CHAPTER - III

THEMATOLOGY

The comparative / contrastive study of themes has been termed differently by different theoreticians - 'thematics', 'thematology', 'stoffgeschichte' ... Prawer identifies five prototypal subjects of investigation in this field, viz. (i) natural phenomena and man's reaction to them (ii) recurring motifs (iii) recurrent situations (iv) the literary representation of types and (v) the literary representation of named personages¹. Prawer's remarks about the benefits of comparative thematology are of special significance with regard to the present study². First of all, the comparative study of themes and motifs enables us to see what type of writer chooses what type of material, and how the material is dealt with at various times. For example, Balamani Amma has a genius for combining themes and motifs from the most varied sources and integrating them into unified works of art, but Kamala Das weighs, filters and distils her themes.

Secondly, thematic studies enable us to examine and contrast the spirit of different societies and epochs as
well as those of individual talents. The significance of this has been amply illustrated before: we saw zeitgeist operating as a dominating factor in the poet's choosing of themes as well as style. Balamani Amma's tentative adumbration of physical love transforms, as we have seen, into Kamala Das's clinical prognosis of foreplay and coitus. Thirdly, thematology helps in providing fresh perspectives in the analysis of style, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

Discussing the problematised and elusive concept of 'influence', Rene Wellek says that the whole conception of a 'cause' in literary study is uncritical; nobody has ever been able to show that a work of art was 'caused' by another work of art, even though parallels and similarities can be accumulated. A later work of art may not have been possible without a preceding one, but it cannot have been caused by it.

Now, this casual admission of fact by Wellek can be taken as an excellent launching point, though his statement may be somewhat too broad in reference. Putting things in this broad frame of reference one can well argue
that all texts have been 'influenced' in some way or another, and that all works of literature are intertextual in nature. Granting the basic truth of such a viewpoint, we are constrained to bring things down to microlevel for any useful comparison to take place. Going back to the latter part of Wellek's statement which provides a rationale for diachronic comparative study, we can ask, with Prawer: What is there in the earlier work which made it 'possible' for the later to be produced? In what way did the later work build on (and modify) grounds prepared by the earlier one? What expectations aroused by the earlier work did the later disappoint or satisfy?.

Speaking about literary indebtedness, J.T. Shaw says that an author's literary debts do not in effect diminish his originality, since originality is not best understood in terms of innovation. Many great authors have openly admitted the influence of others on them, and some, like Salman Rushdie, have even paraded their indebtedness to others. They seem to have felt that originality consists, not exclusively or even primarily in innovation in materials or of style and manner, but in the genuineness and effectiveness of the artistic moving power of the
creative work. The innovation which does not move aesthetically is of interest only to the formalist. What genuinely moves the reader aesthetically and produces an independent artistic effect has artistic originality, whatever its debts. The 'original' author is not necessarily the innovator or the most inventive, but rather the one who succeeds in making all his own, in subordinating what he takes from others to the new aesthetics of his artistic work. What emerges from the aforesaid is that the juxtaposition of comparable authors as well as their works has rewards richer than we might imagine. The kind of quasi-diachronic comparison we are attempting here will be seen to expose hitherto ignored or unperceived aspects of awareness concerning both the mother and the daughter.

From the foregoing, it would almost be tautological to say that we have here two poetic minds operating on entirely different milieu. Creative power is, as commonly observed, fed and controlled by the time-spirit. Since Balamani Amma had written most of her poems during the Indian struggle for independence, we have a natural preponderance of themes like patriotism, reverence for God, concern for the poor and the afflicted etc in her poems,
combined with a dominant lucidity of style.

But on the other hand we have Kamala Das, a product of modern life-situations. She is the spokeswoman of the subtle but powerful eruptions of the complex modern psyche. Identity crises, phobias, inhibitions, unfulfilled and uncertain relationships - all form the natural make-up of the raw material before the modern poet; and hence we have the ensuing complexity and innovativeness of both theme and style. However, as has been hinted in Chapter I, intertextuality is a potential mine for significant discovery of links which exist, directly and subliminally, between the mother and the daughter. In the present chapter, what follows is an attempt to concretize some facets of intertextuality which exist between them.

