CHAPTER II

"TO MANIPULATE MINDS, TO WAKE UP THE LAND"

A creative writer endowed with an awareness of moral values and with a sense of his/her deeply ingrained culture may feel the need to convey his/her ideas about society and human nature through a literary medium that serves him/her best. It is an accepted fact that the primary function of any artist is to entertain and educate and to sensitise and conscientise. Every good work of art teaches humanity the immensity and variety of the natural world and the mystery and plurality of human nature. Even writers who enjoy portraying the immense and varied natural world through their works, find it necessary to write about human nature, its foibles and powers. Analysing the mysteries of human nature takes the writer away from the individual to the society and the study of the societal mind. As man is a social animal, his relationship with society is significant in all its dimensions. How man is supported or harmed by the society, or how, as a social being, his capacities are enhanced or limited by the society are questions of interest to any great creative writer.
Literature has always been regarded as a mirror held up to life and it is supposed to reflect the aspirations and failures of life's spatial and temporal milieu. Since time immemorial, writers the world over have considered the problem of man's place in the huge universe, the purpose of his existence and the question of his suffering. Handicapped by diseases, old age and death, and bound by the society, he is often not free to design his life, and the harm done to his personality is serious. Great works of literature have always tried to analyse and alleviate these personal and social injuries. Moreover, a creative writer is supposed to awaken the conscience of the society whenever it tends to fall into slumber.

The writers of ancient India, who were "rishis" or sages, considered it their responsibility to do good to others through their literary creations. They were not ivory-tower artists, but creative geniuses interested in the day-to-day life of human beings, with a sympathetic disposition. When Vyasa, the great sage, who is thought of as the author of the eighteen 'puranas' was asked what he had wanted to convey through his literary works, he replied,

"Paropakara Punniahaya
Papaya Para Peedanam"1

(Doing good to others is a great virtue, while doing harm to them is sin)
In ancient India, the poet was considered to be a 'rishi', that is somebody who has transcended the barriers of selfish interests and desires and is devoted to serve the whole world. It was incumbent upon him to rectify the errors that other people had made.

Western critical tradition also maintains that poetry has a well-defined purpose to serve. Apart from entertaining and amusing, it should enlighten and improve, according to the old masters. Plato condemned poets for telling lies and contaminating the minds of the youth. He wanted poetry to be as reasonable and as logical as philosophy and he could appreciate only those branches of knowledge that would enrich the masses. Aristotle, in defending poets and poetry, also insists on the social commitment of poets. He argues that poetry in general and tragedy in particular purify the mind through catharsis. He admired poetry, since it was serious and useful. The didactic function of poetry was important to critics like Philip Sidney also. Shelley, in his 'Defence of Poetry' argues that poetry is a great instrument of moral good. His contention is that sympathy, imagination and morality are mutually interactive. Though poetry does not teach directly, it is the expression of the ideal order as apprehended by the imagination.

Many great literary works deal with social problems, or questions that puzzle man as a social being. The Mahabharatha is the saga of
individual aspirations and disillusionments that disturb the society, accompanied by selfish motives striving to achieve power, and finally resulting in total ruin. T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is the story and graphic portrayal of the degeneration of life in the modern age. It pictures how the society has changed its moral stance and how deformed it has become.

Kamala Das's poetry mainly takes off from the springboard of individualism, articulating the female sensibility of modern India. She is well known as a poet expressing the anguish of a woman who confronts reality in a male dominated world; but, it is not the frustrations of women alone that find expression through her writings. She gives vent to the smouldering pain of the muted, the neglected and the oppressed. Though she is basically a romantic and the quest for love is her major preoccupation, she does not overlook the problem of human predicament in this fast-changing world. As Ayyappa Paniker has remarked,

"Das is not unmindful of public affairs even though her major concern is with personal experiences".

She believes that by generalising her personal experiences, and giving vent to the pain she has suffered, she is expressing what others
also might have experienced. The societal attitude towards the individual and his autonomy is often questioned in her poems. She, who considers honesty and candour as the greatest values, cannot admire a society that promotes hypocrisy. She condemns the pretences and deceptive appearances of people and craves for an honest approach to life. That is why she laments,

"I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman
Happy wife
I must keep the right distance
Between me and the low
And I must keep the right distance
Between me and the high"

Though much is said about social equality of all, still there exist barriers that separate the high and the low, and keeping up such differences is considered the proper way to behave. Kamala Das, who believes in the religion of love, finds such classifications undesirable. To her, nobody is higher or lower than anybody else. In her childhood,
she used to receive much love and fondling from the servants in her ‘tharavadu’. The stories they narrated had helped to develop the little girl’s imagination, and she could not alienate them as belonging to a lower status and keep a safe distance from them. She has to admit that, she does not fit in, as she fails to “be a quarreler with servants”.

