Chapter 1

Introductory

"As I have been explaining to you, you are two separate persons, whose relationships cannot interact . . . . I have no doubt that you are concretely this person and not another, though I do find you very similar to many men I have known, but the one who interested me was the other, the Silas Flannery who exists in the works of Silas Flannery, independently of you here. . . ."

(Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveller* 151)

The very first impediment that a student of literature is bound to come across in his long and tedious academic odyssey is the acute shortage or even absolute absence of an unambiguous theoretical framework to rely on and to conceptualize within unlike in the case his more fortunate scientific counterpart who enjoys the delimiting transparent purviews and parameters of objectivity, accuracy and verification which transcend (or supposed to do so) the localized dynamics of history, economics or politics. In contradistinction to this, the student of literature and theory can seldom make use of the availability of basic terms with clear-cut and universally valid meanings since scholars more often than not blithely tend to use terms
arrived at by their interpretation of a regional development without qualifying them as to either social origin or acceptability, applicability and adaptability. It is in the discourse regime of literary criticism and literary theory that this methodological handicap manifests itself all the more conspicuously with a myriad number of unforeseen and unanticipated implications inextricably intertwined with reading practices.

Needless to say, the advent of literary theory in the last century has been profoundly influential in spite of its obfuscating language which is capable of throwing even a vigilant reader off the trail. The most far-reaching and beneficial effect of theory, perhaps, has been the attitude of examining and reassessing the case of marginalized classes in literature and society. This approach emancipated theory from the grips of an esoteric group chiefly found in the academy. If theory was the business of exclusive and voluble minorities in 1950s and '60s, the arrival of new ideas has effected a reversal of perspective which has undermined universalist claims about the centrality of the accepted canon of great works around which criticism and teaching has circulated has opened up the possibility of attending more closely to the alternative claims of the neglected or marginalised works which promote a sense of
We might consider the discourse of literary theory as a double-edged weapon: on the one hand it can explain and/or demystify some of the assumptions or values implicit in literature and literary criticism, but on the other we should not let the 'truths' which emerge from theoretical texts stand unquestioned and unchallenged. Perhaps this rather cautious approach and potentially infinite activity of appraisal and re-appraisal of terms and the judgements or values they convey is one of the more general features of literary theories; they tend towards a self-conscious or even self-reflexivity that more traditional criticism has eschewed and this self-consciousness is centered most often around language--the language of the text being studied and the language which is brought to bear on that text. The long and short of it is that we ought to trim our sails to the winds of immense theoretical revolution blowing across the academy more fiercely than ever before not only to keep ourselves updated but also to perspectivize literary discourses effectively and meaningfully.

Few writers in India have been simultaneously championed and maligned as Kamala Das on the one hand as the poet who "embodies the most significant stage of Indian feminine
poetic sensibility not yet reached by her younger contemporaries" (Chavan 60) and on the other as a maverick snobbish iconoclast flaunting her physical charm to keep herself afloat in the limelight through uninhibited words and outrageous deeds. Whether it be My Story which does quite well on the stands even today or the recent acrid comments as a proselyte drawing flake, each act unfailingly inflicted a fatal cultural shock to the complacent society. Being heirs apparent to a deeply ingrained reading legacy that positions itself near the word as an exclusive exhibition of the soul, many researches (and common readers) have painstakingly tried to identify and establish intimate one-to-one correspondence between the Kamala Das/Madhavikkutty/Kamala Surayya who appears behind print and the Kamala Das/Madhavikkutty/Kamala Surayya they have met and talked to. For instance, K.C. Shrivastava attempts see My Story as a natural and unproblematic extension of Das: Kamala Das's autobiography, My Story, clearly shows how her urge for identity and liberation finds its fruition and fulfillment in the superimposition of her poetic self over her domestic self—in her emergence as a poet by her overcoming her domestic self which compelled her to play the monotonous and enslaved wife and mother (95).
In strange contrast to the generally accepted postmodern ethos where "the more one tries to fix oneself in writing, the more one is forced to realize that in converting one to a linguistic category, a sign, one can in fact never be present to oneself" (Waugh 64), we often tend to remain assured "even if we dismiss the author's biography, of knowing at least what the link is, be it natural or contractual, between a given text, a given so-called author, and his name designated as proper" (Derrida 24). In the case of Das this presumptuous correctness has touched frenetic levels of critical practices, often rendering alternative reading strategies impossible, even for the scholar who legitimately belongs to the disciplined academic discourse. Each and every word in the Kamala Dasian oeuvre is decoded strictly against a semantic background provided by the close and the supposedly inalienable bond between the author inside and outside the text, taking for granted the relative sociological self in terms of spatio-temporal configurations. When Iqbal Kaur reads her literary discourse in the aforementioned lines she is effecting an interpretive enclosure, an impasse:
The male manufactured definitions of femininity nauseated her. She detested the male gaze because it situates woman as an Object. Besides, the sexual politics that prevailed in the relationship between her mother and father and several other couples around her shaped her views on marriage. The traditional formal politics in sex-relationships was repulsive to her. So, she wanted to escape marriage--the bondage. The one who had always wanted to falsify the myths which tended to restrict her freedom, who tried to liberate herself, to shape her own future. . . .(112).