(a) PREOCCUPATION WITH THE DIVINE

For Balamani Amma, man-God relationship is not enigmatic at all. She was convinced that the way to God lies in self sacrifice, and almost all of her poems in this category centre on this keynote. "paniniirppuuvə" "mannambalam", "vandaţam" etc are good examples. In her poem "paniniirppuuvə" we see that though man has access to
high ideals and spiritual thoughts which are said to be capable of leading him towards ultimate Bliss, God-realization occurs only when he is willing to place everything at the feet of the Almighty. The poem "vandanam" is another triumphant acclamation of the man-God relationship. The poet says that the troubles of this world - disease, discomfort, loneliness or anything - cannot destroy her faith in the Almighty. One of her other similar poems, "Benediction", ("aasirvaadam" translated by the author) deserves special mention, where she felicitously combines the mundane with the spiritual:

The first cry of the child was a 'Mantra' Sanctifying their love... No wonder. The child has come with the key of Heaven held tight in his curling fingers, Fingers that have to scribble the first lessons of self-sacrifice on her mother's bosom

(Balamani Amma, Thirty poems)

Kamala Das on the other hand has considerably problematised the concept of God, especially in some of her Anamalai poems. In poem No. 10 she says:
There is a love greater than all you know that awaits you where the red road finally ends its patience proverbial...

Its embrace is truth and it erases even the soul's ancient indentations...

In poem No. 4, God or eternity is presented from another angle:

... If only the human eye could look beyond the chilling flesh... where would death be then, that meaningless word, when life is all that there is, that raging continuity that often the wise ones recognize as God?

For her, the concept of God or 'heaven' is totally free from religious insinuations, and the way to God does not need to involve self-sacrifice in any form. For her, the wise one is he who is able to escape the stranglehold of the immediate, one who has enough perspective to view life as starting from the infinite and proceeding towards the infinite, with the occasional intrusion of death which cannot spell finality.
(b) THE FEMINIST SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND FULFILMENT

The overtly feminist stance of Kamala Das has been exegetically discussed during the recent years. Almost aggressively individualistic, she systematically disposes of patriarchal codes in the various facets of human relationship, arguing for a just balance:

Fond husband,

ancient settler in the mind

Old fat spider,

weaving webs of bewilderment, be kind.

You turn me into a bird of stone,

a granite dove,

You build round me a shabby drawing room

and stroke my face absent mindedly...

(From "The Stone Age")

Kamala Das's poetry has a special force and appeal for us primarily because of the honesty and candour with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual with a distinctive identity and to be her authentic self even if this involves breaking the moulds of traditional ethics and propriety. Her poetry voices a vehement protest against the senseless restrictions which compel a sensitive
and intelligent woman to lead a vapid kind of existence. She refused to fit into any scheme devised by the "categorizers". The frank, confessional quality of her poetry is her main strength, though in the absence of a mature self-restraint we can also notice in it a dash of callow exhibitionism particularly when she has to flaunt her "flamboyant lust" in order to retrieve her undermined dignity.

The bitter irony and anguish of a woman who finds herself tied down to a meaningless routine of household activities can be noticed in many of her poems. We see them, for example in "The Siesta" where we find the poet asking herself ironically if she could have "the courage" and "the sense"

to pick herself an average identity, to age through years of earthly din gently, like a cut flower until it's time to be removed . . .

Through her defiant self-assertion, Kamala Das increases our awareness of how the dead weight of outworn values can block the emotional and individual growth of an
individual. How painful, frenzied and self-consuming the
life of an ill-adjusted, sensitive individual can be in
the rotting and decaying society is well brought out in
many of her poems.

However, it is more interesting to see the same
streak of rebellion in the poetry of Balamani Amma,
although in different form. The telling effect of zeit-
geist upon her poetry diverted the force of her attack, so
much so that she has had to project her feelings via an
artificial context, many times resorting to using a third
person, which would be of help in coming round the
delicate problem of involving one's own husband. For
example in her poem "kalyaanaveedimeel" (Upon the Wedding
Stage) she evocatively highlights the picture of a
potential groom afraid of his own natural impulses.
Apparently, his whole life is dedicated to the pursuit of
knowledge, and he cannot understand what 'knowledge' the
prospective bride would be able to impart. Though in his
heart of hearts he looks forward to the pleasures of
marriage, his conscious self considers it a weakness to
have decided to marry.