Even as a little girl, Kamala Das discovered that the society had a double standard for the rich and the poor. Only the rich matters to the society; nobody is bothered about the poor. When Nani, a housemaid died an unnatural death, no one considered it as a memorable incident; but little Kamala could not forget her. Her questions regarding Nani were silenced by her grandmother’s pretended ignorance about the hapless woman. The poet is shocked by the way the wise, adult world deals with such uncomfortably true questions, and she realises that,

"With that question ended Nani. Each truth

Ends thus with a query. It is this designed

Deafness that turns morality into

Immorality, the definite into

The soft indefinite"."
In a painful vein, she comments that such people who are not disturbed by questions of right and wrong, or justice and injustice, enjoy a "clotted peace" embedded in life. Her sharp sensitivity cannot appreciate such a hard-hearted and dishonest societal stance; she does approve that kind of adamant nature, "unscratched by doubts".

Though the death of Nani drags her into bitter realities, death is not disdainful for her. She does not think of death as the end of every thing, or the opposite of life. It is only life's "obscure parallel" and she feels that "a little of each is in every gesture". It is only a question of change of place. Although she loves life ardently, she can speak about death without any fear. She is sure that the fences between life and death fade very easily and what remains at the end is "the handless clock face of eternity". This awareness of timelessness that enables her to look upon life and death with the same detachment is another point where she deviates from the general societal outlook. While most men are worried about the inevitability of death, and such a worry casts its shadow of gloom upon their outlooks, Kamala Das is unaffected by it. In maintaining such a concept of death, she is echoing the Hindu philosophical view of death as nothing to be shunned, but as a natural process. Of course, such a view gives the poet a positive attitude towards worldly life, as expressed in The Bhagavad Gita.
“Na jayate mriyate va kadach
Nayam Bhutwa Bhavita Va na buvyay
Ajo nitya saswatoyam purano
Na hanyate hanyamane jarive”

(He is not born, nor does he die; having been born, he does not remain unborn. He who is birthless, deathless, eternal and ancient does not die, when the body dies.)

The poet is always haunted by the fear of change, of the change from childhood to youth, and from youth to old age. The problems of old age seem to worry her very much. The helplessness of the old, their sense of being unwanted, the indifference of others towards them are all sympathetically discussed in her poems. Das believes that if death comforts, old age disturbs. The sight of aged cattle being driven to the slaughter-house, with the vermillion brand on their haunches, reminds her of human beings who are never branded with hot irons, but with diseases and rejection. Again, the poet is hurt by the sight of unwanted men and women who are never fortunate enough to experience the feeling of home; they have never known love and acceptance. They wait here and there, clutching at heavy briefcases. They speak of public affairs. But what they actually mean, through words and deeds alike,
is to convey their urge to love and be loved. Das’s keen sensitivity to recognize the lightest spark of the soul’s need for love, makes her a humanist writer who knows what others want most. Her social poems, thus, deal with questions of inner deprivations and disharmonies as well as public issues. She thinks that these inner deprivations are not in anyway less important than their external counterparts; also she seems to think that they can all be solved with the help of a little bit of love and understanding.

In “The Fatalists On Stone Benches”, she pictures the penniless, homeless destitutes idly sitting on stone benches on a railway platform. It is a kind of death-in-life for them; their eyes are dead as the eyes of convicts – even though they are not convicts, though they are free, freedom does not mean anything to them. Through the cold tombstones of their eyes, they stare at the rich, at the indifferent world. The depth of destitution and utter poverty, as is presented in the poem, is unforgettable.9

Poverty disfigures not life alone, but death also. The death of a poor man goes unnoticed, not touching the world of the rich that surrounds it. With all our talk about the high ideals of socialism, equality of all men is still an unrealised dream. Even in death, the poor fail to
draw the attention of the rich. The parallel existence of the two contradictory worlds of the rich and the poor is sharply portrayed in the poem, "The Joss-Sticks At Cadell Road". While the dead body of some poor fellow is fed to the fire, the rich do not pay any attention to it; neither the existence, nor the passing away of the poor seems to be of any importance to them. They go out to have some beer to cool themselves, or to get relaxed through sex. The dead man's relatives wail 'flatly and monotonously', as if they were performing some ritual, without any touch of emotions. The poet suggests that their wailing was,

"As only the poor
And the absolutely
Hopeless know how to wail" \(^{10}\)

The portrayal of the sad reality of a poor man's death, accompanied by the sadder pangs of hopelessness that injure his kith and kin, and contrasted by the apathetic attitude of the rich, summarises the poet's agony about social inequalities.

