movement with due transparency virtually dawned in the writings of these women. The following observation of Beauvoir, for instance, very powerfully expresses the need for woman to counter the prejudice of patriarchy.
Masculine claims are contradictory; authority no longer works. Woman must judge and be critical, she cannot remain a mere docile echo . . . what she is able to agree with in her husband's way of thinking she should agree with only through an independent act of judgment . . . she cannot borrow from another her own reasons for existing. (208)

What all Beauvoir summates in the above context is a fervent plea on behalf of women for a proper understanding of their needs. It is obvious that the enlightenment begotten by these Western writers suggests at the fundamental idea that women can no more tolerate the chauvinist exploitations by men as executors of the familial strategy. However, with the advent of phenomenal personalities like Woolf and Beauvoir in the feminist literary scene, laying the very bricks for the foundation of modern feminist literature, the inhibitions that had hung over the feminine experiences like a veil have cleared themselves off. Women's cause that was hitherto a movement has now been elevated to aesthetic heights in their hands; here is unravelled a new world of feminine experiences both at physical and psychological counters. The basic metaphysics of the feminine psyche started becoming outspoken and vibrant in this act of de-caging of women.

The feminist confessional poetry is almost synonymous with the American poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Their poetic articulations of feminine anxieties paved way for an unprecedented revelation of the vibrant presence of an existential conflict in the feminine psychic response to the patriarchal social systems. Their poetic personae have become the protagonists of the collective consciousness of
women. Their poetry is a far cry from the lullabies, the only kind of poetry women were traditionally expected (or permitted?) to write. They reject the select vocabulary meant for women in the name of social civilities and decencies, and adopt for themselves a sublime rhetoric of violence without the anticipated feminine concealments. The poetic outbursts of these modern feminist poets stamp the patriarchal society as a cruel manipulator, which strategically subdued women and sidelined their freedoms and choices.

3. Feminism and Feminist Literature in India

However, the 'feminist thought system' that Sushila Singh suggests above was somewhat not native for India. To uplift women from the rock bottom of her socially depraved condition, emergence of a vibrant thought was a timely necessity. The revolutionary upheavals on the Western part of the world notwithstanding, the Indian women still had little opportunity to board the train of the modern feminist thinkers, chiefly due to the peculiar nature of Indian social set up emerging out of its abnormal demographic variations and social and cultural expansions and differences. In a rigid social structure like India's, revolting against any accepted values would mean risking an existential conflict with the society as a whole. Thus, with the awareness of the comparatively freer existence of women on the other side of the globe, Indian women felt themselves to be like caged animals. The partly emancipated women of the West functioned as teasers for these 'caged animals.' To break the stronger social bars around themselves than those around their Western counterparts, women needed extra energy and intrepidity in the Indian context. It is in the post-Independence era, particularly in the late fifties and the sixties, that Indian women's writings in English
abundantly revealed a hitherto unravelled feminine psyche, thanks to the spread of learning and awareness in the country. More and more women writers began expressing their anger articulately against the vile social situation they live in. The tone and tenor of Indian women’s writing in English, particularly fiction and poetry, gradually revealed a consciousness of alienation, deprivation, and a quest for a new identity for women. These writings, with their vibrant presence in the Indian literary scenario, are living evidences of the Indian woman’s modern temperament, a rapid growth in their awareness, and the resultant urgency revealed in re-writing the man-woman interpersonal relationships in their typical Indian political, ethical, and socio-cultural background settings. Veena Noble Dass evaluates this awakening among Indian women writers:

Very often these works do not offer a tangible solution for the feminists. But the experiences rendered through the feminine consciousness invariably point to an inner exhilaration suggesting the beginning of a fresh awakening, a much sought-after precept of the feminists. Indian English Fiction, Poetry, and Drama are replete with the male-female confrontation, problems of adolescence, and coming of age, with special reference to women, explicit and latent pleadings for equality, liberty and self preservation, even risking the normal safeguarding of hallowed tradition. (11-12)

The essential poetic subject of Kamala Das ultimately concerns with this ‘hallowed tradition.’ But more than the details of ‘the male-female confrontation’ Das’s poems do reveal even the most intimate experience of a very sensitive feminine psyche. She
wants to present a new transparency, a new articulate vision of understanding woman and her depraved state of survival in the Indian familial context. Through her poetry, she initiates that long-awaited vibrancy and transparency in the Indian mainland. In this context, she is the leading floodlight in the Indian subcontinent. In her ferocious poetic forms, she is at pains to suggest that even after the glorious feminist liberation programme, the fundamental problems of woman and her province of personal experience remain tentative, obscure, and unappreciated.

