Chapter 2

““The Inheritance”: A Disinherited Self

(Taking off from the ideas discussed in chapter one, particularly the multifariousness that characterises Kamala Das and her poetry, this chapter contextualises her within the discourses of Indian Literatures in English, and cosmopolitanism.)

Nationality is a good thing to a certain extent, but universality is better. All that is best in the great poets of all countries is not what is national in them, but what is universal. Their roots are in their native soil; but their branches wave in the unpatriotic air, that speaks the same language unto all men, and their leaves shine with the illimitable light that pervades all lands. Let us throw all the windows open; let us admit the light and air on all sides; that we may look towards the four corners of the heavens, and not always in the same direction.

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

[…] and I told them many times of the writer’s need to free himself from any nationality in order to belong to all who read his books.

Kamala Das

Cosmopolitanism, you might say, begins at home. It involves reconciling local attachments with global allegiances.

- Robert Spencer
2.1 Introduction

How to approach Indian Literatures in English today? What should the focus be on – Indian, English or the plural marker in the word ‘Literatures’? Can this paradoxical existence be understood in terms of equally paradoxical features of India - unity in diversity? If so what unifies it – being Indian or being English? Such questions have been a part of the major debates surrounding Indian Literatures in English since its inception, “… nearly one hundred and seventy years” ago (Prasad 1999:11). Engaging with this aspect has led to the rise of an ambivalence which dwells at the core of every Indian citizen in some form or the other. It is not a surprise then that the point of departure for Indian Literatures in English is in negotiating this.

However, while engaging with poetry within this variegated oeuvre of literature, the properties of this genre also have to be accounted for. Poetry is defined by its comparative structural and thematic flexibility. Most often poetic license, the freedom to change facts, the normal rules of language in order to achieve a particular effect is effected through poetry. These aspects as well as the novel ways of addressing questions of identity and existence, have been exhausted by Indian poets writing in English. What is foregrounded through their writing is that co – existence of differences is a reality.

For a deeper engagement with this basic premise, on which the Indian poetry in English is rooted, the many threads of the theory of cosmopolitanism can also be taken into account, as it is similarly rooted in cracking the forms of ambivalence behind the notion of a citizen of a world. More importantly, as an interdisciplinary concept, it has made inroads into postcolonial theory and has had a steady evolution, particularly in the past twenty years. Just as the poets have engaged with the
aftermaths of colonialism and a postcolonial society in transition, so have the discourses of cosmopolitanism. As Timothy Brennan argues in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*,

Without doubting the accuracy of the prognoses on global culture, one notices how in marked contrast to the past the term has become less an analytical category than a normative projection complementing at once celebratory claims and despairing recognitions: the death of the nation – state, transculturation (rather than a merely one – sided assimilation), cultural hybridity (rather than a simplistic contrast between the foreign and the indigenous) and post modernity (as the view that consumption is politically exciting, viable, and wholly one’s own). (1-2)

Evidently, many of the aspects engaged with at length by the theories of cosmopolitanism such as transculturation, hybridity and postmodernism become points of departure for Indian Literatures in English.

Cosmopolitanism as a concept and theoretical tool hold within it many nuanced discourses, as Kwame Anthony Appiah says in his essay “Education for Global Citizenship”: “It is an ideal that’s particularly useful when we are faced with the sorts of conflicts, grounded in religious, ethnic, racial, and national identities, which pervade our world.” (85) In short, cosmopolitanism refers to the opinions and behaviors emerging from the theory that cultural and artistic activities should have neither national nor parochial boundaries even when defined by them. In other words, it emphasizes a dialogue among differences, thereby validating itself as a tool in analyzing the gamut of Indian Literatures in English, particularly poetry.
Keeping these arguments as the premise, this chapter goes into the many nuances of cosmopolitanism as a theoretical concept and its legitimacy as a tool to analyze Indian Literatures in English. It has to be stated here that the elements of cosmopolitanism can be read into the thematic concerns arising out of questions of location and identity and also in the debates surrounding the use of language – particularly the entity called ‘Indian English’. Towards that end, this chapter engages, first, with the many theoretical inroads paved by cosmopolitanism, tracing its evolution from its origins in classical Greek philosophy and thought, to its many avatars in the contemporary world. The second part of the chapter probes into the possibility of the presence and application of the many nuances of cosmopolitanism in the poetry of Indian writers in English, while the third part engages with the poetry of Kamala Das, in deciphering the layers that go into her being qualified as a poet, who imbibes within her the subtleties of cosmopolitanism.

2.2. Inroads into cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism as a concept has meanings and implications across disciplines such as philosophy, law, politics and critical theory. The common understanding of the word is connected to the root word cosmopolitan and is often used to qualify a place or a community “containing people of different types or from different countries, and influenced by their culture and having or showing wide experience of people and things from many different countries” and as a noun the word refers to “a person who has experience of many different parts of the world” However, the roots of all these variegated thoughts can be traced back to the Greek word “kosmopolitēs” which is a combination of Greek words “Kosmos” and “Polis” – former meaning world or universe and the latter city or polity and is attributed to Diogenes of Sinope - the founding father of the Cynics, who famously declared
himself to be a ‘citizen of the world’, when he was asked about his place of domicile. The context of its origin has contributed immensely to its evolution down the ages and it is pertinent here to take into account all these aspects.

At the outset, the word cosmopolitan when used in the context of this research has both literary and metaphorical implications. More importantly, it has to be understood in conjunction with and in opposition to concepts such as national, global and universal. Entries for each of them in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8th edition are as follows: Universal: (adj.) 1 done by or involving all the people in the world or in a particular group. 2. true or right at all times and in all places. Global: 1. covering or affecting the whole world 2. considering or including all parts of something. National: 1. connected with a particular nation, shared by a whole nation. 2. Owned, controlled or paid for by the government

After an initial engagement with these different notions, which though seem to be alluding to the same entity, subtlety stands out as different entities. Interestingly, it is reckoned here that it is only cosmopolitan that accommodates difference or an experiential element arising from an understanding of difference. This is precisely why this term is being inducted to analyse such a variegated area as Indian Literatures in English.

On another plane, an engagement with the concept of cosmopolitanism should be informed by the many threads that it imbibes within it. An understanding of the idea and its evolution and spread into postcolonial theoretical discourses have to be dealt with holistically and hence the many reverberations of the concept in politics, law, philosophy and critical theory are engaged with in detail in the following sections.
2.2.1 Political Cosmopolitanism: Greco – Roman Interventions

Alluding to the discussions in the earlier chapter in the context of Kamala Das’ articulation of a sense of identity (‘I am Indian, very brown,/ Born in Malabar’vii) it is clear that while engaging with identity, particularly in the context of India, political identity is an aspect that gains prominence. This notion of self/identity arises from the notion of belonging to a place. Thus, the polemics surrounding the idea of “kosmopolites - citizen of the world” takes on an added importance here. But the questions that gains prominence is which world is s/he the citizen of, which was also the case in ancient Greece and Rome, from where the idea of cosmopolitanism came into being.

For instance, in ancient Rome if anyone claimed to be a citizen of the world, the world could be Rome, as it was at the heights of its glory. But then, there were questions related to loyalty, and the state that one will be serving and the problems arose from there. By claiming citizenship of a cosmopolis, in effect, who is the citizen serving - world or his own polis or state? Isn’t it then a way of stating that by serving everyone he/ she is not serving anyone or in other words, such a claim would also entail in it idea that one is trying to pass by the responsibilities attached to being a responsible citizen of a state. Clearly then “it is often difficult to determine whether a particular cosmopolitanism is merely negative (rejecting local ties), merely positive (embracing fellow cosmopolites as well as, implicitly, local compatriots), or both (embracing fellow cosmopolites and rejecting local compatriots),”viii which is an aspect that gains relevance in its contemporary relevance too.