On the other hand, things are not easy for the rich also. There is a time, when they also feel neglected and life becomes intolerable. In old
age, they are thrown into the hands of caretakers, while their wealthy children roam somewhere else. The poet remembers,

"..............................and parents
Of the rich who sit with
Their keepers on benches
Beside the seawall, with
Cataract on their minds”

Das’s self-appointed task as a social critic and reformer makes her raise her voice against hypocrisy and pretensions. In the poem titled ‘Honour”, for example, she says that honour is “the dearest word of all in the Nayar dictionary”. She elaborates it in the following lines,

"....................Honour was a plant my ancestors watered
In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres
At night their serfs
Let them take to bed their little nieces..................”

She goes on to relate how these unfortunate peasant girls were later thrown into wells and ponds from which they rose “like lotuses and waterlilies, each with/A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge below her navel”.
As a revolutionary with her radical humanism and progressivism, she cannot appreciate this kind of hypocrisy. To her, being true to one's nature and having sympathetic concern for fellow beings is nobler than keeping up family's honour. In "Of Calcutta" she writes mockingly of the idea of honour, as was cherished by the elder members of her family.

"I was sent away, to protect a family's Honour, to save a few cowards, to defer some Abstractions, sent to another city to be A relative's wife"  

Kamala Das, who considers cowardice and hypocrisy to be vices, cannot spare those who do anything for honour's sake. She is thoroughly positive in her attitude in that she dares to face all life's challenges unflinchingly. Irrespective of the unpleasantness her observations and comments may provoke, she is bold to utter what she feels. She exposes the hollowness of the 'honour' of her ancestors and through that, the dubious nature of the honour of the menfolk in general in the established society. She can speak with equal ease about her own drawbacks, and is quite frank in referring to her illicit affairs,
"After that love became a swivel-door,
When one went out, another came in
Then I lost count, for always in my arms
Was a substitute for a substitute"14

Kamala Das considers it inevitable to identify herself with her fellowbeings and write poetry from their perspective. Answering a question regarding the truthfulness of the incidents narrated in My Story, she said.

"Whether something happened to me or to another woman is immaterial. What really matters is the experience, the incident. It may have happened to another woman who is probably too timid to write about it. I wanted to chronicle the times we lived in and I had to write about the experience"15.

She, who feels that it is her responsibility to write about the trials and tribulations of people around her, thought that an awareness would place all people on equal footing. She felt that a radical change was imperative in the society "which had such strong inhibitions and which validated lies in public"16. In an interview, the poet has expressed her gratification that in alleviating the mental and physical sufferings of
women in Kerala in their every day life, she, too, has played her part through her writings and speeches\textsuperscript{17}. She is confident that in spite of all the insensitive treatment meted out to women, positive changes are possible in their lives.

The cruelty and futility of feuds and battles are condemned in some of her poems. Kamala Das stayed in Colombo for about two years with her husband, and it was then that the anti-Tamil riots broke out. She was shocked to see the fate of the once-splendid city converted into a half-burnt corpse. The joyous tremor of leaves and bird songs are replaced by the stamping of boots. Fear and hatred filled the air. The Tamils were relentlessly tracked and butchered; even the innocent children, singing the Sinhalese National Anthem at the school assembly, were not spared. The illogical ethnic hatred that transforms a civilized society into a battlefield is satirized here. The poem ends with the lines,

" ............ The sea did its
Duty as usual at
The Galle Face Green, without
A sign of fear, without
A sign of shock or pain
It patrolled the empty shore", \textsuperscript{18}
expressing the emptiness of man’s hatred for his fellowbeings. In “Smoke In Colombo”, the smoke that lingers in the streets “as milk lingers on/in udders after the calves are buried” is portrayed. Indians were stopped by gunmen and questioned; but they were too fatigued by the butchery going on all around them, to feel fear or to resist “the abrupt moves of an imbecile will”. Death is all around and bloodshed has become the rule of the day. Man who should live in peace upon this planet is forced to lose his love for life. 19

In “After July”, the unsavoury plight of the Tamils, none of whom was seen on the streets of Colombo is presented. The Tamils are holed up in fear, hiding behind the doors, in darkness, like rats. Hitler is reborn in Sri Lanka, among the Sinhalese, demanding another ethnic cleansing. Once again, the superiority of the Aryan blood is proclaimed at the cost of the lives of the dark Dravidians.

“A Certain Defect In the Blood” is another poem dealing with the terror of ethnic wars. It was written during the censorship period and Indians were frightened to speak and only children asked questions. The poet satirically comments that it was a defect in their blood “that made us the land’s inferiors”, a certain muddiness in the usual red, “Revealing our non-Aryan descent”.20. Her concern for the race becomes
explicit when she expresses the hope that perhaps in a kinder country their stigma might stay unrecognised and the children might feel free to play again under the benign skies of summer months.