In another poem a girl, a sage's daughter, shuns all
lures of conjugal life. In spite of her father's efforts to persuade her to marry one of his disciples, she remains adamant and shuns all worldly pleasures thinking that she has attained supreme enlightenment, and that she must not condescend to be a mere consort to a man. Later her father dies, and after many years when the charm of her youth has ebbed away, she meets a young Sansyasin. The young man likes her and wants to be near her always. But she does not want to enchain his youthfulness to old age and decides to "dissolve every particle of her existence in the foam of the ocean waves". This strange story inexorably justifies the reality and validity of all human passions. 'Kama' or carnal pleasure has its validity in life, and repression of basic urges will only lend to psychological abnormalities. Balamani Amma's philosophy is one which embraces life on this earth with all its fullness, and gives due recognition to the psychological truth that asceticism has its martyrs.

In the poem, "kavanapiṭṭatil" (In the Poet's Study) we have the silhouette of an artist working late into the night. His young wife, having been fighting it out with loneliness for quite some time expectantly makes a
tentative appearance at the door, with age old human desire adumbrating her face. As the poet describes it, the artist, then at a supreme moment of creation disposes of this potential casualty by amicably reminding her of the importance of what he is doing, and the possible hazard which can be caused even by a minute's relapse. His obedient and understanding wife then beats a silent retreat.

Poems like these express, albeit subtly, what the poet wants to say. Balamani Amma had to go by the canons of contemporary zeitgeist which advocated restraint, circumvention and moderation rather than explicitness. But it can be seen that the same fierce individualism and plea for gender justice which marks off Kamala Das pre-figures forcefully in the poetry of her mother, though in a form not substantial enough to attract common notice. However, the mother could later find vicarious realization of suppressed rebellion through the poetry of her daughter, although after many years. In her poem "To my Daughter" written in 1965 she says:

Your mind may grow restless with sad thoughts
Your body may be weary of household tasks
But about you I hold no fear.
Your power of turning worms into butterflies
Comforts me.

It must be noted that intertextuality is not
considered here as a phenomenon operating on the conscious
level, though there are a host of comparatists who believe
that while influence is involuntary, intertextuality can
only be voluntary. In the case cited above, we can argue
with enough reason that Kamala Das's poems expressing
rebellion against patriarchal codes are unconscious
reworkings of an earlier prototype. Her poetic psyche has
subliminally fulfilled the task of distorting, reshaping
or even subverting the earlier prototype(s) so as to
maintain the desired level of 'originality'.

(c) MYTHOLOGY

Myths had a carved a niche for themselves in Balamani
Amma's heart. A host of her poems are fashioned on the
myriad mythical narratives of ancient India. "The story
of the Axe" ("mauvinte kata" - translated by N. T.
Seshan) is one of her typical poems dealing with the story
of Parasurama. She has also worked on the Radha-Krishna
myth, as part of her explorations regarding the concept of
love and the search for knowledge. Though both mother and
daughter have explored the Radha-Krishna myth, it can be seen that each has a distinctive strategy of her own. Balamani Amma on the one hand pictures Radha as the one who eternally waits for her lover. For example, in her poem "Radha" Radha represents humanity in search for ultimate knowledge and bliss, the later implied by the image of Krishna. The mode of representation, as we can see, conforms to the traditional concept of Krishna as the Omniscient One, the giver of all good. In fact the poem depicts some important stages in man's progress towards ultimate wisdom or 'jnaana': When viewed from a distance, Wisdom appears enchantingly beautiful. He realises that worldly pleasures are nothing before real Wisdom. Whatever abstract philosophy is involved in the conceptualization of Wisdom, it is more or less a reflection of man himself. When we realise this everything fades away into insignificance and we begin to feel a sense of confusion and insecurity in our minds. It is in this moment of confusion and helplessness that we actually hear the soft voice of the Almighty. When we hear His voice, our attraction for earthly things as well as our uncertainty and confusion fade away. When we reach this final stage, we will consider the troubles of this
world as stepping-stones in our journey towards Him.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note how Kamala Das, in her typical fashion, subverts the traditional concept of Krishna. For her, Krishna is not an abstract entity: her Krishna belongs to the earth; he is also dark-skinned like herself, and is the source of ultimate sexual energy. He is not a pale shadow, an ethereal phenomenon but clothed in flesh and blood. In "Phantom Lotus" she says:

The only truth that matters is
That all this love is mine to give
It does not matter that I seek
For it a container, as alms
Seek a begging bowl, a human
Shape to envelope its wealth. Heed
My faith alone, all the rest is
Perishable, and as such, but
Delusions. Any stone can make
An idol. Loving this one, I
Seek but another way to know
Him...
In "Ghanasyam" she says:

You come in strange forms
And your names are many
Is it then a fact that I love the disguise
And the name more than I love you?