Evidently, at the core of the idea, is the debate as to where one’s affiliation should be. Should it be rooted in the local community or locality - the polis or should
it be with the cosmos or the world or the cosmopolis. Nonetheless, wherever the loyalties lies the essence seems to be in serving humanity. This becomes the point on which the idea evolves down the ages. (If on any level, this aspect is to be projected into understanding Kamala Das and her works, the aspect where she holds on to all her selves in order to serve her essential self, gains relevance)

There are philosophers such as Anaxagoras, who withdrew from their local cities into the cosmos as a means of quiet contemplation avoiding any political attachment, claiming an attachment only with the universe. There were a few wandering intellectuals, such as Democritus of Abdera, who chose this as a means of leading a comfortable life devoid of any political attachments or responsibilities. When thinking in terms of a moral cosmopolitanism, where the political engagement has the aim of common good, then, Socrates was the first to initiate this moral implication of the thought. He believed in helping not just fellow Athenians, but also foreigners and love of humanity becomes the drive behind being a citizen of the cosmopolis. (This aspect in the Socratic line is evident in the contemporary engagement of post colonialism and post structuralism with the “other”.) As a follower of Socrates, it is just then, when Diogenes the Cynic stated it out explicitly that he was a citizen of the world and not of Sinope and so did his comrade, Aristippus the Cyrenaic.

Moving forward in history, in 4BCE, there were the Stoics, the followers of Socratic thought. However, they upheld the idea that each individual was supposed to be dwellers of two communities – the local community of one’s birth and that of the larger community of humanity. So, for them, there was a sense of dual engagement, implying the traditional engagement with one’s own nation state and the engagement with the other, the common humanity was through their service by moving away. A
cosmopolitan in the Stoic tradition treated the polis and the cosmos as a means of serving humanity.

But the Stoics did not all agree about whether they owed special service to their compatriots in addition to helping humanity more generally. Nor did they agree about whether citizenship in the cosmos is a special achievement of the wise, who live by right reason, or is a common characteristic of all humans, who possess reason.\textsuperscript{ix}

After this new branch - Stoic Cosmopolitanism, the idea came to be linked to more of a political engagement with the aim of building bonds outside the traditional community, which was taken forward by Epicureans and the founding Stoic, Zeno of Citium. But there were developments on that notion, in the lines of Rome as the ideal state to rule the world as is seen in the literature of the Golden age of Rome, particularly through Virgil’s \textit{The Aeneid} which established itself as the national epic and played the role of propaganda in establishing the ideal roman citizen as the citizen of the world. Moreover, the expansion of Roman Empire, in a way, legitimized the use of the word Cosmopolitanism as, at its heights, Rome was, in effect, a cosmos. The idea of a world state also came into the picture with the likes of Alexander the Great and the possibilities of a nexus of cosmopolitanism and imperialism is evident in Roman Stoic texts, such as Cicero's \textit{On Duties} or Marcus Aurelius’ \textit{Meditations}.

Reverting here to the origins of the term cosmopolitanism as it comes into play in the many dialectics that define Indian writers, stoic cosmopolitanism and the Hierocles’ circle model of identity which it popularized becomes pertinent. This model states that a person should be regarded as existing in concentric circles, the first one around the self, next immediate family, then extended family, and gradually
expanding to include local group, citizens, countrymen, humanity, making all human beings fellow city dwellers. This is an ideal way of marking the identity of an Indian citizen who is defined by many effective concentric circles such as region, religion, caste, customs, traditions and language. However, when it comes to literature, the ambivalence arising out of the engagement with the various circles and its resultant representations gains significance, as was highlighted in the first chapter through Kamala Das’ poem “An Introduction”. It is possible to read the element of palimpsestousness into this circle model of identity.

2.2.1.1 Middle Ages and the shift in cosmopolitanism

With the initiation of Christianity, the polemics surrounding polis and cosmos gains a new height as the debates moved on from the basic premise of location, to that involving a relationship between temporal political authority and the eternal church. Thus, from local polis to the cosmopolitan cosmopolis, the evident shift was from the secular aspects of the Roman emperor to the religious underpinnings of the Papal Authority. Evidently, on a broader plane, this was taken up as the dialectics between divine city and earthly city by Saint Augustine who propagated the idea of a global citizenship in the City of God. It states in the Bible, in the epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians 2: 19-22,

Now, therefore, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In whom you are also are being built together for a habitation of God in the spirit.
Though, here, there is an explicit distinction, as only those who were ready to follow
the path set out by of Christ, could have accessibility to that city. However, in this
case the two cities co-exist until the Day of Judgment.

Thus the initial nuances attached to the idea of cosmopolitanism gets sidelined
here and it is only in the 16th Century with Erasmus of Rotterdam that cosmopolitan
thought is revived through a religious reformation stressing a Christian humanistic
tradition whereby he upheld the importance of free will and the idea of a world-wide
peace through religious tolerance. This basic notion had an impact on the revival of
cosmopolitanism during the period of Enlightenment.

2.2.2 Enlightenment thought and the revival of cosmopolitanism

18th Century is that watershed in human history, with many events that
changed the path of humanity as such. Apart from the various revolutions such as
American Revolution, French Revolution and the consequent Declaration of the
Rights of Man (1789), what signifies this epoch is the emergence of a notion of
human rights and a philosophical focus on human reason which led it to be dubbed as
the Enlightenment period.

This period even when situated in 18th is not tied down by proper time frame
and reflected a sense of open-mindedness and impartiality. Hence, it was a fertile
ground for an idea like cosmopolitanism to come up again. Prominent thinkers and
philosophers of this period such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Joseph
Addison, David Hume and Thomas Jefferson, among others, identified themselves as
cosmopolitans. During this period, however, cosmopolitan was used to signify a man
of no fixed abode, or a man who is nowhere a stranger. Incidentally, this was also the
period when the idea of cosmopolitanism expanded beyond the political nuances, to include moral, legal and economical cosmopolitanism.

However, the spirit of the essential ideas imbibed by the concept of cosmopolitanism was accurately identified and propagated by Emmanuel Kant through his work *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795). It envisioned a cosmopolitan law and highlighted the need to respect human rights of the citizens as well as the foreigners, in a way reiterating the ancient stoic thought. However, this way of approaching humanity also came to be called moral cosmopolitanism as his views were firmly grounded in human reason and the idea of a moral community. This basic notion is reverberated in Jeremy Bentham’s notion of utilitarian cosmopolitanism implying a common and equal utility of all nations and also in Adam Smith’s idea of free market. In 19th century these notions are imbibed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (evident in *Communist Manifesto*) and is also evident in the formation of organizations such as League of Nations (Kant also talks about the creation of a league of states in his treatise)

However, in contemporary politics, it is moral cosmopolitanism that takes the upper hand. Here, the stress is on essential humanity and the idea that there are certain aspects which all people share irrespective of their political citizenship, national identity, religion or their domicile. Thus,

Cosmopolitans argue that all human beings share a capacity for reason and are therefore, by nature, members of a universal community. From this, cosmopolitanism makes the normative claim that political boundaries and national identities are morally arbitrary and that all human beings should be
held as the primary units of moral worth, as if they were equal citizens of a
universal political community.\textsuperscript{x}

Thus, there is the privileging of the moral values, which points to the need of the
political institutions worldwide to be accountable, in terms of justice for all. This idea
is rooted in the enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant and his treatise \textit{Towards a
Perpetual Peace}. Apart from him there are other prominent thinkers such as Charles
Beitz, Brian Barry, Thomas Pogge, Jürgen Habermas, Simon Caney, and David Held.

