CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims at a study of the inscape of the poetry written by two prominent women writers of modern India. With the changing times and changing perspectives, women writers are gaining importance, and their works are moving from the fringe to the centre stage of social discourse. Consequently, there follows the evolution of new ideas and themes which results in new realisations. The feminine character, which is made up of certain instructive psychological traits as well as certain socially conditioned ones, reflects in their writing. Also, the myriad responses of a woman writer, to her social and psychological ambience are voiced through their work.

There has always been a feminine poetic voice in India. In the Vedic Age, in the Post Vedic or Epic Times, in the period of Muslim rule, and in the Modern period which begins with the establishment of British Power, women poets have been articulating their dreams and disappointments. As Dr. A.S. Altekar observes, "The position of woman
was fairly satisfactory in the Vedic Age"¹ and they were supposed to be eligible for the study of Vedas. They actively participated in the intellectual life of the period and a number of Rig Vedic hymns are ascribed to women like Vach, Ghosa, Apala and Vishwavara. Here is a stanza translated from Vishwavara:

"The fully kindled fire, bright against the firmament;
Facing the dawn shines far and wide
Vishwavara proceeds towards the east with obeisance,
Praising the gods, with oblation and ladle full of butter."²

In the Post Vedic or Epic Age, woman’s position in the society underwent some deterioration and she was denied freedom of will. Will Durant observes,

"Her (woman’s) high status in Vedic days was lost under priestly influence... The code of Manu set the tone against her.”³. But the evolution of Buddhism, which was a reaction against the orthodoxy of Hinduism, regarded woman with more consideration. It declared them eligible for entering the order of Nuns. Many of these Nuns, like Mahapalapati, Gotami, Ambapali were poets and some seventy three verses from ‘Therigatha’ were composed by them.
During the reign of Muslim rulers women began to lose more of their individuality and freedom. But it was during this period that the Bhakthi Movement became strong, and it paved the way for the flourishing of many women poets. Mirabai from Rajasthan, Madhabi from Bengal and Jaina Bai from Maharashtra were among the devotees of Krishna, and they wrote devotional verses. There were also women poets like Honnama of Karnataka, who protested against the social injustice towards women. She voices her disgust in 'The Value of a Woman',

"The mother who brought them forth (blind fools),
is she not a woman? Alas, why do shortsighted fools pour forth ridicule, crying, woman, woman"  

The introduction of British educational system in 1814 brought Indians in contact with western culture. Female education became widespread and it led to a great change in the outlook of women. The Gandhian Movement became another inspiration for women to participate in social activities. As a result of all these, more and more women were gradually attracted to the realm of poetry, as it offered them an opportunity to express themselves. Both in the regional
languages and in Indian-English there was a flood of women poets. Women poets like Saralabala Sarkar, Nirupama Devi and Radharani Devi wrote in Bengali, and Lakshmibai Tilak, Manoramabai Ranade and Padma Gole contributed to Marathi. In Hindi, there were great poets like Subhadramunari Chauhan and Mahadevi Varma, while in Gujarati the poetry of Jayaintidevi and Shanti Barphivala became highly esteemed. In Malayalam, there were renowned poets like Mary John Thottam, Bhagirathi Amma Thampuran, Kadathanattu Madhavi Amma and Balamani Amma followed by the most prominent modern Malayalam woman poet, Sugatha Kumari.

Indian poetry in English written by women poets marks the beginning of an awakening among the women of India. The influence of western education and thought inspired the Indian women poets to articulate their feelings in English, as it would free them from all inhibitions. In the second half of the 19th century the pioneers among women poets, Toru Dutt (1856-1887) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) made their appearance in the literary scene. They wrote poetry mainly under the influence of the British romantic tradition. Love, Nature and an aesthetic passion for beauty were their favourite themes. A few women like Nilima Devi, Susi. P. David and Sabita Devi wrote poetry, mostly romantic in nature, in the second quarter of the 20th century, but
none of them became remarkable. In the post-independence period, there came forward many a woman poet, encouraged by the Gandhian Movement. Also, the process of urbanisation and westernisation might have prompted them. Monika Varma, Mary Erulkar and Indira Devi Dhanrajgir belong to this group. Their themes included birth, life, love, death and a metaphysical concern for Eternity; they were acquainted with the capacity of modern science, and they had an all-pervading sympathy for all objects of Nature. They expressed their experiences effectively, but Sunanda P. Chavan observes that,

"The dedication to pre-supposed ideologies cripples their concern with reality."  