Her fiction also throws light on her Krishna-image. In her story "The Sign of the Lion", she writes:

His dark skin reminded me of Krishna the libertine. The inconstant lover. The monarch... \(^9\)

And, in a sense, we can say that she transcends human promiscuity regarding love and sex, and claims this Krishna-consciousness to be her cultural heritage. For her, Krishna should overpower her soul:

Beside the rivers of my blood, he rests like a hunter after the hunt. The rivers wash away his thirst. He drinks my blood. He grows strong on my meat. with a trim sandalled foot, he kicks at my nerves... \(^{10}\)

There is no ignoring the fact that the daughter has traversed the mythical thoroughfares well beyond the
wildest imaginations of her mother.

(d) LOVE AND SEX

Motherly Love

Balamani Amma is usually identified as "the Mother", justified by the emotional content of her writing in the first stage. Her poems opened up a new horizon, since all aspects of life were depicted from the exclusive viewpoint of a mother who finds supreme happiness in motherhood, the bliss being comparable to the experience of the mystic. Thus the experience of motherhood depicted in her poems has a uniqueness that transcends all limitations.

The child is for her the embodiment of all divinity whom she is destined to serve and worship. The ego of the mother who nourishes and nurtures, vanishes and in its place a devoutness flourishes. This extraordinary emotional sphere of 'holy motherhood' has been given due homage and recognition by discerning readers. Owing to the unique position of the mother in human life, there is no actual need for an outward expression of the unfathomably deep feelings for the mother - she is 'everything' and at the same time, 'nothing' - an omnipotent presence and a virtual non-entity. The
'mother figure' associated with Balamani Amma's poetic self is also subject to this divalency. Love for the child is definitely a vast universe in itself. Being confined to this universe throughout one's life does not make one inferior or less significant. The tenderness, delicacy, warmth and gentleness in her poems of motherhood constitute a vast domain of poetic sensibility hitherto unsurpassed in depth and grandeur. To understand the truth of the statement we only need to refer to the well-known poems of motherhood that appear in the beginning of her anthology "soopaanam", especially those titled "maatraicumbanam", "kuuttikalakkittayil", "aasirvaadam" etc mentioned in Chapter II.

The tender feelings of motherhood are so fundamental and universal that often it becomes impossible to formalize them beyond a certain point. As mothers, both Balamani Amma and Kamala Das evoke comparable responses in their respective audiences, the prominent difference being in that while Balamani Amma carries affection for one's children to the realm of transcendent spirituality, (cf. poems like "maatraicumbanam", "aasirvaadam" etc) Kamala Das lets a bit of stringent realism seep in. An apt example for the latter would be her poem "My Sons", where she
brings in the telling contrast between olden and modern life:

... Who remembers the smell of his skin or the words he murmured in my ears? My sons are old enough to take their own women...

Or consider the poem "Jaisurya" where she says:

Love is not important, that makes the blood Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his Lust, but is shed as slough at the end of each Embrace. Only that matters which forms as Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft Stir in the womb, the foetus growing...

[A Mother's Heart]

whereas in "maattrpradayam" we have Balamani Amma saying:

...O, Mother, whose love, whose embrace Are you seeking, when all the creatures of the world flock around you and you are Mother to them all...

In her poem "Sympathy" translated from the Malayalam by herself, she says that she can view the different elements in the Universe only with motherly tenderness:

Why did I feel a sympathy never
Felt before? Later, while I sat and watched
My baby sleep, the answer came to me.
"The soul of the world took form to become
Your beloved child. So you are mother,
Mother to them all."

In the poem "ariiññukuuṭaa" (I do not Know) we see how an
innocent question raised by her child leads Balamani Amma
to ponder over the mysteries of human existence. Her
child asks her where a baby comes from, and this sets her
thinking. Though this question is not original in any
sense, the mother is touched by the way in which her own
son asks it. The poet feels that it is precisely the
question of 'From where?' that holds up the dignity of man
over other beings. Since man cannot with any conviction
answer this, there ought to be a feeling of humility in
him. The poet is sad because she, with all her
scholarship, is unable to give a satisfactory answer to
her own child. She says there is no dearth of
philosophical treatises to draw from. But the mystery of
human life does not yield easily to scholars. The poet
concludes by saying that she does not have the courage to
answer this question from which even the 'rishis'
themselves recoiled in awe.