Kamala Das’s observation of the uneasiness she has experienced in Sri Lanka is like this: “I was in Lanka for two years and came back in June, feeling like Cinderella at 1 a.m.” She voices her protest against terrorism and the cult of violence, both through this observation and through her Sri Lankan poems. Das’s concern for the well being of mankind is manifest in “Delhi-1984” where she laments over “the dry-eyed adherents of the newest cult who practise violence as their religion.” In “If Death Is Your Wish” also this “brand new cult of killing” is attacked. She calls the practitioners of violence “the curse of this decade”. They are bent on cleaving this earth into two; or with a lap they may “shatter/like an unblest babe and its cradle / this accursed decade and what it holds.” Das’s earnest concern for the future of humanity is obvious in these lines.

These poems which portray the fear and anxiety of the Tamils in Sri Lanka during the riots, show Kamala Das as a champion of the oppressed and as a bitter critic of dictatorship. She condemns the politics of hatred through many a picture like “the human ear deafened by
scream”, “fear gleaming like a swift knife”, “the silenced streets and 
“smoke-stained sky”. With the zeal of a pacifist, she refutes all wars 
which issue from man’s ignorance and selfishness. But, it is noteworthy 
that nowhere in these poems, Kamala Das loses faith in mankind, nor 
does she express hatred for the culprits. She seems to agree with Gandhi, 
in his concept of condemning the sin, and not the sinner. She might be 
hopeful that such feuds and battles are only temporary, and ultimately 
there will be peace on earth. Though suspicion, hatred and death reign 
noisily, faith grows but in silence”. In spite of the fact that we are 
living upon an earth “built layers and layers of bone”, life will go on. 
In “Requiem For A Son”, 
She expresses her spirit of hope in “Requiem For A Son”, 

“...to walk the corridors of this prison and note with 
A quiet joy the saplings bursting from the cracks in stone and 
Know for certain that life will go on”.

“The Flag” gives vent to the poet’s disillusionment with 
nationalism and the erosion of values which were once held high. The 
National Flag which used to declare the pride, dignity and unity of the 
nation, has lost its glory in the changed atmosphere of communal riots, 
corruption, greed, poverty and cultural pollution. The poet observes 
that now the flag has nothing to be proud of. The age-old civilization is
shattered and the Indian soil is blood-drenched. Yet, the rich celebrate life, dancing in nightclubs; the bejewelled city gleams. Neon lights wink and prostitutes frequent the streets, on the pavement of which poor old men lie, coughing out their lungs. The Tricolour that rises up in the midst of sombre scenes like these is ironical; now its colour gives only false promises, its dignified dance in the sky is meaningless. The poet demands the flag to come down, fall to the soil and hide its shame.

The silent, yet strong patriotic spirit of the poet thwarted by the undesirable socio-political changes in post-independence India finds expression here. Kamala Das dreams of a nation, where human relationships are more serious, life is more honest and straightforward, and the difference between the haves and the have not is less pronounced.

Kamala Das admits that she does not know politics, and it is not a theme for her poetry. But the disillusionment of a sensitive writer, who cherishes hopes of a better tomorrow, renders this poem a sharp political tone. By enumerating the evils that creep under the flag, she is aiming at correcting them and recovering the lost glory of the National Flag. The poet believes that we should try our level best to create a better world order, a brighter tomorrow. The present with its darkness troubles the poet; but still she is able to cherish dreams of a bright future.
Towards religion also, she has maintained a similar attitude. In “The First Meeting” she writes,

“\[\text{I never knew any}\
\text{Politics, wielded no religion or}\
\text{Caste to empower my claims; yes, never}\
\text{Feared calumny, poverty, pain or death}\]^{27}

The callousness of political and religious leaders in using religion, or caste or any other difference between people, as weapons to win their goals is hinted at here. In “The Inheritance”, the bitterness caused by religious fanaticism is attacked. The Muezzin’s high wail from the mosque, the chapel-bells announcing the angelus, and the Brahmin’s assonant chant from the temple – all give one message to the followers – the message of hatred. To slay the unbelievers is the only lesson they learn from their leaders. Time and again, each religion is purified in the unbeliever’s blood and the city is sanctified by communal killings. Kamala Das, who is a sworn disciple of the religion of love and harmony between people, irrespective of caste or creed, cannot help criticising religious hatred and intolerance nurtured by institutionalised piety and devotion. To her, the noblest religion is that of love, and anything that teaches man to hate each other, is sacrilegious. Today, when communal
hatred and dastardly massacres have become day-to-day incidents, the relevance of Das’s voice of warning is more important than it has ever been.

It is not a nihilist’s denial of all existing political or religious institutions that we find here. On the other hand, it is only a humanist’s deep concern for mankind, in an age disturbed by politics of hatred and violence. Her longing to see religious institutions encouraging people to develop mutual understanding and sympathy is effectively expressed in this poem.