But the next generation of poets showed a sharp sense of reality about themselves and their surroundings. Among them Kamala Das, as K.R. Sreenivasa Iyengar remarks, is "one of the most aggressively individualistic." A quest for identity and love, in the fast changing world is a major theme in her poems. K.R.S. Iyengar says that, "Kamala Das is a new phenomena in Indo-Anglian poetry - a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu."

For the first time in Indian English poetry written by women poets, there was a serious sense of urgency and readiness to face
the challenges encountered by Indian women in their journey from tradition to modernity. Unlike her predecessors, Kamala Das has introduced a powerful personal voice in Indian English poetry. K.R. Ramachandran Nair observes that the poetry of Kamala Das 'is not merely Indian like that of Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu before her, but a passionate expression of the universal experience of love, despair, anguish and failure apprehended through a feminine sensibility'. He goes on to say that,

"the subject matter for women poets till then was often limited to the retelling of traditional legends and myths as in the case of Toru Dutt, or to the exploitation of romantic love and fantasy expressed in jingling rhythm as in the case of Sarojini Naidu."

Kamala Das shows great concern for the existential anguish of humanity, for woman's alienation in the male dominated society and for the helpless millions who are oppressed in the name of race, nationality and so on. The same concern for the predicaments of mankind, animals and even trees is voiced in the poetry of Sugatha Kumari also. For her, poetry is the expression of deep-rooted pains, and the most natural way to rebel against the injustices all around her. Atrocities towards women, cruelty towards animals, deforestation, child
molestation and deterioration of values in general are vehemently discussed in her poems. As in the case of Kamala Das, she too has departed from the traditional retelling of legends and harping on the theme of romantic love and fantasy, which was what most of the women poets before her, were doing.

Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari belong to the same socio-cultural milieu. Both of them hail from upper middle class Nair families, and both are of the same age. Both Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari share the family inheritance of patriotic leanings, literary inclinations and social activities. Kamala Das’s mother, Balamani Amma is a renowned Malayalam poet. Likewise, Sugatha Kumari’s father, Bodheswaran is also a well-known poet in Malayalam. In fact, Sugatha Kumari may be considered the spiritual daughter of Balamani Amma, since she was brought up on the poems of the latter, as is stated in the poem, "Poorva Thara" (Morning Star). Being poets, wives, mothers and daughters to poets, they may have similar sensibilities and cultural consciousness. Both of them are immensely popular and even those who are not bothered about literary events, are familiar with these two names. They can be regarded as the two polestars among the women poets of present generation India.
But, in spite of their same socio-cultural milieu, the poetry of Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari seem to be different in style, approach and tone. Sugatha Kumari writes in the traditional style of Malayalam poetry, following the footsteps of its great masters. Kamala Das is a bilingual writer, and she writes poetry mainly in English, and short stories in Malayalam. Sugatha Kumari’s poems are metrical, keeping in tune with the rules of prosody. There is no disregard for metre, nor is there any crossing the borders. She uses Malayalam and Sanskrit words harmoniously, and her poems are rhythmic, musical and melodious. Kamala Das does not observe the rules of versification and she does not bother about metre. She writes poems, in the way they come to her. For her, the language she uses in her poems “is useful to (me) as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions”¹⁰. She does not worry about making it polished, or metrical. It is enough that her language can voice her joys, longings and hopes. In an interview, she has said,

“I don’t attach any importance to the language I try to convey my message in. Language is not even necessary. How does the baby communicate with its mother?”¹¹.

Sugatha Kumari’s poetic style is simple and she does not leave anything incomplete or unsaid in her poetry. There is no ambiguity of
meaning, and everything is lucid and plain. Her poems are not intellectual acrobatics, but words of love and concern that have a soothing effect upon the tortured human soul. K.P. Sankaran comments,

"As a hope, as a shelter, the poetry of Sugatha Kumari becomes unparalleled. When we melt in her poems, new springs of feelings open up in our minds. Like rain, her poems shower on us.""12.