C. Kamala Das’s Poetic Contribution

1. The Feminist Mouthpiece

Kamala Das plays a very significant role in making the feminine concerns and points of view violently clarified and made transparent through her poetry. In our times she is probably the only poetic voice of India, which attracted a wide critical acclaim all over the world. As far as the Indian novel in English is concerned, there are many names to reckon with. Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Praver Jhabhwalla, and Shashi Deshpande are some such Indo-Anglian fiction writers in addition to innumerable creative fiction writers in the regional languages. With these writers, Indian Novel has evolved into a respectable genre of literature in terms of thematic complexities and idiomatic innovativeness. Nevertheless, the advancement has not been so rapid in other genres of Indian writings in English including poetry. Kamala Das is a loner in poetry in the sense that no feminist revolutionary, more particularly in the Indo-Anglian poetic milieu, is as important as Kamala Das either in terms of structural and thematic complexities or in terms of aesthetic dimensions. If one endeavours to examine the Indian woman—poetry in
English in the last fifty years or so, only Kamala Das stands apart as a woman poet of international stature. This fact prompts Sunanda P. Chavan to say, “Kamala Das embodies the most significant stage of development of Indian feminine poetic sensibility not yet reached by her contemporaries” (“Moderns” 60).

Kamala Das’s poetry is more of a familial nature than social or cultural. It does not mean that her social and cultural concerns are in any way less important. It only means to imply that she progressively arrives at her social and cultural concerns after making a meticulous analysis of the familial interpersonal relations, particularly of men and women in their ideological thrust for a greater and perfect involvement and understanding of human relations. Since she is taking the mature woman’s point of view for her poetic creative analysis, it is quite natural that she is bound to be prominently of partisan perception on behalf of women. The tone of violent outcry in her poetry is a poetic strategy; in fact her poetry is a call for humanistic understandings born of mercy, pity, peace, love, and charity. Somehow, the lopsided and even one-sided progress that humanity made in the scientific and technological directions ultimately contributed for a confusion rather than clarity of human interpersonal relations. Kamala Das makes a humble but violent poetic effort in order to highlight the feminine problems and predicaments in the context of our times.

The cultural crisis that Kamala Das personally underwent in the biographical context is greatly responsible for her being violent in the tone and tenor of her poetry. It is not altogether untenable to state that her poetry is most prominently personal in nature. The entire amalgam of it conforms to the prime credentials of a confessional document, wherein utmost attention is paid to the fundamental feminine demands and
privileges in being a woman endowed with a sort of prime individuality, independence, and self-introspection coupled with enviable judicious assertions. It is in Das that modern Indian feminist poetry acquired for itself a real substantialness that matches equally with the creative contributions of the Western confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton of America.

2. Traditional Women Poetry in India and Kamala Das’s Poetry

Referring to Kamala Das’s poetic temper, K.R.S. Iyengar says, “There is no doubt, Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in the Indo-Anglian Poetry, a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu” (680). There is relevance in Iyengar’s bringing in the names of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu in the context of Kamala Das because the former two represent one important aspect of Indian women’s poetry—the Indian Romantic tradition. Before Kamala Das took to writing poetry, the tradition of Indian woman-poetry ran along a different path; it had the ancient tradition of transcendental poetry of Avvayyar and Mirabai, and the Romantic tradition of poetry written by Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. Das’s modern poetic temperament did not lead her to any of these traditional manners of poetry. Her world was not colourful; her mission was different. In fact she did not have any Indian role model to emulate in her poetic endeavours. In a ‘Meet the Author Programme’ thus spoke Das: “Till recent times, women lacked the social and intellectual authority to write seriously. There were certain prescribed norms for a woman’s writing. When I was growing up, there was no tradition to fall back on, no model to emulate” (“My Instinct” 156). Both in the thematic and structural aspects of her poetry, Das absolutely distances herself from these Indian Romanticists. The Romanticists
displayed an imitative tendency on the structural front, and penned beautiful poetry in soft chiselled words tacitly hailing the patriarchal culture and its ancillaries, whereas the dynamics of Das’s poetry are promptly endowed with the angst born of woman in general being neglected. No traditional Indian woman-poet, Das felt, had ever endeavoured to question the legitimacy of their own fosterage as social beings. They had written a kind of poetry that customarily tried to lure their own class to the feet of man-made gods or man-gods. In Das’s own words,

The prescribed themes for women’s writings were God and domestic bliss. Nothing else. This body, this physicality was to be ignored. We had Avvayyar, Mirabai, but they wrote of God, they sang of God. That was allowed. But what happens to you, what happens to a woman, when a man becomes her god, her living god? Has she no right to write about that god? (“My Instinct” 156)