There have correspondingly been inroads into international law because of the
debates surrounding the basic human rights as initiated by cosmopolitanism, which
seeks to extend the reach of international law beyond issues of state sovereignty and
concern itself with the rights and responsibilities of world citizens as is evident in the
formation of international legal bodies, such as the UN or UN authorized courts, to
protect the rights of individuals, with the possibility of moving beyond violations in
sovereign states. John Rawls's \textit{The Law of Peoples} (1999) and Jürgen Habermas's
\textit{The Divided West} (2006) are the key texts which have led to this. Moreover,
since1989 there has come into cosmopolitanism an element of interdisciplinary, as
Robert Fine, believes gets reflected in, “the overcoming of national presuppositions
and prejudices within social scientific disciplines, the recognition that society has
entered an era of mutual interdependence on a world scale, and the development of
normative theories of world citizenship, global justice, and cosmopolitan
democracy.”\textsuperscript{xi}

Cosmopolitanism, with myriad possibilities continues to be the focus.
However, its presence in the critical theoretical discourse also have to be considered
where this concept is seen as an entity which is in essence beset with ambiguities, as
even when it evokes similarities with ideas such as pluralism and internationalism, it is not that, as it is defined as,

A mode or ‘way’ of being in the world commensurate with the condition of globalization, characterized by a high level of mutual respect for the rights of others and a generalized tolerance of ethnic, cultural, political and national differences. It is in this sense a paradoxical concept because it implies identification with one's difference or singularity and an empathetic acknowledgement of one's sameness\textsuperscript{xii}

With the advent of nationalist tendencies in the 20th century, the idea of cosmopolitanism also took certain shifts, but it was rooted in the idea of a kind of community among all human beings beyond social and political affiliation. Based on this premise, this basic idea branched out into different heads such as moral cosmopolitanism, political cosmopolitanism, cultural cosmopolitanism and economic cosmopolitanism. Even though all these aspects gain significance while engaging with a problematic entity like Indian Literatures in English, it is cultural cosmopolitanism that gains prominence.

\textbf{2.2.3. Intervention of Cosmopolitanism into Postcolonial discourse}

Cosmopolitans are the flaneurs of our age, walking the cities of the world, convinced that their identity can only be mirrored through their engagement with others, sure of their mastery of global cultural flows and their secure place within it. […] cosmopolitans are not stateless; they move freely across boundaries; they are autonomous subjects; they can choose when to engage with the Other and when to retreat. - Simon Gikandi\textsuperscript{xiii}
At the outset, the engagement of cosmopolitanism, particularly that of cultural cosmopolitanism with locality and its reverberations on the creation of identity of an individual have much scope and relevance in the postcolonial discourses which came to be recognized in the last decade of the 20th century and more precisely with the advent of 21st century. It has to do with the many new levels of mobility, questions of locality and the emerging notions such as diasporas. Seen in this light, it is more a post – imperialist reaction and has continued into the discourse particularly in its engagement with the idea of a borderless world somehow mimicking the polemics surrounding the critique of the idea of nation and nationality. Hence, the idea of world as a single community beyond political affiliations went well with the new discourses of post colonialism.

Apart from that, contemporary aspects of the concept, in relation to postcolonial theory as delineated by Robert Spencer becomes a very important component of the debate here. Regarding this he states in the essay “Cosmopolitan Criticism”: “Cosmopolitanism is thus a vital aspect of the reorientation or rerouting of postcolonial studies. A set of values as well as political and institutional objectives, cosmopolitanism provides a cogent alternative to the logic of exclusion and hierarchy that characterizes ongoing forms of colonial rule and, to some extent, the nationalist and related projects that have arisen to combat colonialism.”(37) In the essay, he outlines the various theorists and the positions taken by each with regard to the utilization of a multifarious concept like cosmopolitanism. He delineates three schools of thought on cosmopolitanism – skeptical, celebratory and socialist.

For example, the first school of cosmopolitanism, according to Spencer, opened with Edward Said’s Orientalism and this way of thought “was more interested in deconstructing the cultural and epistemological authority of colonialism than in
elucidating the relationship between colonialism and capitalism or in asking how to move beyond these things.”(37) This school whose proponents include Carol Breckenridge and Sheldon Pollock, is skeptical of cosmopolitanism as it favors plural cosmopolitanisms in its persistence for (re)asserting identity and difference. This argument is a pertinent tool in approaching the Indian scene. And equally important are the views of the socialist school of cosmopolitanism, Spencer’s third variant, which highlights both the advantages and disadvantages of cosmopolitanism in tackling the obstacles of imperialism and the nation state, whose exponents are Jonathan Parry, Hena Ahmad, Jan Brennan.

However, moving beyond the formidable skeptical approach plaguing these schools and critics, are theorists like Homi K Bhabha, and Kwame Anthony Appiah who in “Education for Global Citizenship” outlines his conception of cosmopolitanism as universality plus difference and discusses its commitment to pluralism. (2008: 92, 96). He is suggesting the possibility of a cosmopolitan community in which individuals from varying locations (physical, social, economic, and so on) enter relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs (religious, political or more). In effect, cosmopolitanism as a concept is now transcending itself-- from its early avatar as an entity defined by geo-politics—it is taking on new permutations and combinations and what

   hopefully emerged from a consideration of existing approaches in postcolonial studies is a distinctively dialectical understanding of cosmopolitanism: one that combines diversity with commonality; political action at the level of the nation state with political action at a global level; and hard-hearted awareness of the insufficiently cosmopolitan present with cognizance of the necessity and desirability of a cosmopolitan future.”(40)
Incidentally, this concept has led to significant shifts in postcolonial theory and thought-- from a limited multicultural perspective, it has expanded into an inclusive and nuanced term with far reaching implications as vouched by Brennan: “We have for some time now been witnessing a shift from the binary otherness to a single, internally rich and disparate plurality: a variety of levels within and sites between, rather than the lonely outposts on either side of belief’s wall.” (1997:1-2). Thus the term contains within it nuances of colonialism, postcolonial ‘Indianness’, post – independence cultural and linguistic fundamentalisms and the possibilities of multiple narratives of people who might be migrants in their own country. These aspects can be accounted for while analysing Indian Literatures in English as Robert Spencer says in *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literatures* that no literary text is cosmopolitan in its own right but only by virtue of its dramatisation of cultural conflict and convergence. (2011: 23)

Even though, while engaging with the poetry of Kamala Das, this aspect becomes the central premise, the various avatars of cosmopolitanism is utilized. At the outset, it is the engagement with “Other” that gains prominence and theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Inmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida etc. have to be alluded to in this regard. Apart from them, there are theorists such as Ulf Hannerz, Homi K Bhabha, Sheldon Pollock, Pnina Webner who have worked on the notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism, which gains significance while looking at the presence of the vernacular in Indian English poetry, and therefore in Kamala Das’ poetry. The engagement with locality as is highlighted by the works of Simon Gikandi and Bill Ashcroft also figures prominently while engaging with the complexities in Das’ poetry evoked as part of the research.
2. 3. Nuances of cosmopolitanism in the Indian poetry in English

“We are very like the English, — are, in fact, English under a different sky.”

— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

While engaging with the wide range of thoughts opened up by cosmopolitanism, those theories pertaining to cultural conflict and convergence stand out. This fact becomes a crucial component while journeying down the chequered history of Indian poetry in English as it has always been a site of critical engagement with the respective milieus. The beginning of a tradition in Indian poetry in English is traced back to the period before Indian Independence, with poets— among others— like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Nobbo Kissen Ghose, Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. A preoccupation with themes pertaining to India, particularly Indian myths and legends is observed in their poetry, even though the mould is occidental. Can there be elements of cosmopolitanism in their poetry?

The early poets were writing in ‘pure’ English, ‘lingua franca’ – a cosmopolitan language, imitating the ‘standard’ universal model of poetry prevalent then. Incidentally, they were not yet the citizens of ‘India’, as the move for an independent India was still in progress and the notion of a nation or a national identity as understood today was not in the picture. But many of these poets used poetry as a vehicle to propagate the ideas of the freedom movement.

While engaging with the poets in the early phase of Indian poetry in English, it is noted that a universal idea of the land is evoked, mainly by projecting her past glory, through another language. For instance, in “The Lotus”, a sonnet by Toru Dutt, it is striking, how she talks about the origin of Lotus, incorporating it into the
Greek myth of Psyche and Cupid tapping the advantages of form and language. She states in the poem that Love came to Flora asking for a flower, “That would of flowers be undisputed queen./ The lily and the rose, long, long had been/ Rivals for that high honour. Bards of power/ Had sung their claims.”

Even though, there is an explicit privileging of the occidental flower, Dutt goes on to project lotus as the ideal flower having the qualities of rose and lily and how Love got his request fulfilled when “… Flora gave the lotus, “rose-red” dyed, / And “lily-white,”-- the queenliest flower that/ blows.” (Narasimhaiah 1990: 14). What we discern here is an attempt at communicating that India, informed by virtues of her own, is also a part of the universal discourse and perhaps entails within her the best of all the worlds. More importantly, the reference to “bards of power” here is striking as, the question is, whether she was implying that literature has the power to establish the identity and importance of a flower and if yes, is she hinting at how she has the power to elevate lotus to that stature. On a similar vein, majority of Sarojini Naidu’s poetry are descriptions of Indian scenes as in “Indian Weavers”, “Song of Radha, The Milkmaid”. These lines from the poem “Song of Radha, The Milkmaid” is a good illustration:

How softly the river was flowing

I carried my pots to the Mathura tide…

How gaily the rowers were rowing!...