In "valutaavanam" (Want to Grow Up) it is another such innocent question that prompts the poet to offer some philosophical insights about human life. The child asks his mother when he will be able to grow up like her. Reflecting on this, the poet says that man always nurtures a desire to grow further despite the fact that one can be happy and contented with whatever he already possesses. But in reality what is the nature of this so-called 'growth' of man? It is best compared to the cycle of the seasons, which repeats itself again and again. The child desires to be like her mother, who in turn wishes to be a child once again.

The poem "veenugoopaalan" (Krishna) is similar in the way in which the poet moves from specificity to generality. Here the poet sees in the child not only perennial founts of joy, but an image of God Himself. The gods took delight in the flute-music of little Krishna because perhaps they themselves having had no childhood, were interested in this particular phase of human life. Any mother who is devoted to her child can espy the image of the Almighty in the child. However, man searches for
God among the dust-ridden pages of age-old religious texts in ignorance of this.

On the other hand, Kamala Das can discourse on the concept of motherly love without taking the by-route to spirituality or transcendentalism. Her affection for her son is one that is a product of the earth, rooted in earth. In "Jaisurya", describing the apocalyptical moment of childbirth, she writes:

For a while I too was the earth.
In me the seed was silent,
Waiting as a baby does,
For the womb's quiet expulsion.

The dominant earthiness of her feeling for her offspring is further asserted in other lines in the same poem:

When the rain ceased
and the light was gay on our casuarina leaves
wailing into the light he came . . .

For her the birth of her child is "another dawn breaking", a translation from darkness to light. In her poem "My Sons" she ungrudgingly accepts what life makes of her children. She displays an enviable objectiveness when she describes the cycle of time:
... they swing
Round and round with the females of their tribe
Yet another generation awaits
At the closed doors behind their faded jeans...

Thus we have two poetic minds employing the concept of motherly love for two entirely different ends. While for Balamani Amma it is a starting point for extended reflections on human destiny and man-God relationship, it provides for Kamala Das yet another opportunity to renew her inveterate relationship with the earth with all its variety and flux.

Conjugal Love

As we noted earlier, Balamani Amma had very definite convictions about the nature of love, especially conjugal love. If is clear that she liked to think of wifely devotion as an essential sacrifice. Many poems of hers depict this sacrificial aspect of love, for example "kavipr̥eyasi", "diipaaraadana", "vaduvinoḍa", "gr̥hini" etc. The reiterated message in these poems is that a housewife can attain 'moksha' not through superhuman feats, but through endurance, steadfast love, and sincere devotion to her husband and children. However as we have
seen, it would be myopoeic to dispose of Balamani Amma as the poetess of household chores and familial obligations, because she hides the roaring seas of insurgent feminism within her superficial camouflage of unoffending traditional poet. (cf. poems like "kalyaanaveedimeel", "kavanapiittattil" etc cited earlier). In the poem "kavipreeyasi" the poet describes how a faithful and devoted wife sacrifices her physical impulses so that her husband may continue his work uninterruptedly. The theme and structure of this poem is very similar to that of "kavanapiittattil". In the poem "vaduvinoode" Balamani Amma shows the path of self-realisation through love. There she says:

What has made the honeyed-love
A flower for worshipping the world,
What has made the wedding-hall
An altar for sacrificing the ego,
What has made happy marriage
A ladder for reaching out to self-realization,
Let that soul-force of Indian womanhood
Be awakened in you.  

According to Balamani Amma, a happy domestic life founded in love is the stepping stone to self-realization. We can
see a similar ideology encapsulated in another poem "प्रांभाते" (At Dawn). Here the poet, herself a
housewife, comes to realize that she can please the
Almighty by going through her daily household chores as
well. When she rises early in the morning to go to the
river to take a bath, thoughts about her husband and
children, still asleep, intrude in her meditations on the
Supreme Giver. At first she is disconcerted at this
interruption, but later understands that there is a
presence of God in all facets of the universe including
that of domesticity, and that as far as a housewife is
concerned the best and the most natural way of God-
realization is attending to the needs of her husband and
children.