Right from her childhood, Kamala Das appears to have had a sublime awareness of her exact role. This awareness, this firm commitment, made her look at the surroundings in a different perspective. She felt the need to redefine beauty and ugliness in the feminine world, was determined to upset the apple-cart of the complacent world of male autocracy. For the same reason she rejects, but gracefully, the kind of poetry her predecessors wrote. She would certainly not come under their influence. Her perspective of beauty and ugliness is different from theirs. Says she, “I see a beauty of horrible kind in people. I see a kind of beauty which Sarojini Naidu did not see, and she had seen a kind of beauty I do not see. We have two separate visions” (“My Instinct” 158-159). Sarojini Naidu is a lyric voice, but her lyrical
thrust merely comprehends what the Rasa School of poetry in India proposed as an aesthetic exposition. But Das, on her own acknowledgement, belongs altogether to a different category. As she had found exploitation of women on the social and psychological levels of Indian social system, she felt the compelling need of poetically opposing the feminine sufferings. If so, she has taken upon herself the province of tragic emotions born of centuries of neglect and suffering of women. This subjective tone and modality that she attributes for this suffering of women becomes the essential poetic figuration. Therefore, she considers her perception of 'beauty' as altogether different from that of a traditional lyric poet like Sarojini Naidu. While the 'beauty' of performing oneself as a traditional woman is the subject of Sarojini Naidu's poetry, altogether a compelling passion to express the anxieties and concerns of modern woman in all her troubled states of mind is the poetic province of Kamala Das. In other words, Kamala Das is a poet of tragic dimensions, while Sarojini Naidu is a votary of plastic dimensions of beauty.

3. The Quintessential Modern Poet

The revolting instinctive manner of looking at the gross creaturely nature of human survival, particularly in the context of man-woman interpersonal relations, gives Kamala Das's poetry a sort of modernistic harrowing, agonizing dimensions. There is that nerves-fretting imposing manner of life constantly and continually contributing for a sort of shattering of the very naturalistic dignity of being woman in the context of our traditions. With a fervent zeal, she hopes to establish through her poetry altogether a new way of looking at woman as an entity created with a rare and
unique prerogative in the naturalistic context. If so, her rebellion in itself contains that unique sense of modernism.

Modernism in literature is an ambiguous term. J.A. Cuddon defines "modernism" as a term "which describes the element of rebellion and innovation in new work which attempts to break from tradition." According to Hutchinson Educational Encyclopaedia, "modernism in art and literature" is "the conscious rejection of traditional forms and use of new forms of expression" ("Modernism"). However, the attempts 'to break from tradition' in the modern literature do not merely manifest in 'the conscious rejection of traditional forms,' but it also tries to express the collective sensibility of the time and space in which the author exists. In other words, the modern literature not only spells out the personal agonies of writers, but it also has a collective tonal vibrancy. As Wilbur Scott observes rightly, "Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important because articulate part" (123). This is what Albert Camus had clarified by saying: "The unhappiness experienced by a single man becomes collective unhappiness . . . I rebel—therefore we exist" (28).

The modern literature of Europe, including poetry, is experimental in nature. innovative in temper, and considerately humanistic in spirit, as against the traditional egocentric heroic boastings of man as the centre of the universe. In this context, writers like N. Mallarme, Baudlaire, are the plinth makers of the modern temper or temperament. Precisely speaking, according to modernism, a poem is not an imitation of an action or an expression of the authentic interiority of the maker or the
Poets like T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot, the avant-garde innovators of what we call modernism in poetry, had said that the modern poetic movement had on its stead Imagism, use of Symbolism, and the formula of audible and visual excitations.

The fact about modernism in general and modern poetry in particular lies in the conscious realization of the exact human predicaments in the naturalistic, ideological, and social counters of existence and survival. Gone are the days where man-hero and his worship ruled the roost; in his place 'man-concerned' came to the forefront. As it had been suggested by Aldous Huxley, the twentieth century would not be remembered in future for its aero-planes, its sky-scrapers, or for its atomic weaponry. According to him, it would be remembered as an age in which man for the first time started thinking in terms of how it looks like being the other. Needless to say, the other, just as the self, is bound by physical, metaphysical, and cosmic limitations of being-in-the-world; and a concerned and apt realization of these limitations is the true text of modern man's formula of understanding. This understanding in all its vibrant dimensions takes the form of an experimental poetic genre. In fact modernism in literature is more a matter of temper or temperament than the strategy of exposition. Even in the poetic strategies, the moderns are out and out experimental in nature. But the uniqueness of modern temper lies in comprehending life in a distinctly deviated angle. This angle of perception in the moderns, while it is progressively attuned with enlightened humanistic impulses, the very way of looking at life from a deferred angle, readily contributes for a new and quickening experience that stands as unique in being a matter of perception.
With the advent of modernism, the Indo-Anglian poetry also came out of the Western classical imitation counters (Aristotle), as well as the expressionistic formulas. It also freed itself from the tedium of over-spirituality of the Aurobindian School of poetry, and embraced more relevant themes concerning the creaturely instinctive experiences of man. To quote Iyengar:

The consciousness of the verbal medium, where it doesn’t degenerate into a mere play with words, semantic pyrotechnics or promiscuous image-hunting, and where it doesn’t dispense with the need for emotional or intellectual content, has given to the poetry of the moderns a freshness, a crispness, an immediacy and a vitality ... (688)

Kamala Das’s poetic temper is exactly born of frustration. What all that strikes modern in her poetry is revealed in the violent, irrepressible ‘cry’ of the occasion. Anger and fury are voluptuous emotions, which have their short rise and sudden fall in the inner authentic feeling self. The texture of her poems is aptly matched to the extent of the rouse of anger and fury, and, therefore, the poems envelope in themselves those harsh moments of serious reactions born of her stricken and shattered psyche. Hopelessness condescending to cynicism, even pessimism, is the tonal significance. But this pessimism is not owing to a Hardian view of life against the backdrop of providential freaks. As Kurup points out, it is the articulation of “the universal angst of the modern feminine sensibility” (144). This is evident in the following lines of her poem “A Request”:

When I die

Do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up
And
Let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth
What love was worth
In the end. (D 5)

It is a stock taking, in a highly personalized style, of the sum total of achievements a woman has had in the process called ‘life.’ As a woman, life and its most vital ingredient, i.e. love, gave her only memories of pain and disgust. For her even before death life turns out to be as nauseating as the decaying flesh and bones. She speaks out her mind in the rhythmic onslaughts exactly as her feeling heart experiences them. Of all the Romantic poets, John Keats is the only poet who had given supreme importance for feelings. However, according to Helen Cixous, the modern women’s writings directly appeal to feeling. In Cixous’ own words, “Let’s look not at syntax but at fantasy, at the unconscious: all the feminine texts I’ve read are very close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language . . . perhaps because they don’t rush into meaning, but are straightaway at the threshold of feeling” (489). True to Cixous’ observation, Kamala Das considers feelings as all-important. The stricken feelings of her heart are profoundly confessed into furious eruptions in her poems. Therefore, most of her poetry is conversational in form and lyrical in structure.
Judicious introspection and intense re-evaluation of the inherent human strengths and weaknesses is the ideological leap that the Renaissance humanism acquired for itself in our time; and the period after eighteen ninety, with its seriously concerned interrogative temper, contributed for a dispassionate and honest search for the very nuances of being-in-the-world and being-in-the-universe. According to Kamala Das, being-in-the-world is a matter of insufferable existential crisis, for woman particularly, in the male-predominant social environments. If being human is a unique privilege, being woman is a matter of greater concern and still greater responsibility in this world. Although Das borrowed her feminist ideological properties from the furious liberation movement of the West, her intimate knowledge and understanding of the Indian woman, and her special grievances born of centuries of neglect and subservience of women culminated into a serious and uncontrollable volcanic fury in her. This tinge of collective concern on behalf of woman in general, and Indian woman in particular makes her essentially a modern poetic voice.

4. The Unique Poetic Voice

Referring to Das’s uniqueness as a modern Indian poet writing in English, K. Satchidanandan says:

She is an Indian poet writing in English when Indian poetry in English is breaking free from the rhetorical and romantic traditions, when her male counterparts like Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan are struggling hard to form a dense, pithy and ironic idiom in their poems, and Jayanta Mahapatra is trying to relate his poetry to his immediate environment with pain and anger. (9)
The phenomenon of British poetry extricating itself from the ‘rhetorical and romantic traditions’ started with T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Before this, Gerard Manley Hopkins and W.B. Yeats progressively contributed to make poetic imagery out of conversational language. Needless to say, the conversational language in any speech island is divided into various strata of operation; dialectic variations and the variations of their implementations in the kitchen, in the drawing room, in the market place, and even in the closed walls of the bedroom are significantly distinct. Taking the lead from T.S. Eliot [of The Waste Land], Kamala Das compounds her poetic strategies in the drawing room and bedroom jingo. That way, she is an earnest confessional poet speaking to herself in mono-logic monotones and complacent musings. As such, there is no place for ‘rhetorical and romantic traditions’ in her poetry. But then, interpersonal relations between man and woman being her principal theme, love as a certain phenomenon of human existence (not of the romantic sublime sort) becomes all-important in her poetry. Love, according to Kamala Das, is a sort of invitation by two competent personalities inviting each other for the purpose of mutually measuring the depth of their personalities. It does not mean that the so-called depth of the personalities is readily available for rational and mechanical mensurations. The depth of a personality has to be intuitively apprehended and instinctively conformed or confectioned into certain expressive verbal images. These verbal images in Kamala Das, which adumbrate themselves in a clear conversational language, take their origin in the instinctive manner of apprehending interpersonal gestures and relations. In this instinctive phenomenon of her poetic innovations in imagery, to the extent that it is related to the sublime aspirations of the British
Romanticists (John Keats and P.B. Shelley prominently influenced her imagery filled with Romantic agony), there is a profound inbreeding of melancholy and frustration. Frustrated love and failing love-partner being the central themes of her poems, she is in close affinity to D.H. Lawrence and his mystic of love in its creaturely dimensions. The influence of the feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf is far too obvious to make extended elaborations. Some modern American poets like William Carlos Williams also influence her poetry. The delicate and sensitive manner in which her poetic images spiral themselves into certain inverted and introverted imaginative interminable and never ending reflections particularly designate her as a poet in a serious quest for meaning of being and becoming in the world.