My comrades called, “Ho! Let us dance, let us sing

And wear saffron garments to welcome the spring.

And pluck the new buds that are blowing”. (Narasimhaiah 1990: 19)
It is clear from the choice of words like ‘Mathura tide’, ‘gaily’, ‘Ho’ and the rhyme scheme that she was imitating the style of the British Romantic poetry. A common man’s take on the Radha Krishna myth would not be so lofty. It can be reckoned that even when imitating language and literary tradition they try to integrate indianness, which is evident in her call for comrades to wear saffron garments. (Contrast this with the way in which Kamala Das depicts Radha, discussed in chapter three)

In Sri Aurobindo, occasional glimpses of the same aspect can be found though his poetry is predominantly spiritual. In the poem “Surreal Science”, he talks about the reverberations and manifestations of violence down history and literature. He starts off with the creative processes behind Hamlet, Iliad and Odyssey, alludes to Ashoka who advocated and “Spoke of the Wheel and eightfold Path all right” and then to the fall of Napolean, but ends the poem thus: “A scientist played with atoms and blew out/ The universe before God had time to shout.” (Narasimhaiah 1990:17). In the canvas he paints, there is the representative of India. Maybe he was trying to situate himself in the western world, the classical tradition and as was always the case he projected the spiritual side of India as was done by many.

Clearly, to bring the early Indian poetry in English under the framework of cosmopolitanism entails within it the pitfalls of being reductive. Even then, it could be reckoned here that the elements of homogeneity or the attempts to mould a homogenous India through verse was one of the ways in which the whole idea is destabilized. The vein of cosmopolitanism, if any, in terms of heterogeneity and elements of dislocation, can be traced to Henry Louis Vivian Derozio who is considered as “the first Indian English poet of any importance”, who was displaced to begin with as, “Derozio’s father was of mixed Portuguese and Indian descent, while his mother was an English woman. He was born in Calcutta and educated there.”
(Prasad 1999: 15-16). However, his roots were firmly fixed in India as his patriotic sonnets like “The Harp of India” and a few lines from “To India – My Native Land” show:

My country! In thy days of glory past

A beauteous halo circled round thy brow

and worshipped as a deity thou wast—

Where is thy glory, where the reverence now?

Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,

And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou,

Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee

Save the sad story of thy misery!

Evidently, in the poetry of the early stages, there is a longing to be part of the ‘Western Canon’ and a sense of projecting the reality onto another mould as to belong to that canon, as the allusions to authors or works of the western canon indicates. Nonetheless, they also wrote for such an audience, hence India was served in small doses. India was the ideal one, as described in the myths and legends. They held onto this past glory of India more, than the reality. Ironically, in their poetry there are allusions to our national symbols as in Toru Dutt’s description of the lotus and in Aurobindo’s reference to Ashoka’s wheel (chakra). This is inevitable as “… India is automatically foregrounded in Indian English Poetry as the poets struggle with the language, and internalize and experiment with the poetic, technical possibilities that it
offers.” (Prasad 1999:8). (Compare the delineation of national symbols taken up by the next generation of poets, which is discussed later in the chapter)

Interestingly, it must be duly noted here that Kamala Das was also writing when all this was taking place, but she was in a galaxy far away with concerns which were drastically different from them. She was a child then, trying to comprehend a sense of alienation that was creeping into her as she was negotiating her presence among a group of white students, the only brown among the white – a lotus among the lilies and roses. This was during her stint as a student at St. Cecilia European Catholic School in Calcutta. She lived the experiences of racism and colonialism, when she was not allowed to read out her poem in English to the visiting British dignitary, instead a British girl was chosen to do it. The trope of alienation and difference was ingrained in her from the beginning, even with her introduction into the English language.

**2.3.1 Time to Change**

It is clear that the Aurobindo model of poet as national prophet or that of Sarojini Naidu as nationalist nightingale, writing in blank and/or rhymed verse to emulate the style of their English counterparts, was at odds with most of the post-independence Indian poets, whether it was Kamala Das, or Ezekiel and the group of poets in Bombay such as Adil Jussawalla, R. Parthasarathy, Keki Daruwalla and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, or P.Lal and the poets associated with the Writers Workshop in Calcutta. The real issues, themes and sensibilities of independent India were to be understood and dealt with in other ways.”( xvii)
The next phase in Indian poetry in English is characterized by experimentation and change – both in the utilization of themes and language, as highlighted in the lines of Devindra Kohli quoted above.

At the outset, it was self-reflexive as the poets were aware that they were using an alien language; but by then it could not be helped, as it was the language of the Indians, courtesy of Lord Macaulay. Moreover the Official Languages Act and the debates it started off in relation to the continuance of English as one of the official languages also impacted the literature at that point. Unlike the early poets for whom the dilemma was”… of having to prove their understanding and mastery of the English language and tradition, while at the same time maintaining and expressing their Indianness” (Prasad 1999: 17), these group found themselves in a precarious situation where the pertinent questions were why write in English and what does it mean being an Indian. For instance, as already stated in Chapter 1, Kamala Das in her poem “An Introduction” writes: “I am Indian, very brown, born in/Malabar, I speak three languages, write in/ Two, dream in one. Don’t write in English, they said,/ English is not your mother- tongue.” It is clear that the use of language has changed, it resembles the speech of a common man, any Indian who speaks in English - a unique Indian English-- and not the lofty version subscribed to by their predecessors. There is also an assertion that even when it is half and half

. . . The language I speak

Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness

All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half

Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don’t you see? (Das 1965: 62)

The fact that it is honest also have to be taken into account here. For the poets of this group like Nissim Ezekiel, Shiv K Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Keki N Daruwalla, Kamala Das and more, the focus was on dealing with the notion of a unified identity that was thrust upon them at the wake of independence and what to make of the language that they were all writing in. Even though a few were initiated into it in the mid 1950’s, they gained limelight in the 1960’s; a strategic point in Indian and world history as it was the that crucial time when, “The international recognition accorded to the legitimacy of diversity by the complex interrelated radical changes in politics, art, literature and technology that took place across the globe during the ‘cultural decade’ which extended up to the mid – 1970’s and is popularly known as the High Sixties.”(xii-xiii)

They were the harbingers of modernism into Indian English poetry and this was made possible mainly in the way they problematized their own existence, grounded in the reality of ‘becoming’ Indian rather than being Indian. Central to this was the use of English, “the language of a counterculture” and this aspect can be best demonstrated by Ezekiel’s poem “Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”: “Friends, / our dear sister/ is departing for foreign/ in two three days,/ and/ we are meeting today/ to wish her bon voyage.” (Narasimhaiah 1990: 23) The use of expressions like “our dear sister” as a stand in for a colleague, “departing for foreign” instead of moving abroad and “wish her bon voyage” refer to the ways in which certain words unconsciously became part of the Indian way by being inducted into the daily
vocabulary. This ironic take at the common man’s use of English critically looks at the way English was hybridized to form an Inglish, which was the need of the hour.

That was the epoch of globalization, and the rise of New Literatures and such a take was necessitated. Poets were declaring that yes we are Indians and yes we write in English but our own English. This is what Ulf Hannerz talks about as a more genuine cosmopolitanism, which is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other and that which entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrast rather than uniformity. (Hannerz 1996:103)

What we find in this stage of Indian English poetry is an attempt at questioning the ‘canon’, proving that it is possible to produce great literature without following rhyme or metre and without the grandeur of diction and thought. The poets in this group were debating with the ambivalence where the tongue though foreign articulates Indianness. It is not a blind imitation or acceptance but a declaration that this tongue is part of Indian ethos too. The poetry of this group was not the verbose of an elite educated class as was the case with the early poets, as Devendra Kohli maintains.