But unlike her mother, Kamala Das insists on perfect
reciprocity in man-woman relationship. This insistence on
reciprocity may be a direct contingent of her better
exposure to western culture. Balamani Amma in a sense
found vicarious satisfaction of unexpressed emotions
through the poetry of her daughter, which she was broad-
minded enough to admit, though indirectly, in her poem "To
My Daughter".
Unfulfilment

Most of the poems of Kamala Das deal with the theme of unfulfilled love. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" is a good example, where she finds an objective correlative in the dance of the eunuchs for expressing the theme of suppressed desire. The dance of the eunuchs with their wide skirts going round "Cymbals/richly clashing and anklets jingling/Jingling..." is contrasted with their vacant ecstasy, suggesting a gulf between the external simulated passion and the sexual sterility inside. We can say that the quest for love, or rather the failure to find emotional fulfilment through love is the central theme of her poetry. But her greatness as a love-poet arises from the fact that her poetry is rooted in personal experience. It is an outpouring of her own loneliness, disillusionment and frustration. Marriage and love are not mutually exclusive, but for her they have proved to be so. When she speaks of love outside marriage she is not actually propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which provides both love and security.
Her love-poetry is shocking to the orthodox, for her treatment of sexual love and the human body is frank and uninhibited. She was equally unconventional in her life and her poetry, by refusing to conform to the traditional role of a wife. In the poem "An Introduction" she complains:

...Dress in sarees, be girl, or be wife, they cried. Be embroider, cook or a quarreller with servants. Fit in, belong, said the categorizers.

For Kamala Das, love seems to be an endless quest. She thirsts for the unattainable and chimeric shangri-la of genuine love. According to her the Hindu concept of wife which avers that she should be an amalgam of adviser, servant, mother and seductress is a pretty useless remnant of patriarchal domination. In her poem "In Love" she asks:

... where
is room, excuse or even
need for love, for, isn't each
embrace a complete thing,
a finished jigsaw, when mouth on mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor
moody mind... ?

A systematic analysis of her poetic corpus brings to surface a host of unresolved questions - why physical love does not always lead to spiritual love, why physical love grows thin with the passage of time etc., to cite only a few. She holds that real love leads a person from a lower level of consciousness to a higher one:

... It was not to gather knowledge
of yet another man that I came to you, but to learn What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every lesson you gave was about yourself.

(The Old Playhouse)

Love for the Family

Kamala Das carries love over to a different plane in her poems which depict her sincere devotion to her grandmother. Her poem "Evening at the Old Nalapat House" is an endearing example. Her grandmother, though dead for many years, is a living presence:

... only my grandmother walks there
Then, though dead for eighteen years and wispy
As a shred of mist.

To her, her grandmother is the only symbol of genuine love
in this loveless world. This idea is expressed beautifully in another poem, "The Millionaires at Marine Drive":

Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death; I wonder why the ache still persists. Was she buried, bones and all, in the loose red soil of my heart? All through the sun-singing day, all through the moon-wailing night, I think of her, of the warmth that she took away...

Another area which can be explored is her attitude to other members of the family - her mother, brothers and father. As we have seen, Balamani Amma idealizes a housewife's obligation to the family, by projecting it as a pedestal to attain 'moksha'. Typically enough, Kamala Das removes with clinical precision remnants of cliche and stock sentimentality in her portrayals of her parents and siblings. Her father was a man not particularly given to showing his true feelings. He was a sort of tough go-getter, one for whom worldly success became almost a psychotic obsession. However, in the poem "A Requiem for My Father" she masterfully draws the picture of man in his death-bed, unable to don any more masks. Now the time has
come for the father and daughter to talk eye to eye, but it is too late... :

You loved life
You wanted to be on the new Press Committee
You wanted a seat in the Parliament...
Every word I spoke to you seemed to sink
Like a stone in a forest pool
I knew then that there was someone listening
But someone wasn't you
Someone within had risen from a sleep
When you fell into yours, father
And that someone rejoiced to hear me cry
I loved you, father, I loved you all my life....

The materialistic world-view of her father was unable to accommodate the emotional algebra of his daughter, nor her literary achievements. The plaints of an anguished daughter who was denied love echo in our ears when we read "My Father's Death":

You should have hugged me, father, just
Once, held me to your breast, you should
Have asked me who I was, in truth.
You gave my sons each a hundred
Rupee note, you purchased their brief
Devotion, my price was too high.
For you, your wallet could not hold
Abstract currency...