Further, the 'dense, pithy, and ironic idiom' that Ezekiel and Ramanujan 'are struggling hard to form,' as suggested by Satchidanandan, came to Das as a spontaneous verbal force. So far as relating her poetry to the immediate environment is concerned, she is a better success than Mahapatra, as her environment is located in her authentic self as far serious self-reflective, self-emanating, self-evident, and self-fulfilling ideas concerning interpersonal man-woman relations. These ideas sometimes are so profound and strong that they become absolute confessional demonstrations of her inner most thoughts and feelings. The extra-vibrant and violent manner in which Kamala Das expresses her feelings and volitions finds equivalence in John Keats only.

No other voice in Indian literature could ever revolt with such tribal fury and violence as has been sounded in Das’s poems against traditions and conventions. She has daringly defied the phallus as in the following lines of her poem "Conflagration".
Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive,
The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame. (D 20)

She is vibrantly declaring here her inner most feeling that the six foot male frame is not only insufficient for her aspirations, but also incapable of subjugating her identity which, she feels, is as profound and mysterious as nature itself. Das just wants to show the unlimited vibrancy of feminine creative principle as against what man thought it to be a suppressible living entity. She exhorts woman to realize her real significance as a being-in-the-world. In a sense she wants to suggest that man can neither control nor fulfil her personal needs of identity as a woman and as a creative principle. The expression 'again' in the second line is notable, for it stands as a pointer towards the prehistoric past when femininity had received the requisite eulogy in being the most important aspect in the schemes of nature in the matrilineal context.

So Kamala Das's outcry, which appears to be a fervent furious personal onslaught, is really an invitation for a proper understanding of the feminine sentiments. It is all as though she is speaking as an official mouthpiece of every woman and her depravities. The tone of the above lines expresses a sort of uncontrolled and uncontrollable violence and fury, which is an assertion of uninhibited feminine freedoms and choices.

The modern sense of alienation, the nostalgic sentiments—both in spatial and temporal contexts, the anxiety syndrome, the nausea arising out of the girdling ugliness, all find a fuller and a more meaningful expression in Das than in any of her older or younger Indian poets writing in English. Nissim Ezekiel, as Iyengar
comments, is a poet "who is willing to take pains, to cultivate reticence, to pursue the profession of poetry with a sense of commitment . . ." (657). Ezekiel turns around and writes with a sense of frustration and despondency about the poverty, deprivation, and the dirt and squalor of urban India, of course in a mocking tone in lines such as the following from "Poverty Poems—2":

I lifted up my eyes

near the railway station

and saw a leper standing

against a poster-ridden wall (L. 1-4)

But in Kamala Das, the objective pathetic pictures of social and cultural complexities of poverty and deprivation in India are substituted by the objectification of subjective animations of unfulfilled desires and the frustrations thereof. The following lines from the poem "The Seashore" will illustrate this point:

On some evenings I drive past the cremation ground

And seem to hear the crunch of bones in those vulgar

Mouths of fire, or at times I see the smoke, in strands

Slowly stretch and rise, like serpents, satiated

Slow, content and, the only face I remember

Then is yours, my darling, and the only words, your

Oft-repeated plea, give me time, more time and I

Shall learn to love... (BK 33)

The 'crunch of bones' in the 'vulgar / Mouths of fire' and 'the smoke / Slowly stretch(ing) and ris(ing), like serpents, satiated / Slow, content,' bringing the memory
of the husband’s ‘face’ has definitely undertones of the cruel satiation of carnal hunger by him who has still not learnt to ‘love.’

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry revolves round his cultural past and the loss of ethnic roots. About Ramanujan’s thematic concerns, Iyengar’s observation is pertinent: “He [Ramanujan] is like one caught in the crossfire between the elemental pulls of his native culture and the aggressive compulsions of the Chicago milieu” (714). Both Ramanujan and Kamala Das are evidently caught ‘in the crossfire between the elemental pulls’ of their ‘native culture and the aggressive compulsions’ emerging out of the European enlightenment and progress. Particularly in the case of Kamala Das, the crumbled ethnic roots of her culture born out of East-West encounter become inflated poetic material. Here her poetry is typically informed by both the Freudian and Jungian dreams. It is true that all the poets are conscious of their personalities that go to drive and dive them into their creative manner of expressions. It is the vibrant presence of this personality in whatever they create that becomes poetically enthusing. If so, Kamala Das has a complex personality as a woman, which very often proposes itself as an unabashed ‘schizoid.’ In her, the vibrant conscious self seeks a constant regress into libidinal ego, and the machismo in her reverts fiercely against it. In her poem “Summer in Calcutta” we have a rare fire of passion that drinks the “April sun”:

What is this drink but
the April sun, squeezed
like an orange in
my glass...
What noble venom flows through my veins and fills my mind with unhurried laughter? . . .