Kamala Das’s poetry has an intimate tone and ingenious rhythm. She does not obey the conventional style of versification, and sometimes subverts the stanza pattern and allows the lines to move on in accordance with the pattern of her thoughts. She often leaves dots at the end of sentences, giving an impression of incompleteness. When asked by Iqbal Kaur she has said,

"I don’t believe in writing from A to Z. I want to leave certain things unwritten. I want to let the reader participate and fill some spaces with his own thought."13.

Kamala Das makes use of the medium of free verse that allows her enough freedom to follow the flights of imagination. Anisur Rahman observes that her images are powerful. He says, that yet her images
“emerge from the cultural source of the topical Indian background and they also define her identity.”  

Das is fully aware of the immense potentialities of words. They grow on her “like leaves on a tree” and “they never / seem to stop their slow growing/from within”\textsuperscript{15a}. She regards them as “chasm where running feet must pause”\textsuperscript{15b}, “a sea with paralysing waves”, things that come “from a silence, somewhere deep within”\textsuperscript{15c}. It seems that the poet does not consciously work upon them to create any effect. The words that come to her from “somewhere deep within”\textsuperscript{15d} picture the poet’s moods and feelings. She knows how to use the medium, which is not her mother tongue, to mirror the inner world of her feelings. T.S. Eliot says that,

“The notion of appreciation of form without content, or of content ignoring form, is an illusion; if we ignore the content of a poem, we will fail to appreciate the form; if we ignore the form, we have not grasped the content - for the meaning of a poem exists in the words of the poem and in those words only.”\textsuperscript{16}.

Here, in the poetry of Kamala Das, the distinction between form and content disappears. Though she does not care about the morphology
or even the grammatical nuances of words, she recognises their vital power and emotive effects. Her diction is finely chiselled, and as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, "while giving the impression of writing in haste, she reveals a mastery of phrase and control over rhythm—the words are often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly, alive." 17.

Sugatha Kumari is basically a romantic, singing about an unseen presence in all the physical objects. S. Guptan Nair says,

"the expansion from microcosm into macrocosm and the contraction from macrocosm into microcosm happen constantly in the heart of the poet." 18.

Awareness of an invisible radiance that brightens human life is felt in her poems. Also her poetry embodies the quest for the archetypal experience of love. There is an unmistakable vein of melancholy in the poetry of Sugatha Kumari, and she believes that writing itself is an act of experiencing sorrow. In an interview by K. Sajeev Kumar she has said,

"For me, poetry is my life. It is the basis of my existence. I write poems when I experience great mental stress and strain. I cannot write poetry when I am happy." 19.
She wrote about unfulfilled hopes and unrecognised sorrows at the beginning of her poetic career, but later her poetry evolved into having a more realistic approach towards life. She, who believes in the basic goodness of man, is disillusioned to find him exploiting Nature, adulterating ideas and betraying his fellow-beings. Sugatha Kumari laments the selfishness of human beings, their incapacity for true love, the highhandedness of politics, man’s instinct for violence and his loss of inner freedom.

Radha-Krishna myth occupies a focal position in the poetic world of Sugatha Kumari. She regards Krishna as the embodiment of pure love who gives pain and pleasure alike to his devotees. For her, Radha is the ideally loved woman, the one who cannot have an existence apart from her Krishna. She thinks that every woman of this poor country is in reality a Radha at heart, for whom life is an eternal search for ideal love.

Dr. M. Leelavathy comments,

"It is because she can keep close to her soul, both the ancient Radha and the modern Jessey, thereby blending dream and reality and balancing them skilfully, that her poetry is able to contain the spirit of both Eternity and that of the age in which she lives."
Sugatha Kumari is concerned about social issues, and especially the problem of ill treatment of women bothers her. The question raised by women like 'Jessey', seems to haunt her and she believes that,

"women should defend themselves, protesting against all sorts of humiliations, and they should be strong enough to face life."\(^{21}\)

Kamala Das writes in an intimate tone, and her self is the poetic nucleus from which her poetry originates. In trying to build up an intimate tone, she gives unabashed expression of her personal experiences and conveys them as accepted truths. She is acclaimed as a confessional poet and as she claims, poetry is "stripteasing" for her. Rosenthal observes that confessional poetry is,