It is to be noted that Kamala Das published her first collection of poetry in the year 1965. This period is important in the relatively young history of Indian Literatures in English as it was during this time that it rose to prominence as one among the New Literatures, marked by experiments and freshness in themes and styles with a unique tradition. It was part of the process of modernization as vouched by Bruce King:
English is no longer the language of colonial rulers; it is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances and references, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling. Such Indianization has been proceeding for several generations and is prominent in the poetry. (King 2001: 3)

Indianization, a form of indigenization, has been occurring in the Indian English poetry in numerous ways in the use of colloquial idioms, the use of everyday language and comparisons, the dovetailing of the new and the old and by reworking the myths, legends and folklores, by a subtle dovetailing of the past and the present. In addition to that it also gave rise to many debates about the use of a language like English in India.

It is needless to say that the debates on the use of English by Indian writers have been going on for a while now. According to Amit Chaudhuri, Indianness exists only in English and not in the vernacular languages. Another critic P. Lal says: “Only Indian writing in English can hope to attain the Indian flavor, which is a cosmopolitan flavour.” (Kulshrestha 1980:22). The many issues about the use of English can also be connected to the theory of Cosmopolitanism. Pramod K. Nayar talks about this aspect in his book,

Cosmopolitanism it is argued, expresses the need to ground our mutuality in conditions of mutability… to live in terrains of historic and cultural transition… That is, in a world topos almost excessively migrant in nature, we need to find mutuality while dealing with constant change.

This change that he talks about can be seen in the way the English language is used. In the process where the pureness of English is destroyed or when English is
decolonized, which Kamala Das does with an amazing expertise “… lends a dualism, a schizophrenia, to both native English and the immigrant in what is a fluid act of mutual transformation.” (Nayar 2008: 214-215) it is not connected to the idea of resistance or writing back in the case of Kamala Das but it is a means of comprehending the ambivalence. The yoking together of the dualities could be the unconscious act of her dormant unconscious coming to the front- the slips of tongue as explicated in the Freudian psychoanalysis.

The use of English as in Indian English has been something similar which highlight indianness as being contextualized with an underlying sense of rootedness. With Indian English, there is always the possibility of going beyond the Englishness of English Language with the presence of ‘vernacular oddities’. (Discussed at length in Chapter three) At this juncture the observations of Rochelle Almeida on the poetry of Das have to be noted. She says:

The ‘vernacular oddities’ that de Souza (in her introduction to Kamala Das in the anthology Nine Indian Women Poets) refers to here concern the notorious tendency that Das has to leave off the definite article, perhaps a result of her mother-tongue interference. . . . However, it is this defiance of grammatical correctness; this tendency to allow Malayalam to color the idiomatic quality of her lines that gives the poems their peculiarly distinctive essence and allows her to claim them uniquely as her own.(Sanga 2005: 156) Her moulding of English is also reflected on another level – in her experimentations with structure and syntax. A case in point is her poem, “The Blind Walk”, a few lines from it goes thus:

. . . the poets ultimately lose their way inside their own minds on dark rivers they sail they sail their lighted boats on murky waters they go to seek their
past in the future the sea is full of writers carcasses I thought you knew these 

things the lost words rise from it at high tide . . . (Das and Nandy 1979: 16)

In this prose poem we find Das deliberately forgoing sentence breaks, capitalizations and punctuations. Moreover, she is also talking about the process of writing a poem. A significant aspect of her poetry is the way she plays with the form of poetry. She makes her verse sound more like prose, as if she is trying to convey a heightened meaning of the ordinary everyday life. A sudden conscious and unpredictable break in a line demands more attention that a normal syntactically complete line even in poetry. Most of her critics have talked at length about this aspect of her poetry, where she disregards the syntax or the structure.

From these discussions it is clear that she brings in an indianess or importantly she affects a mutation to her English. Kamala Das also makes use of traditions, customs and folklores of India to a large extend in her poetry. Even when Das is describing an urban set up she deliberately brings in something that is unique to the Indian sensibility. One such instance would be the lines from the poem, “The Bangles” where she is describing a scene set in a flatlet in a town: ‘Over the/ Front door protruding into street/ Like a cervix, she hangs some/ Mango- leaves.’

She uses striking images that are essentially symbols having meaning only in India – the mango leaves and the bangles in the title of the poem which is often worn by married women as a symbol of their integrity. There is a custom of breaking the bangles when someone’s husband expires. She brings in many such elements that take us back to the roots of India. However, as the lines say there is confusion and a conflict inherent within as is evident from these lines:
They will bring us luck,

She tells the pock-marked man who took

Took her in. He is confused. He

Does not know whether to smile

Or sulk. (Das 1965: 34)

This poem becomes one of the instances where Kamala Das differs from the other poets, from the point of engaging with locality. Clearly her roots belong to Kerala, but when certain imageries in her poetry is analysed it can be discerned that those images have no relevance in Kerala as such. The custom of wearing green bangles as a symbol of being married is not essentially a custom rooted in Kerala. However, she evokes such symbols which indicates that the roots that she looks for also has a pan-Indian element to it rather than a parochial hue. This fact differentiates her from others. Another instance would be a few lines from the poem “In Love”:

-- and at

Night, from behind the Burdwan

Road, the corpse – bearers cry “Bol

Hari Bol”, a strange lacing

For moonless nights, while I walk

The verandah sleepless (Das 1965: 12)
She uses simple language, yet the images do stand out with a certain indianness, be it the words used or the situations described. Another prominent example of this is her poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs”:

> It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
> To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
> Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
> Jingling. Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with
> Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
> They danced, oh, they danced till they bled… (Das 1965: 1)

Nevertheless, by choosing to write about her locality (the use of the term locality in relation to Das is problematized as in her poetry it is reckoned that locality could also reflect a sense of pan-Indianness) from a language like English and by imbibing into it a certain indianness Kamala Das was creating a cosmopolitan space - through the language she calls “half Indian, half English”. For her, who straddled pluralities, it became inevitable that she wrote in such a language which opened up the possibilities of articulating such an existence.

It has been observed that Indian critics disagree about the significance of Das’ choice to write of her experiences as an Indian woman in English, with some scholars suggesting that, in her shunning of the traditional aesthetic form, she has created a new language for the expression of colonial contradictions. As Pramod K.Nayar says in his *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*:
The local language engages and negotiates with the ‘foreign’ one before settling into a hybridized form. . . . What this means is that there is evidently no ‘standard’ English being used by postcolonial writers. English has been multiplied, fragmented, hybridized, bowdlerized, and indigenized by authors and cultures across the former colonies. Indigenization of the language here marks a process of postcolonial resistance (through adaptation and rejection of standard language). (2008: 251)

Consequently, English began to be decolonized or localized. What is visible here is a cosmopolitan nature which as Pramod K. Nayar says “… lends a dualism, a schizophrenia, to both native English and the immigrant in what is a fluid act of mutual transformation.” (Nayar 2008: 214-215). Indian English poets are migrants if we consider English language as the country into which they are forced to migrate. Metaphorically, that is the case in India with the colonial legacy of English medium educational institutions.

On the other hand, this English now a pertinent part of everyday reality becomes localized and in effect produces multiple narratives evoking Bakhtian heteroglossia. Interestingly, the cultural theorist Simon Gikandi in his essay — “Between roots and routes: Cosmopolitanism and the claims of locality” discusses cosmopolitanism in relation to the claims of locality, taking issue with the term’s inherent universalist, transnational ideals, arguing that differences and inequalities persists. (Wilson et al. 2010: 22-35)

This aspect is fore grounded in the works of poets who were prominent around the advent of the new millennium. From the 1990’s, a slow but sharp shift is recognized in the Indian English literary scene. Kamala Das at this point of time was
entering the second phase of her poetic career donning the nuanced roles as politician and activist. It was the time when, apart from the blooming of the myriad poetic selves, there is a trend towards localization. They wrote in the same language, but they brought in nuances of their roots. Strangely, it was not a pan-Indian root.