Kamala Das has a clear idea about her readers; while speaking about the “dreams” of this “sad mouthed human race”, muted and insignificant, she cannot help expressing her frustration. She realises that her fellow beings are deficient in imagination to such an extent that their dreams do not scale the heights “to reach with finger tips/a fringe of summer clouds” nor can they explore the depths of the sea “to count the mermaid’s eggs/that lie beneath the anemones”. They are capable of dreaming only about “limbs and limousines”. Things beyond their vision or hearing are beyond their understanding. “The newspaper — hate, the bulge in wallets” the “morning-tea” and “the weekend’s tired lust” constitute their religion. She appoints herself as the
spokesperson of such a humanity, taking up the responsibility of awakening them to a higher sensibility.

She is able to include (all that comes her way) into her poetry and feel one with all and sundry. The bald child in the open pram, the slim lovers behind the tree, the old who sit on the park bench basking in the evening sun, the cavorting cabaret girls, the resounding wedding drums, the eunuchs who "swirl coloured/skirts and sing sad songs of love," the wounded who moan and the dying mother who yearn for a look at her child—all are assimilated into her poetry. It is with all-consuming passion of a forest fire that the poet's consciousness embraces all these people and events. She is very keen to recognize the sense of loneliness, pain, and the yearning for love, and voices them through her poems, to make the busy world stop for a while and listen.

Das has the wonderful quality of identifying herself with the different situations in life from their perspectives. She has put her "private voice away" as she declares in "Loud Posters" and is speaking on behalf of the inarticulate multitudes.
"I am a million, million people
talking all at once, with voices
raised in clamour, like maids
at village wells.

I am a million, million silences
strung like crystal beads
on to someone else's
song ..............."30.

By putting her private voice away, she is demolishing her self
gradually and is then reconstructing as to include everybody "who calls
himself I". She is voicing the hopes and agonies of both the sinner and
the saint; her aches and joys are exactly those of the multitudes. She
shares the same name, the same fate, the same crumbled dreams of
everybody. She is the "kith and kin" of everybody who has sorrows
and that she has gathered the laments of others into a song, hoping
she would be able to alleviate their pain. She is writing poetry with a
positive aim, that is of improving the life of humanity. In an interview
she has remarked that,

"A writer can either be evil and plot the manipulation of young
minds or the writer can be not so evil but conscious of his or her power
to manipulate and use it. Perhaps I’m doing that now. I’m trying to manipulate the minds of people.”

The poetic world of Kamala Das is fraught with melancholic experiences; disappointment in love, cultural and moral degeneration, loss of identity and deprivation of will, insensitive and inconsiderate treatment meted out to women, isolation in old age and the shameless hypocrisy of the society are all portrayed. But, it is with clinical detachment that she is presenting such scenes from real life. Besides, she does not feel crest-fallen thinking that things are moving from bad to worse. In an impersonal manner, she is voicing her fears and anxieties, but these fears or anxieties cannot darken her vision. On one hand, she seems to accept the transitoriness of both pleasures and pain, or affluence and destitution. She realises that youth and old age alike are transient, or fulfilment and disappointment in love is equally momentary, discovering the melancholic nature of earthly life. If she is asked to sum up life, it would be defined as “love transformed into mere pain”, and this emptiness that hangs from brackets of withered arms” or “the oyster’s ache / for the pearl it has lost”. Such an understanding of the essential nature of life is not the outcome of a tragic or pessimistic vision, but it is a visionary’s realization of the ultimate truth. In a way, she is echoing the words of Adi Sankara as is expressed like this, “Lokam
Sokahatham Cha Samastham" (The world and its inhabitants are all ruined by sorrow).

Das is quite positive about life and when asked, in a personal interview what are the themes of her present writings in Malayalam, her answer was, "the courage human beings can gather at times of crisis". Certainly, a person who admires the presence of mind and courage of others in crises, can never be a pessimist. Again, when she was asked, in the same interview, why she tries to escape from life, she replies. "I don't think I am trying to escape anything. It may be that I want to bring variety into my life, to be ten different 'avatars' in one life. Be this, be that, change, blossom, like a flower and each petal different from the other".

Such an enthusiasm for life, such a desire to add spice to life with variety, is the outcome of an optimistic turn of mind. The readiness to celebrate life, inspite of an awareness of all its darker aspects, makes that optimism even brighter.

People who feel seriously that they are close to God can never be pessimistic. Their faith in the nearness of God is enough proof
of their faith in life, and in the future of humanity. Das asserts, "But now I’ve come away from religion and the more I move away from religion, the closer I come to God, my concept of God."38

Thus, the portrayal of suffering and other social evils in Das’s poems emanates from a reformist’s zeal and not from a pessimist’s frustration.