"an attempt to present the poet’s own naked self and unrationised, uncensored actual feelings and behaviour."\(^{22}\)

In Kamala Das's poetry, the naked self of the poet, engulfed by frustrations is portrayed. She does not bother about social propriety and decorum, while disclosing her inner world. By peeling off the layers of her self, she explores the true nature of love. In an unconventional manner she examines man-woman relationship and points out why there is always an element of despair, frustrations and protest, as far as the woman is concerned. Her poems and short stories alike reveal the basic
nature of man-woman love, sexual disgust and a thirst for true love. Satya Dev Joggi affirms that “she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman”23. Suresh Kohli expresses the same view when he says that,

“her vision is vitally particularised by woman’s point of view.”24.

In fact her poems voice the several pains and pressures the modern Indian woman has to encounter, while journeying from tradition to modernity. Her ideal man-woman relationship is based on love without lust, and she awakens in her readers an awareness of genuine love. She reminds women that satisfying man’s lust can not bring them any happiness and warns them not to be dwarfed by man’s ritual of sensuality. Her woman persona also is a Radha, driven by the need of an all-encompassing love, which alone can fulfill life. With an aggressive frankness, she speaks about the details of the physicality of love and extra marital relationships. She is in fact, searching for the fulfilling experience of love, which can be attained through sex, but beyond its undesirably constrictive dimensions.

It is clear that, though Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari differ from each other in their style, language approach and tone, the poetry of both these writers speak with the zeal of reformism. Whether they declare their commitment to improve the world or not, their poems bear evidence to such an intention. Both of them agree that writing
poetry is not deliberate, or intentional; but a spontaneous flow, a natural reaction to physical and psychological experiences; their humanitarian concern for fellow beings, for flora and fauna and for Mother Earth creeps in and thus creates a spirit of positive thinking. Both of them are aware of the essential nature of life as an encounter with pain in relation to all our experiences. Both of them are often disillusioned by the hard realities of life. But neither of them loses hope and becomes dejected negativists. When Kamala Das says that she writes mostly in her short stories in Malayalam about “the courage human beings can gather at times of crisis” and when Sugatha Kumari claims that she has “portrayed the unconquerable and strong spirit of man who keeps his head high in all crises and who is able to accept pains as God’s blessings, with great pleasure” we realise that both of them share the spirit of optimism. Despite the frustrations resulting from the chaotic conditions around, they are able to keep up the flame of hope-it is their hope about the future of mankind. Both are renowned as poets of love. And their love for the world and its inhabitants, along with the spirit of optimism reveal their altruistic craving to make the world a better place.

This study of the poetry of Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari is aimed at analysing how far they have maintained such a positive thinking and how does it help them in moulding their worldview. The study of the spirit of optimism, on the basis of the major foci in their
poetry, throws light on the way their poetry articulates hopes of a better world order.

The first chapter of the thesis reveals the reformist's zeal that pulsates in the poetry of these two writers. Their deep concern for the sufferings of all living beings is examined here. It also presents an analysis of the social themes ardently discussed in their poetry. The second chapter examines how the theme of love is treated in their poetry and how far it has helped them in developing a positive vision of life. It also traces the identification of true love with the Krishna myth and the fulfilment of life through the love of Krishna. The third chapter aims at a study of the spirit of rebellion in the poetry of Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari on the basis of feminist parameters. A brief account of the feminist perspectives, both in the West and in India is given here. The righteous anger they feel, as humanists, at the unjust treatment meted out to women, developing into a feminist spirit of revolt is analysed in this chapter. The fourth chapter is devoted to the study of the treatment of the theme of pain in their poetry. An analysis of how they accept sufferings in earthly life and also their vision of love in relation to the inevitability of pain is attempted here. The concluding chapter consists of a recapitulation of the thesis and the findings derived as a result of the study.
NOTES


7. ..., 680.

9. ..., 1.


15. 15 a, b, c, d Kamala Das, *Only The Soul*.


18. S. Guptan Nair, (Foreword) *Pathirappookal*.

19. (Interview) *Kumkumam 36, May.13. 8*

20. M. Leelavathy, (Foreword) *Ambalamony*.

21. *Kumkumam 36, 37 May. 13, 9*