For instance, in Eunice D’Souza there is a subtle yet prominent presence of her Goan catholic heritage, in Imtiaz Dharker problematization of gender and religion (some of the statements made by Das in the persona of Suraiyya, related to her experiences as a convert to Islam led to her being compared with Imtiaz Dharker), in Agha Shahid Ali dialectics of displacement – physical and psychological, in Hosang Merchant a queer voice, while in Meena Kandaswamy the strong undercurrents of caste politics of contemporary India, and the list goes on, not to mention the increasing number of poets of the Indian diaspora. However, it does not mean that they do not write on common themes, but they stand out because of their engagement with a particularity. What is evident here is the new avatar of Indian Literature in English – where it has to be understood as Indian Literatures in English as its singularity lies in its plurality. In fact, this is a direct result of the evolving process of globalization complemented by cosmopolitanism as echoed in the introduction of After Cosmopolitanism by Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin and Bolette Blaagaard:

…Cosmopolitanism should be concerned with specificity rather than generality, groundedness, rather than abstractness, engagement rather than distance and interaction rather than reflection. It becomes a cosmopolitics, by adopting embedded and embodied perspectives that takes our actual situated location as starting point, rather than a timeless and placeless perspective.

(2013: 2-3)
Even though all these poets are clubbed under the term Indian English poets what stands out even in this universality are the subtle evidences of differences, alternative realities and multiple perspectives. For instance, Hosang Merchant in his poem “Ashes of Gandhi” alludes to the reality that is ‘becoming’ India. He says:

you, Father of the Nation, take me by your

thin hand, trembling like a brother-ascetic

sex-denying (dead, dead like us in this garden)

Belonging to the nation and belonging

to no one.

The sarcastic tone becomes loud as the poem progresses capturing our attention to the reality around us as he continues to say:

The nation too belonging

to no one – Despoiled

by the rich. And I reach out in the fetid Indian summer…

…As on your grave waves a strand

of sad homespun, left there

by some Italian virgin who became

an Indian widow: you take all

with you, the Hindu, as the dust stirs

amid the first big raindrops  (Menka 2013)
Along a similar vein is Kamala Das’ poem “The Flag”

It is time to say goodbye to your charms
Dear flag, to your old,
Meaningless pride, to your crude postures of
Honour, to the lies
Your colours tell, to the false hopes you did
Extend, to your old
Macabre dance in the blueness of the sky…. (1965: 21)

This poem even when published in the 1965 is a bold specimen that evokes quite a similar thought which is largely a part of the contemporary Indian poetry and another variant is Meena Kandasamy’s as she writes in “Advaita: The Ultimate Question”: “Non Dualism/Atman Self/Brahman God/Are Equal/And Same.” In her poetry a different India is represented, but an India nevertheless. However her play with the form, and the choice of words are poignant.

One More

Final Question

Can My

Untouchable Atman

And Your

Brahmin Atman

Ever Be

One

? (www.poemhunter.com)
In effect, the reality that is India is different for each and that is what gets communicated.

For a poet like Temsula Aao, what Mamta Kalia says might not be an immediate concern, even though both their concerns are real and relevant. Indian English poetry has evolved in such a way that it expects an informed and responsive reader who is aware of the nitty-gritty of any poet, be it region, religion, mother tongue, ideology, belief and such. So what is found here in the realm of Indian English poetry is a coexistence of differences; generality/universality with a specificity/plurality.

In other words contemporary Indian English poetry is in itself cosmopolitan, in the words of Jeremy Waldron signifying hybridity, fluidity and recognizing the fractured and internally driven character of human selves and citizens, whose complex aspirations cannot be circumscribed by national fantasies and primordial communities. (Benhabib: 2006) Indian English poetry and Indian literatures in English is a cosmopolis – a fertile site of convergences and divergences, with equal berth for both.

To attempt an answer to the questions with which this chapter began; the dialectical relationship between Indian and English is what unifies diversity. It is Indian because it is English otherwise the literature would be identified as Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam and so on. As GJV Prasad says:

… the question of Indianness comes up only because the poetry is in English—a language grafted onto the various trees of Indian languages, a language that seems to have taken no roots in our country. … Indian English poets are hence faced with an almost impossible task—of shaping and
renewing a language which they cannot call their own, not with complete assurance and acceptance. And this leads a majority of them to affirm their Indianness even if rather obviously. (Prasad 1999: 15)

In the early Indian English poets what was communicated as Indianness is an ideal – an ideal they hold onto in order to pacify themselves for using a foreign language. While in the evolutionary process what is projected is the reality. This explains the need for a plural marker as each writer in the genre of Indian English Literature brings to their writing their own Indias or an idea of each of them being an Indian. When Kamala Das says “I am Indian” she is asserting a sense of universality – a pan Indian identity. Yet in the same breath she says “—very brown, born in Malabar” (Das 1965: 62), which is a subtle indication of the differences that permeates her like any Indian. She implies through her poetry that as a postcolonial ‘cosmopolitan’ citizen it is impossible to have a singular sense of identity. Yes, she is an Indian but this seemingly universal term is wrought with differences. Hence, when engaging with writing in ‘English’ in India, it becomes mandatory to use the plural marker, Indian Literatures in English, as it is the only way out of the conundrum, as in the words of Shashi Tharoor the singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural.(1997: 8) Singularity in India is “internally rich and disparate plurality”. (Brennan 1997: 1-2).

It is imperative here to call into context the opening quote. Interestingly, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had stated that nationality is a good thing to a certain extent, but universality is better. All that is best in the great poets of all countries is not what is national in them, but what is universal. Their roots are in their native soil; but their branches wave in the unpatriotic air, that speaks the same language unto all men, and their leaves shine with the illimitable light that pervades all lands. These
lines are taken from his novel Kavanagh and is part of the conversation between Mr. Hathaway – an aspiring magazine editor and Mr Churchill an aspiring writer in a small town of America. The background to the novel is the cry for a national literature - truly American in character- dissociating itself completely from the European traditions or influences. However, through Mr. Churchill, Longfellow argues for a universal literature which has to be seen as a continuum rather than an imitation and hence there should not be a breaking away from it but a means of taking forward those influences by projecting on to it the unique identity of North America. As he says, let us be natural and we shall be national enough.

There are clear parallels between the Indian situation and what is explicated through the novel. Even more interesting is M.K. Naik’s amendment of these words. He argues that nationality in literature is good because it leads to universality and its absence to triviality. But in the present context this statement has to be reworked as the idea of nationality itself is questioned here. The focal points in the case of Longfellow are nationality, universality and imagery of the tree. In the Indian English literary scenario, the national and the universal coalesce, bringing into its fold the elements of locality- wherein the language – Indian Englishes—though an oxymoron, communicates the reality. Thus, what is reckoned here is a dovetailing of the national, universal and the local— there is no assimilation or transformation, but a dovetailing — which maintains the characteristics of the whole without changing or ruining that of each. The imagery however, goes a long way in understanding the evolution of Indian English poetry and the elements of cosmopolitanism embedded within.

In the Indian context today, being rooted in the native soil takes on a parochial nuance. The roots of each poet are grounded in their respective region, but in India. Region does not necessarily indicate a place it could be a vantage point. But
their roots are spread far and wide. It is a cliché to evoke the banyan tree here but clichés are true most of the time. Understanding the precariousness of the contemporary Indian literatures in English is possible only if the tree is the banyan tree where the branches eventually grow down to be part of the roots. The leaves thus become the carriers of a unique ambivalence – a legacy where the roots are local but the branches universal. In a way the banyan tree becomes an image for representing the notion of cosmopolitanism. Given the present scenario it is impossible to exist as either national or universal. Being cosmopolitan, with its many nuances, is the viable option. Being rooted and routed simultaneously.