The same chord of unfulfilment and shaded resentment
is wafted out in another poem, "To My Big Brother (About
to be Married)"

What shall I give to you? The hum of dreams
trampled into childhood soil? ...

... The silence
of noonday ponds? What else?

This yearning for genuine affection within the home is
given expression in "Home is a Concept" :

...The unwanted carry heavy bags
and overcoats but the heaviest luggage
they tote is pain. If home is a concept
they shall not know it, if home is a group
prepared to love, the traveller has not known
that group and never shall...

When they speak of the need for a Centre
to promote Commonwealth Literature or of the
Nuclear Holocaust, they are merely 
crying out to you, love me...

Though the mother and the daughter lived in entirely 
different worlds, we cannot deny the fact that there was a 
truly emotional bond between them. She watched with 
silent pain as her mother got older and older:

Driving from my parents' home to Cochin last 
Friday morning, I saw my mother, beside me, 
doze, open mouthed, her face ashen like that 
of a corpse and realized with pain 
that she was as old as she looked...

(My mother at Sixty-Six)

As illustrated before, the poems of Kamala Das dealing 
with domestic relationships are tinged with disturbing 
realism while that of her mother are more subtle and 
indirect, which cast in an idealistic mould voice her 
forebodings as regards the waning founts of real love, 
care and affection.

(e) SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Balamani Amma was never blind to the social evils and 
injustice during her time, and she often sharply 
retaliated through her poetry. Her poems like
"kṣeetraviiṭiyil" (On the Temple Road) and "kalkkattayile iruṭṭara" (The Dark Dungeon in Calcutta) are two good examples in point. The first was written to celebrate the Guruwayur Temple Entry Proclamation. During ancient times, backward communities were prohibited to enter the temple, and several prominent leaders and social activists had to fight for years to effect a change in the situation. Displaying a commendable awareness of social and political issues during her time and full of appreciation for the revolutionaries, she ends this poem by saying that revolution becomes meaningful only when it can wipe away the tears of the downtrodden. In the second example, the poet bewails the plight of Calcutta city which has become a miserable place for the poor, even though it is a paradise for the rich. Extravagance on one side is disturbingly counterbalanced on the other by disease, poverty and ignorance. The poem however closes on a hopeful note, expressing the wish that some day this abominable chasm between the rich and the poor will be done away with.

The theme of class-struggle and the ultimate redemption of the oppressed has found proper expression via her mythological narratives and thematic characters.
Deliberations on the problem of 'means' have taken Balamani Amma to certain stories in the great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. She has composed several monologues in which famous characters are made speaking selves regarding the quest for truthful means. One such poem is the "The Story of the Axe" cited earlier. During the freedom struggle, she composed the poem "Deliverance", where a parrot is pictured as clamouring for freedom from its cage. The parrot is aware that no master would release the slave for mere asking. Here the poet upholds the means chosen by Mahatma Gandhi - non-violent struggle.

Annihilation of oppressors and exploiters is a universal and eternal problem and every Humanist has been more or less obsessed with it. Non-violent methods have not been too successful, but violence does not solve the problem. The Humanist's eternal dilemma is depicted through themes drawn from contemporary situations. She turned her eyes to epic literature, but modified it in such a way that contemporary significance and eternal dimensions are suggested simultaneously. In the poem "niveediyam" the problem is analysed in the light of the Naxalite movement, describing the last thoughts of the
victim of a Naxalite attack. He is remorseful and visualises his fate as a kind of nemesis. He thinks that he was chosen as the instrument to cure the mental cancer of others belonging to his class. Other narrative poems like "visvaamitran", "vaalmiiki", "sarasayya" etc. pose eternal philosophical problems.

It is interesting to see how Kamala Das works on the same themes i.e. that of discrimination, insensitivity, cruelty and violence via her poetry and fiction. As Parvati N. Pillai says, she exhibits a certain repetitive urge both in her poetry and fiction regarding this. For example, the themes of the Malayalam short stories "neypaayasam" and "koolaad " and that of the poem "The Death of a Goat" are identical. The homosexual relationship of her husband with a friend, which she mentions in 'My Story' is repeated in the poem "An Introduction" and also in the short story "candrarasimal. The English poem "Radha-Krishna" is part of the thoughts of the heroine in the story "caturangam". The image of the lovelorn woman as a raging sea in the poem "The Wild Bougainvillea" is found in the story "tarisunilam". The suicide of the maidservant mentioned in 'My Story' forms the theme of the poem "naani". Examples like these may
prompt some to insinuate weakness and limitation of range in her writings, but the actual experience seems to be that this repetitive urge lends her works an aura of added authenticity.