Sugatha Kumari is a writer with a deep sense of social commitment and in many of her poems social issues are fervently discussed. She began her poetic career as a Romantic, writing about the sweetness of love, painful longing of lovers, the beauty of Nature and legends. But in her later poems, the problem of injustice and suffering, mostly caused by man’s careless and inconsiderate attitudes, becomes the focus. Sugatha Kumari presents a wide range of social issues, beginning with deforestation and spreading up to male atrocities against women, and child molestation. Whatever the topic is, she discusses it with the zeal of a reformist, aiming at raising the conscience of the reading public. Her dedication to improve the moral and humanitarian outlook of the individual as well as the society is so great that she is well known as a social activist. K.P. Sankaran observes that she has merged social issues into her poetry, aiming to create a new
sensibility that suits the age. He goes on to add that the story of her social commitment is so well known that she is nicknamed as the "poet of trees". Even such a nickname becomes a compliment, as no other poet of Kerala has waged such fierce battles to defend Nature. With the same fervour, she attacks atrocities towards women, neglect of the mentally retarded, and political or communal killing. Her poems, intended to sensitise and conscientise the society, leave no stone unturned. M.T. Vasudevan Nair writes in his Foreword to Devadasi,

"Without weeping, wavering, she asks sharp questions raised against Nature, society or God, in certain moments of realization. When she ceases to be a physical presence and becomes a few sharp queries, I feel my soul filled with a deep and quiet exploration of truth."\textsuperscript{40}

It is such acute questions which disclose the innate cruelty of the so-called civilized society, that throw light on the depth of social commitment Sugatha Kumari keeps up.

Sugatha Kumari believes that Nature and Man are inseparably related to each other and that man cannot isolate himself from his surroundings. His well-being and happiness depend on the well-being
of Nature. In maintaining such an opinion, she is in perfect tune with the Hindu vision of the unity of all forms of life and the concept of the world and its inhabitants as belonging to a single family, as is expressed in the saying, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam".

The poem "Silent Valley" is a recapitulation of her heroic struggle to protect the ever-green forests of Silent Valley in Wayanad district, from deforestation that would accompany the implementation of the proposed hydro-electric project. Once again, the poet visits Silent Valley and feels the presence of benevolent primitive Nature in the deep, virgin forests. She remembers the uncompromising fights they had with the government, the humiliation they had experienced and the unexpected retaliations which disappointed them, during those days. She tells her companion,

"Let us wait for a while, my friend
Who walked with me, and let us remember
The painful moments, the pleasure of our
Hard struggle, let us preserve the long years
Of struggle in our tears; let, us, who gave
Tongues to the forest sing aloud, to wake up the land!"41
She declares her purpose in "singing aloud" as to wake up the land, or the society or humanity as a whole. Far from being an ivory tower dreamer, she intends to "give tongues" to all those who are oppressed and dumb, and thus her poems become expressions of deep buried anguish in the hearts of the muted. K.P. Sankaran comments, that "Poetry is the expression of intense pain for Sugatha Kumari", and this pain which transforms itself into poetry, emanates from the painful experiences of all those who suffer. In "Ningalen Lokath Eentu Cheythu?" (What Did You Do To My World?) the sorrowful wail of a dying forest is portrayed. Man's endless greed is fast destroying the blessings of Nature, when he cuts down trees, kills wild animals, adulterates the soil, air and water and thus brings about total annihilation. The poet is fearful about the day when Nature will decide to retaliate for all the ills man has done.

Through many of her poems, Sugatha Kumari has expressed her sharp disagreement to the merciless treatment of animals. She draws our attention to the growing problem of torturing of elephants all over Kerala. Excessive hard work, lack of rest, and want of proper care result in the untimely death of the pachyderms. The poem "Aana" (Elephant) commemorates the numerous elephants that have been tortured to death recently. The poem presents a few piteous scenes in which the land's
biggest animal is confronted by deathlike life, which kills it gradually. The poem compels the reader to have an introspection and see in what way man is better than beasts.

She voices her deep-felt angst at the way women are treated. Though not a feminist in the accepted sense of the term, she strongly feels that the patriarchal tendency to denigrate woman as an object or a possession of man should be resisted. As a humanist, she feels that woman’s identity should be recognized and she must be treated with love and compassion. In “Jessey”, the hypocritical societal norms that push women into the flesh trade and then exiling them as outcasts are presented. It is the story of an innocent girl, born in a poverty-stricken family, suffering all through her life, with nobody to support her. All her hopes and anxieties fall down dead and finally she becomes indifferent to her fate. Sugatha Kumari sympathasizes with the hapless woman, and in a painful voice she says:

“I feel like shouting, oh, don’t go
You need some rest, my dear
Come and sit down in the shade
And have a little nap”43
The plight of the poor becomes the theme of many other poems also. She does not simply make passing observations, but painfully participates in their hardships. In “Sare Jaham Se Achha”, the cruelty of poverty that drives woman to the flesh trade, strangling her self-respect is pictured. The poet who happens to see an adolescent girl, lingering in the dark, in one of the slums near the metropolitan city of Madras, feels broken-hearted at the misery of the hapless girl and her likes; she imagines that if the girl had been born into a well-to-do family, she too would have been attending school, learning, playing and singing patriotic songs that praise the glory of this nation. Here we are reminded of Kamala Das’s sympathetic portrayal of Tamil children in Sri Lanka, singing Sinhalese National songs at their school assembly, being slaughtered. The idea that woman should always lead a protected life, is an integral part of traditional Indian thought; even that condition is constantly violated now-a-days, and she is forced to sell her body to earn her daily bread. The poet is disillusioned to recognise the degradation of ‘dharma’ and all moral values and principles. The poem, “Dharmam Enna Pashu” (The Cow Named Dharma) written in 1974, is an analysis of the twenty-seven years of Indian independence and democracy. There was a time, when India or ‘Bharat’ was the paramount model of moral and humanitarian values. The age-old wisdom of the Upanishads extolled the virtues of self-sacrifice and suffering for the
sake of others. The creed of self-sacrifice and willing abjuration of personal comforts has influenced many a youth to undertake hazardous missions to subvert the British rule and win freedom. But recently, this tradition of selfless service is lost and the people of India have become greedy and unscrupulous; their only aim is to make material gains for them and they find it inconvenient when questions of righteousness are raised. That is why they are overjoyed when 'dharma' or virtue breathes its last. They are presented as saying,

"Today is a good day
Our independence day, and
Let us do the last rites
Of virtue, with great joy"**44

Again in "Dharmathinte Niram Karuppanu" (The Colour of Dharma is Black) the same theme of moral decadence is dealt with. It is the occasion of the hundredth birth anniversary of Gandhi and the poet recollects how the Gandhian spirit of selfless service was defeated by power-politics, corruption in public life and consumerism. We celebrate 'Gandhijayanthi' ceremoniously, but the spirit of Gandhian vision is everywhere neglected. Our hypocrisy is summarised thus,
"With palms held together in devotion
A revolver hidden in our pockets
And a pious smile between our lips
We stand watchful at your tomb"45

"Ningalee Indiaye Ippozhum Snehikkunuvo?" (Do You Love This India Still?) is a poem expressing her deep-concern for the rich, yet poverty-stricken motherland. The change from the concept of "simple living and lofty thoughts" to posh living and petty thoughts has defiled the soul of the nation. Now, moral, social and economic degeneration reign here; its once-splendid culture is gradually decaying. She observes that,

"No prayers are chanted now,
No hushed murmurs of benign spirits,
What we hear now is modern music,
Laughters loud, drunken revelry
Merry-making, and the sound of counting money"46

Still, the poet cannot help loving this nation of selfish, avaricious, and merciless people.
In “Kollendathegane?” (How to Kill) the helplessness of a mother is heartrendingly portrayed. She is in her old age, and thinks that her days are numbered. What worries her most at this juncture, is the future of her mentally-retarded daughter. There is no one to take care of her other than herself. She feels that it is better to kill her daughter and commit suicide rather than leaving her alone in this inhuman world. As M.T. Vasudevan Nair observes, this question which is asked, may be to herself, or to us, or to God Almighty perplexes us.

“How to kill? Staring at the
Smiling face, your mother is perplexed...”

In the poem “Ammayundu” (There Is My Mother) the plight of a few mentally deranged people is presented. They have long been under treatment in an asylum and now they are all about to be discharged; nobody has ever come asking for them, nor do these unfortunate fellows have anywhere to go. But each and every one of them believes that his or her mother is waiting for the return of her child. The sense of rejection and isolation which gnaws these outcasts is portrayed in this poem. Our society in its big leaps towards progress and prosperity has neither space nor time for these ‘useless’ ones. The land of king Sibi who was ready to sacrifice himself to save a dove does not care for
human beings; it is this derangement of values which is painfully discussed here.

Sugatha Kumari's concern for the welfare of the society embraces all social issues. She is anxious not only about the so-called civilized society, but about those who dwell in its periphery also. In "Aadivasi Saksharatha" (Tribal Literacy), the true face of both governmental and non-governmental endeavours to uplift the tribals is revealed. Under the guise of the literacy mission, the tribals are exploited; their land is taken over, their women are dishonoured and their culture is ruined. Greed and callousness have replaced compassion and feeling for others, which were the guiding principles for our forefathers. Their prayer was "Lokasamastha Sukhino Bhavantu" (May the whole world be comfortable and happy). Here again, Sugatha Kumari expresses her strong disapproval at our indifferent way of dealing with the problems of others.

Despite these sombre pictures, her poetic vision is not pessimistic. Even while accepting sorrow as the essence of worldly existence, she is not a negativist. She believes that hardships will be followed by pleasures, and the darkness of despair will be replaced by the radiance of hope, sharing the Hindu philosophy of the transience of all experiences.
"This night will fade away
And a new dawn will smile at us
Following winter's snow storm
Won't there be a sweet spring?" \(^{48}\)

This is what Sugatha Kumari expects, echoing the words of Shelley who asks,

"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? \(^{49}\)."