Dear, forgive this moment's lull in wanting you, the blur in memory. How brief the term of my devotion, how brief your reign . . . (OP 24)

The 'April sun' being 'squeezed like an orange in my glass' becomes an expression of contempt for feminine weakness. Therefore, a 'noble venom flows through my veins and fills my mind with unhurried laughter.' This 'unhurried laughter' is born of her irrepressible machismo and 'this moment's lull in wanting you' (A hot desire for companionship) coming into a conflict with each other as split personalities in her, contending for supremacies and victory. Further, the "Wee bubbles ring like a bride's nervous smile" (OP 24) explains her concern for the flimsy momentary nature of the pleasures of meeting. It all becomes a 'blur in memory' since the 'term of my devotion, how brief your reign' ends when the drinking glass is still in her
hand, with the 'wee bubbles ring / my glass' (A profound poetic analogy for John Keats' "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" ["Nightingale," L.17]). She ultimately implores her partner to 'forgive / this moment's lull in / wanting you' (a sharp stabbing irony) for "drink, drink, / And drink again this / juice of April suns" (OP 24). Here, the 'April sun' metaphor, in which the male counterpart is conceived, substantiates the idea for its fierceness as well as brief nature.

"Summer in Calcutta" is one of the early poems of Kamala Das, and it bears the autobiographical personal experience of her adolescence in Calcutta. The poem depicts a passionate infatuation for companionship, and the consequent half-fulfilled and frustrating manner in which the interpersonal affairs end up. "Summer in Calcutta" very artistically blends the Jungian archetypes ('juice of April suns') with the Freudian agon ('Dear, forgive / this moment's lull in / wanting you, the blur / in memory').

R. Parthasarthy's poetry too compels a comparison with that of Kamala Das in the context of the influence of T.S. Eliot and his modern verve of imagery and symbols. In the poem "Homecoming," Parthasarthy writes:

This afternoon I dusted my table.

Arranged everything in order

in a desperate attempt to get hold of myself.

Later, I watched my forty years

swim effortlessly ashore in a glass of beer.

However, there is no end
to the deceptions I practise on myself:

I have, for instance, lived off friends.

Told the usual lies. (l. 94-102)

The intimate evocations towards T.S. Eliot’s “Alfred J. Prufrock” and his ‘insidious’ rhetoric are obvious in the above lines. The squeaking voices of exploitation of her privacy, and the consequent unrest of the ‘Lady Prufrock’ are obviously present in the following lines of Das in the poem “The Freaks”:

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire.... (OP 11)

‘But, they only wander, tripping / Idly over puddles of / Desire ..’ has a suggestive and symbolic echo to the lines, ‘the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo’ of Eliot’s Prufrock.

However, in the midst of the Indo-Anglian poets touched upon above, the uniqueness of Das’s poetic arguments lies in the fact that none of her contemporary poets, male or female, has shown the courage to directly assault the traditions, and question the legitimacy of culture and its antecedents. Kamala Das, on the other
hand, confronts like a rebel, the glorified nastiness of human culture. To her the entire gamut of the history of human civilization and progress looks like a grotesque edifice of Gothic horrors. This denunciation, this defiance of human advance and progress finds expression in her poem ‘Daughter of the Century’:

We ate our forefathers
To gather the vigour for living.
Our grandchildren shall perhaps eat us
When their turn arrives. (BK 140)

The ‘eat’ metaphor used to express the manner in which we ate the tradition, and in turn hope our children to do the same is inflated and cannibalistic. But then, for Das nothing short of cannibalism can serve the purpose of expressing her fury and agony. In the above cannibal metaphor she implies that one generation flourishes after having massacred and smashed the earlier one. If so, from generation to generation what perspires is not progress. On the other hand, it is all a vain show of failure in standing up to the credentials of the hopes and desires. In effect she wants to confirm poetically that generations after generations, it is always this failure to be that stares into the eyes of the individuals. The whole edifice of culture all through the ages shows the same symptoms of failure and distress. Therefore, there is nothing to be really proud of the human traditions that invariably hurdle the women folk to a marginalized status of being non-entities.

Thus, at more places than one Kamala Das hints that the evolution of human society is strictly in contrast to the self-reflecting, self-fulfilling idealized greatness of human birth. She throws a question directly on to the face of human civilization
“Who can say for certain that we are superior / To the maggots that eat us in the end?”

(BK 141). The macabre self-image of the individual here conflicts with the reality of the disciplined society. All kinds of animosity seep through the interstices of modern life, a sort of maggot culture feeds upon it, transforming the pragmatism of hatred into an essential commodity of every day existence. What differentiates Kamala Das from other Indian poets of her times also is this existential concern, this expression of anger against the set values of the present times. While it is true that her whole poetic property is against the backdrop of woman’s concerns, she rather takes a broader view of human life and its tribulations, and argues out her cause with relevant questions that cover the whole of humanity. Whatever she utters poetically is immediately connectable to its human significance. Thus, Das’s poetic personae represent the ‘essential woman’ in her manifold aspects, rebelling against traditions and conventions, with an underlying reminder of what should be true of humanity. When it comes to the crushing of the very natural felicities, her poetic personae experience an inordinate crisis of agony and restlessness, which in effect turns out to be an inconsolable ‘cry’ of the occasion. When a sense of self-pity attends such a ‘cry,’ her poetry becomes a vibrant symbolic gesture of showing a rebellious will to fight out for her cause. The metaphors that she creates are highly charged with a sort of robust complexities. She confesses in “Loud Posters”:

I am today a creature turned inside
Out. To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire . . . (OP 47)
In her autobiography *My Story* also Das expresses somewhat the same wish: “I have often wished to take myself apart and stick all the bits, the heart, the intestines, the liver, the reproductive organs, the skin, the hair and all the rest on a large canvas to form a collage which could then be donated to my readers” (217). Such a ‘wish’ arises from a passionate inner urge to metamorphose into something else out of the self. As Vincent O’ Sullivan rightly points out, “It is the story of how a woman takes herself apart, so that when she is reassembled she has become her own creation. She wants that to be disturbing—as if *Nude Descending a Staircase* were a self-portrait that stepped from its frame and insisted on doing the living” (181). This poetic transmutaion of the self is not for the sake of rhetoric, but it is an attempt to perceive oneself more objectively; and, when this is done, it puts her on verbal excruciations flaring into abject ravings of a creature wriggling and spiralling under the ideological pressures of life, like Kafka’s cockroach. Hence, life as a given for Kamala Das is a Kafkaish unending agony through a trial. So far as the modern human predicament is concerned, Franz Kafka created the insufferable boils and blisters, and Albert Camus wriggled the wounds. Kamala Das peeps at these boils, blisters, and wounds with an assiduous intention of revealing the very pain of being an ever-neglected woman. This sui generis quality, this creaturely approach towards one’s being, against the backdrop of institutional pressures, is what makes Kamala Das the unique voice of Indo-Anglian poetry.

**D. How the Steel Was Tempered**

Kamala Das was born in *Punnayurkulam*, Northern Kerala in 1934 to a poet-mother (Her mother Balamani Amma is a well known Malayalam poet) and a
businessman-father. Her father migrated to Bengal, and thereby his children got an enviable exposure to multicultural parameters. Das's childhood spent in the Missionary School of Bengal greatly contributed for her individualism, as yet a child, whereby she had an opportunity to learn the primary lessons of Individualism and Humanism as propagated by the European Renaissance and the eighteenth century European enlightenment. The ideas of European enlightenment and progress supplemented the streak of inborn trenchant individualism in her. In spite of the fact that the European enlightenment and the ideas of material progress are a natural fall-out of British Imperialism and Colonialism, Das never developed any inhibition or hatred in adopting for herself progressive ideas of Enlightenment and Individualism. The foreign rule and cultural exploitation do not appear to have bothered her much. She progressively attached herself to the modern British poetic experimentations that started from T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and T.S. Eliot.

As far as Das's formal education is concerned, she did not have a regular school education and never attended any college. After the short-lived European missionary school education in Calcutta, she was sent to an elementary school at her native place in North Kerala, and was subsequently admitted to a Boarding school run by Catholic nuns. However, she was again removed to Calcutta when she fell ill in the Boarding school, and was put under home-tuition. The school years, however, were a period for moulding of Kamala's very sensitive poetic sensibility.

Apart from the experience of racial discriminations she encountered in the European missionary school, another factor which might have made a deep scar in her already hurt sensibility is the discord between her father and mother as a couple, who,
as she tells in her autobiography, “were dissimilar and horribly mismated” (MS 5). This discord, however, did not develop to reach a stage of serious conflict or divorce owing to the timidity of the mother, thus creating an “illusion of domestic harmony” (MS 5). This parental conflict in the family with an upper hand of the father is the starting point of her feministic views and grievances.

Although her father had not much time for his children, he very prudently and mechanically discharged his duties as a father. In the poem “Next to Indira Gandhi” Das hints at the kind of restriction he must have imposed on his children, particularly on Kamala as a female child: “You chose my clothes for me / My tutors, my hobbies, my friends, / And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me a husband” (OSK 118). Her father originally implanted in her a permanent sore and scare towards men and their manners, and in course of time the same scare grew in her psyche to assume alarming dimensions with the unloving manners of her husband, and remained a lifetime sore. The result is her autobiographical painful poetry. But the autobiographical status is a mere poetic ploy. Her real feminine anxieties are prominently inherited from the autocratic, chauvinistic systems in which she was forced to live as a marginalized, self-denigrated woman.

However, the sparks of fire really went ablaze within her with the very early marriage (at the age of sixteen) with a relative, living with whom she saw all her adolescent dreams crumble to the ground. As she tells in her autobiography, and also as her many poems suggest, her husband was an unkind, unloving man who had had sexual encounters with his maidservants. He used his wife only to show the sexual acrobatics he had learnt from his earlier bouts, “veteran that he was in his rowdy ways
of sex which he had practised with the maids who worked for his family" (MS 93).
The abnormal manner of diverting and directing her anger towards the issues speaks for the painful manner in which she suffered the companionship of her perennially failing partner in love. From here onwards, her life, if we take her autobiography My Story as factual record of events in her life, was a tale of woes and illness. But it is interesting to note that her autobiography, like many of her poems, is a mixture of facts and fiction. Her expectations in life were idealized and her experiences romanticized, but the ultimate outcome is her very vibrant and emotionally charged poems expressed in extraordinary and powerful language, revealing the interiorities of a very sensitive feminine psyche, responding aggressively to the Indian familial and socio-cultural complexities.