The internecine wedding of biography with reading (and inevitably with criticism) has been pinpointed and warned against by many a critic/theorist from the schools as diverse as the New Criticism to the New Historicism. Though couched in the obsolete judicial critical vein, The Endless Female Hungers: A Study of Kamala Das offers a piercing observation pertaining to the prevailing critical scenario and implicitly seeks to side with the critical positions mentioned above:

. . . the critical point to make about Kamala is that, even when she does not achieve the kind of subtle expression apparent in Imtiaz, she will
always mean more to most readers of Indian poetry in English. This is because, whatever her deficiencies, they cease to matter when we hear her real voice and respond to her autobiographical authenticity. Even when critics of the future expose the weakness of Kamala’s poetry she will miraculously transcend the criticism and appeal directly to her audience (Nabar 107).

This excerpt sheds light to a blind spot in criticism, and most paradoxically Nabar treads the same path of depending on extrinsic biographical evidence to drive her own point home. For example, she reviles S.C. Harrex for detecting the elements of Marxism and Vedanta in the poetry of Kamala Das, or between the poetic strands of hers, and then argues that her “knowledge of Marxism is virtually nonexistent and even though she may have picked up a few concepts from Vedanta philosophy there is no evidence that she ever made herself familiar with it” (96). The tragic fact is that the scheme of reading called for by Nabar is not one of conceptual pliability and hardly gets along with the present age characterized by cognitive insecurity, unprecedented withdrawal from the ethical field of discretionary selection and the graphic collapse of the Modernist myth which once heralded a veridical structuring point
of view to define an unsentimental truth. The only feasible measure to propel this stalemate into a forward gear, it seems, is to delimit the framework of study so that the well-defined centre of reading shall function as the focalization for (re)readings, and, of course, highly flexible judgement/s.

In the present study, the otherwise inextricably interlaced Name and Work are treated as hermetically sealed entities: the name of Kamala Das serves as an informatory framework to theorize and read within, a body of writing. No personal matters have been taken into account either to predispose the analytical process or to serve as a guiding principle. The approach, thus, is absolutely textual, highlighting the plight of the hyperfragmented emotional nomads as depicted in writings under consideration. The polymorphous characters stuck in the grove of certain cultural constructs, their ('futile) attempts to grab a state of purity, search for understanding and the forms in which these actions are semioticized, etc., are looked at through the writings of the post/structuralist French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

The case of Lacan runs parallel to that of Kamala Das in many aspects but with a very significant difference. Since Lacan was not a 'creative' writer in the conventional
sense of the term, his whims and eccentric behaviour are generally kept away from focus. Naturally they seldom tarnish and relegate his status as a thinker who has played a vital role in bringing about the postmodern condition which objectivizes a number of premises, effects paradigm-shifts at ontological-epistemological levels and transmutes teleology by hypotheses fraught with uncertainty and incompleteness. As Lucy Niall observes, "... the merging of psychoanalytic and structuralist thinking in the work of Jacques Lacan in the 1950s and '60s turned out to be a very important move for the development of postmodernism" (21).

Just like any other theorist, Lacan too has been criticized and even caricatured to an unjustifiable extent. Many critics have sidelined the fact that along with Derrida what Lacan really interrogates is "the unsuspected complexity of the referential relation of discourse rather than reference" (Rajan 232). He has been frowned at for reasons as diverse as blindly following the phallocentrism of Freud to distorting the Freudian doctrines. Leonard Jackson complains that "the modern Lacanian, though often immensely scholarly in using Freud's original papers, is utterly remote in spirit from the scientific, mechanistic and biological orientation of Freud" (2).