Having had a sweeping look into the role played by language in both the discourses – cosmopolitanism and Indian Literatures in English, it is pertinent here to call into context the location of Kamala Das and how it has engaged with the various ideas dealt with so far and see how she is part of this tradition yet different from it. (A few instances were delineated in the earlier section) This has to be approached from two points of entry – one through the use of language and the second by engaging with how she locates herself within the evolving discourse which is evident in her eclectic thematic concerns. Her location and its role in the discourse will be engaged with at length in the next section.
2. 4. Locating Kamala Das in the Cosmopolis

She is the inheritor of many traditions, the regional cultural traditions of Kerala and the pan-Indian tradition… She is also heir to two poetic traditions, that of Malayalam whose roots go back into ancient Tamil Sangam poetry and medieval folklore, and that of the Indian English poetry beginning with Henri Derozio or Toru Dutt: she herself had two poets in the family, Balamaniamma, her mother and Nalapat Narayana Menon, her maternal uncle. She did not have a university education; she is a bilingual writer, writing mostly stories and memories in Malayalam and mostly poem in English. All these have directly or indirectly gone into the making of her poetry. (Das 1996: 12)

There is a unique approach that is visible in Kamala Das’ engagement with language while writing in English. The reasons behind it have to be brought into the frame now. At the outset, one fact that cannot be side-lined is how she brings to herself and her poetry a pervasive multifariousness. This is largely due to an ambit of influences on her from all quarters. As Satchidhanandhan rightly points (refer to the lines above) out in the Preface to Kamala Das’ collection of poetry *Only the Soul knows how to Sing*, Das’ poetry and persona are problematized by her peculiar situatedness. For instance, there are many traditions of which she is a part, but she does not belong to any of these explicitly either. Thus the inheritance that she can boast of is a presence problematized by absence, as Jacques Derrida.xx maintains, “… the present becomes the sign of signs, the trace of traces.” (156)

This crucial aspect as far as Das is concerned, has played a huge role in inventing for herself, a plurality of selves- a cosmopolis of the self, which in a way led to the nuances of ambivalence flavouring her works particularly her verse. Thus, it can be posited that Das creates within her a cosmopolis, which is her inheritance,
which in a way is ironically characterised by elements of disinheritance. This peculiarity is what problematizes this chapter too, as it is posited in this chapter that when the elements of cosmopolitanism in Das is traced it has to be acknowledged that she has invented a cosmopolitan identity for herself which is beset with a sense of fragmentation largely due to her adherence to the many traditions of which she was a part.

However, the endeavour is to prove that her poetry and her writings at large were to great extent influenced by all these aspects. These words of Satchidhanandhan thus becomes a point of departure for investigating the catalogue of complexities that became the inheritance of Kamala Das which in a way points to the many resonances of the concept of cosmopolitanism. Thus the focus is on how these aspects/ influences went on to impact her subjectivity and consequently her verse and how she went on to create/ invent a cosmopolis of her self which being a fragmented and multifarious self is defined by a sense of disinheritance.

Towards this end, it can be posited that a central motif of dislocation comes into play in her life thereby flavouring her verse. In other words, her inheritance which is a disinherited self is linked to dislocation on many levels. While engaging with this notion, the nuances of cosmopolitanism is brought onto the scene mainly through the notion of “transnation” as explicated by Bill Ashcroft and how there is a sense of multifariousness within a subject who is subjected to myriad levels of dislocations. He uses the term in relation to India and China where within the borders of the nation itself there is a need to cross the state boundaries. So in effect, even without moving beyond the national boundaries (as is the case with notions like transnationalism) there are migrations within and dislocations on many planes.
As far as Das is concerned the dislocations or displacements have to be engaged with on many quarters. First and foremost is her sense of geographical/physical dislocation. This aspect colours a major chunk of her poetic output as right from her childhood she has been used to migrations. Her childhood, divided between Calcutta and her ancestral home Nalappat did impact her writing as Shahnaz Habib (2009) rightly points out in his obituary to Kamala Das: “This early lesson in dislocation may have inspired many of her literary themes – the vulnerable child-woman trying to create meaning in an inconstant world; nostalgia for a serene, rural past; the unfair privileges of caste and wealth; and the contradictions of motherhood.”

These geographical dislocations/ displacements works in the psyche of Kamala Das on myriad levels mainly because along with these migrations are also the parallel migrations of the nation as a whole. The initial displacement as a child to Calcutta happened in the colonial period, in the pre –independent India, when the entity called an Indian was not yet in place. Even though there was a crisis of identity as such which was defined by a definite side lining or discrimination or stereotyping. However, the major challenge to her self came post-independence when, after her marriage she moved to metropolis when she needed to assert herself as a political entity, as a citizen of the nation which came to be known as India, where she is uprooted from her ancestral home and village in Kerala to metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata. Thus, this geographical dislocation was for her flavoured by a political dislocation mainly to do within in her sense of subjectivity, evident in her poem “An Introduction”.

Running parallel to this is a spacio-temporal dimension when Kamala Das finds herself in a warp of pre- colonial Malabar, colonial Calcutta and post- colonial India. Where exactly does she place herself in this evolving dialectics. However,
things were not as easy as was seen. The difficulty is visible in her poems verging on ambivalence, particularly the first group of poems highlighting a sense of nostalgia. (Refer to Appendix C)

Adding to this is her marriage which was not going anywhere, mainly due to the many levels of incompatibility. Complementing this sense of displacement is also her psychological distancing from her roots, particularly her grandmother and the regional scape of Malabar which had a huge impact on her mindscape. She says in “Composition”: “The only secrets I always/ withhold/ are that I am so alone/and that I miss my grandmother” (Das 1967: 37). She says in “The Wild Bougainvillea”: “There was a time when I/ Was sad in Calcutta, a few summer days That passed slowly, and/ Moodily, like mourners behind a bier (Das 1965: 14) Here Das connects her self, her love, her unrequited love to the city and its deadness.

Then there is the linguistic dislocation wherein she starts writing in English – a conscious decision which went on to affect her literary inheritance a lot, which was discussed at length through an analysis of her poem “An Introduction” in Chapter One. A few lines from “The Munafique” also highlights this:

Here I was, an uneducated
village lass writing in a foreign tongue what seemed to resemble poetry, music or some kind of esoteric exotica.

I learnt with a thrill
that I had better things to do
other than housekeeping. ((Das and Kohli 2009: 27)
Even though she is well versed in both English and Malayalam it has been argued by many critics of hers that she is not an expert either in English or Malayalam. Her vocabulary in Malayalam is limited and when her sentences in English and Malayalam are analysed syntactically there is an emanating presence of one onto the other. Thus, these two languages in the hands of Kamala Das/Madhavikutty play with the notion of boundaries too on a linguistic plane and apparently they belong to the no man’s land the narrow strip of land between the borderlines, and point to a sense of translingualism rather than bilingualism or interlingualism. This dilemma found in the use of language is reflected in her life and themes of her writings too, as reflected by the poems of Das which were discussed in the earlier section. (another aspect of this will be the focus of chapter three)

Finally with her conversion to Islam also sets in a spiritual displacement which she powerfully communicates through her poems in Closure. To cite an example would be a few lines from the poem “Timepiece”:

conversion to Islam bothers them all. Muslims and Hindus,
both factions are bothered. I am not Mother Teresa eligible for canonization.
I am not the smiling Amma prepared to embrace all.
I am some kind of a worm now laid under
the microscope. My fame itself is in doubt,
it's crisscrossed with blunders. (Das and Kohli 2009: 49)
Again in the poem “The Munafique” she says:

I shall no longer heed

the way religion-game is played out. Let God be my only playmate,

I shall bear him

in my bloodstreams, conceal him within from all who come visiting to discuss

the need to demarcate

each religion and the need to hate the unbeliever,

the kafir, the munafique. (Das and Kohli 2009: 26)

These displacements or internal migrations have led to a sense of fragmentation in her. Is it not inevitable, then, that her writing becomes an attempt at articulating this fragmentation? When it comes to the notion of cosmopolitanism in postcolonial theory this is a concern that stands tall.

This dilemma which translated slowly into an ambivalence gets reflected in her self as a multiplicity or multifariousness and becomes a paradoxical entity as is also understood from her poetry. It is at this point that one has to talk about the play of Uma Parameshwaran, titled “Rootless but green are the Boulevard trees” the paradox inherent in Das is also along the similar line and the image of the greenness and the rootlessness is indeed a paradox in Kamala Das as explicated by Simon Gikandi when he stresses on a certain level of locality, a sense of rootedness characterising the rootlessness, a certain level of locality colouring the universal. This is the paradox that Kamala Das inherits. This is the paradox that came to define the cosmopolis that is Kamala Das. Thus, from a dislocation of self to a multifariousness to an evident paradox of being rooted without any roots, it moves on to a bordered
world emanating into a sense of borderlessness. This is what makes her into a cosmopolitan entity and her poetry an evident offshoot of her experiences imbibing within it the many nuances of cosmopolitanism.