The poem "We Are In The Queue" was written on the occasion of the twenty sixth Independence Day celebrations, and here also we find the poet stunned by the bitter reality of moral and ethical deterioration, which strangle the nation. The poet broods on the martyrdom of great heroes who had dedicated their lives for their motherland; she regrets the torture of the nameless millions by the British, during the freedom struggle. All such hardships, self-sacrifice and martyrdom seem to be in vain, as the new generations sacrilegiously abuse the fruit of their ancestor's struggles; they avariciously support all inhumane and unscrupulous methods of hoarding riches, heedless of the well-being of the nation. In disappointment, the snows of the Great Himalayas melt and the sacred waters of the Ganges are troubled; everywhere there is corruption, contamination and destitution. She articulates a few unanswered questions like,
"Is it for this, that millions of lives
Were shed before you, like little red flowers?"^{50}

But even in the midst of such poignant situations, Sugatha Kumari does not lose hope. She seems to think that still there is the possibility of a resurrection of moral values. She says,

"With eyes that dream of
A new green, bright age
That will rise up from the ashes
We are lining up before you ........."^{51}

The same spirit of optimism is maintained in the gloomiest of situations and she is hopeful of the blooming of a new dawn which will revive life. Prof. K. Ramachandran Nair observes,

"A deep sense of depression, the cup of bitter drink – it is not to be found in the poetry of Sugatha Kumari. Devaki shut behind the prison bars, knows for sure that one day, her son will come, to save her. In the poem "Penkunju-90" (Female Infant-90) the poet dreams that when the helpless female child grows up, she will give birth to strong and daring children, and then she will raise life as a splendid flag, and then Mother Earth will feel comforted, leaning on her shoulders."^{52}
Her positive thinking may be supported by the Vedantic concept of earthly life and all the various phenomena related to it as having a cyclic nature. The dualities of pleasure and pain, of cold and heat, of rain and drought, of day and night, of deprivation and prosperity, of life and death, are viewed by the wise as temporary; they do not consider any one of them as more or less important or permanent than the others. As The Bhagavad Gita says,

"Sukhadukhe same kritva
Labhalabhau jayajayau"^3

(Pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and failure all these should be viewed as the same).

Strongly rooted in the Vedantic vision of life, Sugatha Kumari might be finding all experiences as transient. She seems to believe that today’s injuries will be healed tomorrow; today’s losses may be tomorrow’s gains. The battle of life goes on, and those who fight for ‘dharma’ will never be affected by sin. Hers is not a shallow optimism, but the sagacity of a visionary who has seen through the secrets of worldly existence.
As a very sensitive writer who is conscious of the chaotic conditions around her, Sugatha Kumari is anxious about the future of mankind. But her anxiety is alleviated by the faith that a single ray of light is enough to do away with darkness. In “Ambalamoni” (Temple Bell) the silence, neglect and desolation of years are transformed into cheerful celebration and excitement, in a split-second. The broken bell which has long lost its voice, regains that faculty; the impossible becomes possible, and the unexpected happens. Darkness gives way to light, and gloom is replaced by hope. She addresses the bell as the one who penetrates the heart of emptiness with its sweet voice. It is in the most unfavourable situation that the bell is giving vent to its spirit of hope. She observes,

“Nobody is around, and
No one wants to hear
But it bravely sings aloud
In the long night and loneliness”\(^{54}\)

That is what she is also doing by articulating her unflinching faith in the ultimate triumph of human goodness, when she has nothing to hope for. The night of corruption, moral degeneration and disillusionment is about to close upon her. Sometimes she feels utterly
helpless and pitiably isolated; but noting dissuades her from raising her voice to protest against evils, and she sings aloud bravely to wake up the sleeping conscience of mankind. She is sure that one day the spirit of soulful living will be awakened, as it happens in the derelict temple precincts. That is why she says that,

"As this bell sings alone
The spirit of real life wakes up .......

In "Kanikkonna" (Golden Cassia) she feels one with the 'Kanikkonna' tree in that it retains a bunch of pretty flowers, in the midst of ravaging hands, damaging wind, scorching sun and drought-stricken earth. She confesses that,

"In the lone corner of
My scorched mind
I too keep up a little love
With petals sweet and bright"

In the foreword to Krishnakavithakal (Poems About Krishna) Vishnunarayan Nampoothiri observes that in the poems of that volume, "We can find Krishna as the promise of redemption." When such a
promise brightens her path, she cannot lose her way. Thus, the ‘bright petals of a little love’ reflect her faith in Krishna as the redeemer, her faith in human goodness and finally her faith in the therapeutic power of love. Moreover, her awareness of the ultimate nature of worldly life prevents her from being overcome by despair. Moral, ethical and social problems affect her, but they don’t shatter her faith in man, life and God.
NOTES


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