To study Kamala Das using a/the Lacanian theoretical
framework entails a lot of hardships at both the structural and thematic levels. If it is a sine qua non to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adapt male models and theories, it becomes a foregone conclusion that Lacan has nothing whatsoever to do with the reading of female writers. However, in the present study the analytical angle is the one generally agreed on by the feminist thinkers like Juliet Mitchel, Ellie Ragland-Sulliven, Julia Kristeva, Monica Plaza and Catherine Clement who see Lacan's work as describing, not prescribing, the patriarchal power relations and configurations and the complex interdependence between individual and society. For them Lacan's theory is a non-essentialist one as it theorises femininity as a non-biological construction available to both sexes although in a highly qualified sense (Brennan 1989:1). What the present study can yield, obviously, in neither a Right Perception nor an infallible judgement since critical writing, like any other genre, is a tautology of sorts, an endless postponement of meaning. The prospects of further readings are not a possibility but a certainty as we discern from the endless chain of multiple readings triggered off by Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter' (Lacan 'Seminar', Felman 'The Case of
The title *The Universal Feminine Unconscious in Kamala Das* demands elucidation and justification because any derivative of the word 'female' shows myriad sociocultural associations and logicotemporal divergence in the mapping of its ideological status. The feminine does not refer to the first phase in the tripartite gradation of women's literary sensibility into the Feminine, Feminist and Female. On the contrary it signifies the general relative female experiences and the highly conditioned self evolved through the Freudian problematiques and *ipso facto* defies confinement both in psychoanalysis and its critical incarnation as an unconscious effect. In one sense, winking at the schisms heralded by Adler and Jung, this concept is the hinge upon which pivots, and is inveighed against, the whole school. To accept this as veracious purports to view the phallic signifier as one with no signified as such but only as a symbolization of the learning of difference as an effect that posits a materiality in language which differentiates the word qua meaning from the word as the sense of its meanings. Thus the problem of alienation caused primarily by language—the estrangement of the subject at the threshold of the Symbolic Order that appears to have been equated with the whole of human culture and the originating
point of language—with its colossal all-embracing hands deciding subject positions occupies a major chunk in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Reduced to two different subject positions, man and woman are treated structurally and socially, rather than biologically, as two links of a thoroughly conditioned chain.

It then follows that woman is destitute of the phallic signifier which is intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier. Thus female sexuality is a desperate attempt to cover a lack, linguistically and biologically. It is in order to be the phallus, that is, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that the woman rejects an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through cultural masquerades: it is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as desires.

It is against this backdrop that the word 'universal' is to be situated and comprehended. Nobody can deny that there are differences in the problems faced by women and it is only commonsensical to infer that the forces of sexual marginalisation are not monolithic. True to the milieu of the present age, the argument that each geographical area should cultivate its own female philosophy—like small
narratives instead of grand ones--is in vogue now. The present attempt is not to disregard the social dynamics moulding psychic patterns but to isolate the recurring motifs, linguistic peculiarities, subject positions, etc., and to show how these items practise "the infinite deferral of the signified" (Barthes 76) in the light of the Lacanian purview and parameters of psyche and language. The methodology, it seems, needs more elaboration. The structural analysis of Russian folklore by Vladimir Propp is a case in point (1968). There shall always be a villain but the choice of the villain is determined by the social. For example, prior to the collapse of the erstwhile USSR the villain in the Hollywood was always the KGB agent now is an Arab Muslim or a similar specimen. In other words, what changes is not the real basic structure but only the external manifestations.

The design of the study is as follows. Introductory profiles the status of the author concerned, elucidates the plan, details the concomitant difficulties and acknowledges the sources. The first chapter--The Slide--unfolds the Lacanian model of psychoanalysis and its literary implications. It includes Lacan's (dis)associations with Derrida, Freud, Hegel, Jakobson and Descartes, his language, subjectivity, epistemological scepticism, key con-
cepts and touches upon the affinity between Lacan's views on language and the Buddhist doctrines of Apoha and Zen. Then the chapter shows the literary implications of the theory, and highlights Lacan's own stance with regard to literature, his readings 'The Purloined Letter' and the general methodology followed by Lacanians in approaching literary writings. Those areas which play decisive role in the present work are naturally dwelt upon at length subjugating the areas which are not so relevant here. The chapter then attempts to describe the merger of matrices which gave birth to a peaceful coexistence (and viable cognitive scheme) between Lacanian and feminist streams and accentuates the areas of interaction and meaningful convergence. The Fluid, which forms the next chapter, is concerned with the 'consistent inconsistency' of the literary writings of Kamala Das at the semantic level in the main and structural at a lesser degree. The question fluidity is laced with that of lack, and the observations are substantiated by feminist literary theories and textual contexts. The fourth chapter, The Chess-man, tries to identify different subject positions, examines the privileged and the un/underprivileged ones, elaborates on the latent psychic structures and schizo-subjectivity, tracks down implied speaking subjects and demonstrates how voices are marginalised in and estranged from the intricacies of
language. The Re-view consolidates the often erratic twists caused by the immanently confusing and contradictory nature of Lacanian concepts on the readings of works in question, and from the observations from the preceding chapters infers that the palpable female conscious in many writings of Kamala Das cannot be reduced to the four walls of any particular philosophy, gendre or school, but that it is one that transcends all such barriers, and points to the universal imbroglio of linguistic-cultural fragmentation depicted through a perspective which might have had the experiences of women as its immediate cause.