Finally, as regards Kamala Das's quantitative achievements, it becomes pertinent to briefly look at her major works. Das is a bi-lingual writer, writing both in Malayalam and English. (In Malayalam she writes under the pseudonym Madhavikutty; has produced many volumes of short stories and novelettes). She is the winner of the Poetry Award of the Asian PEN Anthology in 1963, and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1969 for her Collection of Short Stories in Malayalam Thanuppu ("Cold"). She has published six Collections of Poems in English, viz., Summer in Calcutta (1965), Descendants (1967), Old Playhouse And Other Poems (1973), Collected Poems (1984), The Best of Kamala Das (1991), and Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (1996). She has also collaborated with Pritish Nandy, another notable Indian poet in English, in bringing out a volume of love poems, viz. Tonight This Savage Rite (1979). Her most controversial book, her fictional autobiography,
My Story, was first published in Malayalam (Ente Katha), and was later translated by herself into English (1976). She has also published a novel, The Alphabet of Lust (1976), and three volumes of short stories viz., A Doll for the Child Prostitute (1977), Padmavati, the Harlot and Other Stories (1992) and The Sandal Trees and Other Stories (1998). Apart from these works she has written many articles in journals and periodicals, a few of which are: “I Studied All Men” (Love and Friendship, Sterling, 1973), “What Women Expect out of Marriage, and What They Get” (Femina, July 1974), “Why Not More Than One Husband” (Eve’s Weekly, May 1972), and “I Have Lived Beautifully” (Debonair, May 1974). In the year 2000, she published a collection of articles entitled The Path of the Columnist.

Kamala Das’s poetry has established a fervent ground for poetic expression of the feminine freedoms and choices, which she considers as the urgent necessities of existence with due dignity and honour in the context of our times. At the same time, she is painfully aware that the real predicament of being woman in the male-chauvinistic counters of modern civilization concerns with the impossibility of reconciling her creaturely survival against the backdrop of spiritual heights theoretically sanctioned to the dignity of being human. Her argumentations are perpetually haunted by the sense of this impending failure at the end. Her poetry, therefore, abounds in feminine angst and violence. Her women protagonists assume the role of herself, the Indian woman, and eventually, overcoming geographical and ethnic considerations, go to identify with the essential womanhood. As S. C. Harrex rightly says, “In stressing the personal tenor and texture of Kamala Das’s poetic voice the extra-personal elements in her idiom should not be overlooked” (165).
expression ‘extra-personal elements’ clarifies that her overall assessment of the feminine predicaments are born of the women’s liberation movement of the West, and her poetry is not a mere outcome of her autobiographical counters. In fact the subjectively compounded ‘personal voice’ gives a rare authenticity to her irrepressible feminine transparencies.

Before summing the discussion in this chapter it is worth recalling a statement by Elaine Showalter on George Eliot, which reads, “...most nineteenth century women novelists seem to have found [Eliot] a troubling and demoralizing competitor, one who had created an image of the woman artist they could never equal” (qtd. in Gilbert 493). On the same analogy one can evaluate Kamala Das as a poet in the context of Indian women poetry in English. Das’s achievement of the absolute rebellious dimensions in her poetry places her as the only voice of its kind in the milieu of Indian women-poetry in English. In fact she has revolutionized the conventional notions about the definition and scope of Indian women-poetry in its structural, thematic, and tonal aspects. The women poets preceded and came after her have never shown such intrepidity and audacity in stretching their “two dimensional / Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, Quarterlies . . . (“Loud Posters,” OP 47). With no model to emulate, Das invented her own stylistic manner of expressions most suitable to the thematic concerns that she wanted to handle. As Bruce King rightly remarks, “Das opened areas in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling; she showed how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the public world” (152). She
has set a tradition of a new generation-women-poetry in the Indian poetic scene that would definitely continue to kindle the fire in the women poets of the coming times.

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. But any attempt to pigeonhole a poet of her stature within the framework of a particular philosophy would be tantamount to undermining her creative achievements. As Vincent O’ Sullivan rightly comments, “there is much in Das that will not be herded into the clear boundaries we may try to erect. She is no more worried than was Walt Whitman that she contradicts herself, omits, exaggerates. It might be argued that her texts offer no bonding centre of control” (193). Sullivan’s statement is true in the light of what Das herself says in one of her answers: “I have not chosen any particular philosophy to guide me in life. I change too fast for any philosophy. I move too fast for any message to catch up with me” (qtd. in Saha 16). Here we are reminded of Camus’ lines: “The true philosophy is the negation of philosophy. No religion is my religion. No philosophy is my philosophy” (118).

The attempt in the foregoing pages, however, was to determine her place (certainly not an inconsequential one) in the overall scenario of Indo-Anglian poetry of our times. Having done this, an attempt has been made in the following chapters to analyse the sources of the exclusive feminine violence in her poetry, and the significance and relevance thereof against the backdrop of socio-cultural and aesthetic parameters.