Chapter 5

The Review

The stories and poems of Kamala Das are more often than not read as an unambiguous frontal attack against the patriarchal values that have ruled our society for a very long time. As members of a society that still prefers traditional strategies of reading that place utmost premium on the symbiotic and one-to-one correspondence relation between the writer and the written, we have decoded works including the autobiography My Story as the textual manifestation of the disturbed and distracted female psycheher. However there are critical observations which tend to see My Story as a class in itself, inspired by illustrious precedents. For Subhash Chandra:

Kamala Das in her book eminently succeeds in discovering her true self-hood and she insists on being herself even in the midst of all kinds of pressures, mounted on her by the entrenched patriarchal values. She discards the emasculating and constricting conventional taboos which she thinks militate against herself. . . . But she does not foreground her femininity, in this book, as a gesture of defiance as the feminists strin-
gently insist on doing. Her aim is to attain a wholeness in her personality, to achieve what Woolf, and before her Coleridge, called harmony between the male and female elements to her mind (142).

Even while waxing eloquent about the artistic value of the poems and stories that transcend time and place, the elementary logical centre of reading has been the invisible female perspective embedded into the work and the equivalent sympathetic one predisposed by the social milieu that possibilities the very act of reading. It is not very difficult to further find out that even the delimited female perspective has been again narrowed down by incorporating the ingredients like Nair ethos and other racial indices and by a propensity to view them through these matrices:

Several poems of Kamala Das reflect lurking strains of a tangible ethos specially related to her Nair heritage. Today the Nair community has proliferated into nuclear families and the ancient splendour of the joint family system is no more in existence. As a child, Kamala Das was involved emotionally with her family and its matriarch, the grandmother. In her poetry the Nair ethos is
a factor that strongly contributes to the elaboration and sophistication of her private sensibility. Kamala Das's community concerns transcend the usual parochialism of such engagements and develop into an involvement with the higher values of life that sustain human beings through their struggles (Nair 83).

Such directions in reading inevitably began to reduce the literary expressions that appear under the name Kamala Das to a literary extension of the name. The first obstacle when one tries to read Kamala Das from a nonfemale angle is the viability of the projected. It is confounded by the apprehension whether he or she has a logical centre of reading that renders such an attempt dense and meaningful. This fear ceases to exist in no time as the present reading strategies partake of the postmodern realization that the once safe binaries like right/wrong, perfect/imperfect and relevant/irrelevant have become a part of history. This, however, does not mean or even imply that all readings and resultant texts are equal or uniform; the bottom line is that every reading unravels avenues and openings which can offer unforeseen and unprecedented semantic richness. Paul L. Love feels that the work of Kamala Das does have the in-built potential to provide us with ever new readings.
According to him, there are many different points of view from which one could speak about Kamala Das like India’s foremost woman poet, or indeed one of the foremost poets in our country or as both; but comparisons and superlatives are abstractions, and there is something about them that leaves one feeling empty and unsatisfied (7).

The question whether marginalisation, alienation and oppression are problems experienced by a particular racial or gender group is one that calls for a minute and detailed analysis. Though they are easily detected in every territory, whatever be the specific sociopolitical dynamics that shape them, each manifestation is bound by definition to be different from the other in accordance with tangible factors which in turn play a crucial role in assigning the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed. History abounds in telling instances of the once oppressed transforming themselves into arch oppressors. This change is possible, at least theoretically, in the case of discrimination and oppression on the basis of gender too.

The impossibility of fixing these roles is evident when we survey the many highly distinguished male and female characters in the works of Kamala Das. Along with them are found eunuchs who as a group transcend the cultural definitions of gender. Though they belong to various
roles--men, women and the third sex-- their worries and angst are essentially the same. All of them invariably struggle to escape from entrenched cultural habits and social practices founded on the symbolic order which is the abode of the sign. Despite their apparent diversity in world-views and sensibility, at a structural plane their actions become the pangs of survival born out of the desperate and mechanical attempts to get along with a hostile order. While some of the characters directly try to talk to the metanarrative of language, others do not care to think about their predicament, let alone reflect, and indulge in emotional outbursts and continue living in the dark of ignorance.

When we subject the work of Kamala Das to a reading using Lacanian glasses, it is such structural similarities that first become visible. Equally noteworthy is the consistent repetition and omnipresence of cardinal images like the sea and the bird. These features are never monopolized by a gender. So is the case of the fluidity of discourse and the positioning of subjects in the discourse regime of language and its ramifications. The fluidity generally attributed to the female is discernible not in the biologically determined subject positions but in positions that are associated or identified with the qualities
which are stamped 'feminine' as a part of a larger social discourse. The narrative voice of 'The Feeling of Kindness' is a telling example. This precisely is the story of cultural norms which are forced upon the subjects who are allotted specific positions by systems and orders into which we are born.

In short, it can doubtlessly be stated that when read away from the narrow perception that the works of Kamala Das are those produced from an exclusive female perspective inspired and conditioned by highly personalized experiences, they put forth a universal sensibility which transcends regional boundaries and more importantly the divide between male and female. Universal feminine sensibility changes itself into a universal fe/male sensibility. Her characters who see the human condition as/in the crucible of the sexual and the linguistic rather than money and related aspects, for this very reason, can remain in our minds for a long time to come.