Social criticism in Kamala Das lies scattered all over her poetry, but a few poems explicitly deal with it. "The Fear of the Year" conveys to the reader the poet's awareness of the holocaust of war, and "The Flag" is a direct statement of the disillusionment of Indian Independence. In "Sepia" she seems to decry the scientific materialism that turns men into unimaginative, pleasure seeking, soulless individuals. "Spoiling the Name" as well as "The Snobs" hit out at social hypocrisy. "The House-Builders" brings out the simplicity of the poor, and their lack of political and social awareness. The house builders build homes for the alien rich without imbibing the social injustice implied in it. We cannot ignore the Shelleyan echo of social rebellion here. The Colombo poems again highlight the poet's aversion to violence and cruelty. The tragedy of children taught to hate their fellow beings is conveyed in a neutral, unemotional manner, more suiting the taste of the fact-
loving moderns:

No birdsong in the trees
Only the stomp of boots
Worn by the adolescent
Gunmen ordered to hate
Did the Tamils smell so
Different, what secret
Chemistry let them down?

("The Sea at Galle Face Green")

The 'smell' does it, it renders the Sri Lankan gunmen nothing less than animals. A new era for the killer Aryan blood has begun and Hitler has resurrected with greater power:

Hitler rose from the dead, he demanded
Yet another round of applause; he hated
The robust Aryan blood, the sinister
Brew that absolves a man of his sins and
Gives him the right to kill his former friends

("After July")

It is the mother in her that laments the cruelty done to children:
How did they
Track down the little ones
Who knew not their ethnic
Inferiority?

("The sea at Galle Face Green")

Her social consciousness is poignantly reflected in her short stories also, especially in "A Doll for the child Prostitute", "The Princess of Avanti", "That Woman" etc. In the first of these, she displays an uncanny ability to delve deep into the mind of the characters and see the world through their eyes so much so that the reader cannot but empathize with them, thus perceiving hitherto unknown aspects of the tragedy of prostitution. In the second and the third, the tone is slightly more detached, if not a bit clinical, but nevertheless powerful enough to shock the reader into new vistas of awareness.

However, it must be admitted that the poetry of Kamala Das which reflects her awareness of the larger world around her is not without faults of its own. The lack of a deep involvement in the fate of the large mass of humanity living around her creates an abstraction in the poet's search for meaning and makes her representation
of life seem a little superficial. For example, in "Visitors to the City" she can describe the "proud, heavy-turbaned men and the wives with tattooed cheeks" only from the outside and from a distance. The poet can declare quite unabashedly that

I don't know politics but I know the names of those in power, and can repeat them like Days of a week, or names of months...

In view of this dismissive attitude toward politics, it should not be surprising that when the poet discusses the general condition of our society in a poem like "The Flag" the intensity of feeling is not backed by an adequate understanding of the issues involved. She can register from the outside that there is something wrong somewhere, but she fails to penetrate beneath the surface and understand things from the inside. This kind of intellectual laziness cannot but produce an inferior kind of poetry whenever she deals with subjects like poverty, social injustice, violence etc.

The one point of difference we cannot help noticing with regard to mother and daughter is that while Balamani Amma prefers to linger on the plane of refined idealism,
Kamala Das thrusts the point further home by personalizing sensitive issues in her typical fashion, thereby etching both themes and characters deep into the minds of her readers. To sum up, we can say with conviction that by 'placing' the two authors and their works side by side, we can expose the actual emotional and poetic sensibility of each poet, thereby disposing of many conventional misunderstandings.
Notes


2 Prawer, 102-103.

3 We can contrast Balamani Amma's "kavanapiitattil" with Kamala Das's "Old Playhouse". Both of these have been analyzed in Ch-II.

4 Prawer, "Influence, Analogy and Tradition", 51.

5 Prawer, 52.


7 ibid.


11 N. Parvati Devi, op.cit. 136.

12 Devi, 151-152.