If it has to be posited that Kamala Das’ poetry has a cosmopolitan touch it would mean that her poetry stems out of multiple experiences. Her openness to themes, form and structure of poetry also adds to it and this could be an evident though indirect effect of her roots. The flexibility and playfulness could also take it to another level. As a person exposed to such a vast variety of experiences Kamala Das cannot but be a cosmopolitan.

Her poetry stemming from the deeply rooted personal realm moves on to a much wider canvas. In other words her personal narrative gains wider relevance and significance. This is in no way limited by the perception that she is cosmopolitan or her poetry is cosmopolitan because she wrote in English. The crux of my argument is that it is because she holds onto her roots that she is cosmopolitan or more importantly her horizon of knowledge which gave her the light to understand that devoid of roots growth is threatened and existence is threatened roots are needed to nourish even though the branches might be soaring high. This basic premise is what gives her the shades of cosmopolitanism and thus becomes the very same aspect that sustains her as a cosmopolis.

Incidentally, cosmopolitanism in her poetry is a paradox where there is universality yet differences, where she is rooted in her culture, yet not part of it – ironically both these aspects are like a necessary evil. In other words, she being rooted to her culture makes her cosmopolitan. The plurality lends her verse or leads her verse to openness – an openness characterized by a cosmopolitan touch in the sense that she
is open to different ideas and experiences. Her poetry opens up the possibilities of dialogue through differences. To give an example is her poem — “Night”:

The city’s night fills itself

with the gush of limousines

starting off, or

arriving;

the bark of miscellaneous dogs

taken out to pee

But when I am about to sleep

the past catches up

and bullock carts rumble

on the dirt roads

of my village where

a grandmother lulled me to sleep.

(Das and Kohli 2009: 10)

When she is describing a night scene in the city, the images that come to her mind are those of her village. The paradox here is that, for her, the limousines and the bullock carts exist in the same skein of thought.

Along the same vein are some of her poems that focus on death and its rituals. One such poem is “Too Late for Making up” : “All I could do was light an oil lamp/And place it beside your head/ After they had wrapped you in off white khaddar/
And laid you on our drawing room floor (1996: 49) Another example is “A Requiem For My Father”:

This time for Onam I shall not decorate my floor

With flowers, father, for I dressed your chest with jasmine

When you died a few weeks ago

And I shall not repeat…

We tied strips of gauze round your chin

And painted your brow with fragrant ash.

You were laid out on the drawing room floor,

A dead Nayar gets only the cold floor to lie on. (1996: 144)

These poems from an intensely personal realm highlights the rituals that are associated with death in the Nayar tradition. When seen in relation to the earlier poems on death rituals (“In Love”), what is evident is the ease with which Das treads both the paths. The same aspect can be taken to another level also.

For instance, when Kamala Das says in her poetic manifesto, — “An Introduction”: — “I am Indian” she is asserting a sense of universality. Yet in the same breath she says — “very brown, born in Malabar” (Das 1965: 62), which is a subtle indication of the differences that permeates each individual as an Indian. She states through her poetry that as a postcolonial cosmopolitan citizen it is impossible to have a singular sense of identity. Yes, she is an Indian but this seemingly universal term is also wrought with differences. When it comes to Kamala Das she herself becomes the community. In other words she entails within her a cosmopolis. A
similar engagement with subjectivity is reverberated by Bill Ashcroft concept of “transnation” which,

… is a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in between the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted. . . . If we think of the “transnation” extending beyond the geographical, political, administrative and even imaginative boundaries of the state, both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation, we discover it as a space in which these boundaries are disrupted, in which national and cultural affiliations are superseded, in which binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other are dissolved.

(Wilson, Sandru and Welsh 2010: 73)

The notion of the national subject is not based on the notion of singularity but plurality. Ashcroft’s view that the subjects of a transnation are constituted by an in-betweenness is relevant to understand Kamala Das. For instance, her self, the self she calls “I” in her poem is encompassed by notions of political identity, personal identity, regional identity and linguistic identity The ambivalence in her is connected to this aspect. The scope for plurality of the subject reflected in her poetry insinuates the traces of cosmopolitanism.

2.5. Conclusion

There is a contradiction here. And coherence too. It is this contradiction in coherence that is of utmost significance.

- V.C.Harris
If India is posited as a transnation, and if we go by P.Lal’s claim that Indian flavour is cosmopolitan, the Indian English is thus a palimpsestous entity whose quintessential feature is the presence of absences, or a co-existence of many presences even in absences. Indian English is thus a trace. The best way to understand this paradox is through Kamala Das, as has been done in this chapter.

Kamala Das carries within her multifariousness which was a direct and indirect effect of the experiences she had. Not just her personal experiences but the experience of coloniality which has been a part of her life also impacts her. Thus when she writes poetry in English it becomes an articulation of these experiences which are at times, contrasting. In other words her poetry is watermarked by these aspects and it does articulate a unique world which is universal yet fraught with differences. Ironically, this paradox is her inheritance. In effect, in her writing she engages with the differences that underline the universality that is Kamala Das where there is also a converging of the differences as well as a transcending of it, bringing in aspects such as palimpsestousness and cosmopolitanism.

In effect in this chapter the polemics surrounding the use of English by the writers in the tradition of Indian Literatures in English has been delineated at length with inroads from the theory of cosmopolitanism. Placing Kamala Das within these discourses have also been done. However the question that needs to be answered is whether Kamala Das has something unique to add to the discourse apart from what has been done by the many poets. I argue that she is a true cosmopolitan mainly on the following grounds.

If the other poets in the genre are considered, they do bring a specificity pertinent to a particular region, however Das informed by her multiple dislocations
entails within her a true pan-Indian cosmopolitan sensibility. She does not specifically have an agenda as her poetry is often open ended—opening up a new horizon of questions rather than answers.

While engaging with the nuances of locality also Das has more to contribute. The roots that she alludes to in her poetry is not just her Malayali roots even though it is there predominantly. But she also emphasises an Indian root—a root by being local also to a considerable extent defies the local fervour. There is an engagement with particularity or specificity as well as an engagement with a generality but both these aspects differ from poet to poet. However, Kamala Das stands out as she brings in an ethos of her Malabar roots, that of her migrant pan-Indian root and yet she moves beyond both and is tied down by neither. Das essentially moves beyond the debates of the dualisms and undertakes a conscious blurring of the boundaries that pervade her, by bringing in a continuum. However, the aspect of a local/regional sensibility that she holds near to her heart is a crucial ingredient of her poetry which is explored in the next chapter.
Notes

i See Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *Kavanagh*

ii See Weisbord, Merrily. *The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das.*

iii See Spencer, Robert. “Cosmopolitain Criticism”


v See Appiah, Kwame Anthony: “Education for Global citizenship”

vi See Cosmopolitan, Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary new 8th edition

vii See Das, Kamala. “An Introduction” *Summer in Calcutta*

viii See Gagarin, Michael. “Cosmopolitanism”, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*

ix Ibid

x See Brown, Garrett Wallace. “Cosmopolitanism.” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*

xi See Cane, Peter and Joanne Conaghan. “Cosmopolitanism”. *The New Oxford Companion to Law*

xii See Buchanan, Ian. “Cosmopolitanism”, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*

xiii See Gikandi, Simon. “Between roots and routes”

xiv See note 1

xv Cosmopolitain is used here in the common parlance to indicate an all-encompassing presence, beyond differences. During the period of colonial expansion English was such a presence.

xvi I start off from Toru Dutt mainly because of her major concerns as well as her use of language

xvii http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/to-my-native-land/

xviii See T.B.Macaulay’s Minutes on Education of 1835

xix See Kohli, Devendra. “Introduction” Kamala Das: Collected Poems

xx See Derrida, Jacques. Speech and Phenomena and other essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs.

xxi This is a play written by Uma Parameswaran which reflects the life of a Canadian-Indian family highlighting the dilemma arising out of the conflicts between first generation and second generation immigrants and the title poignantly capture the paradox of their lives.

xxii See Harris, V.C. “Extruding Autobiography: Kamala Das and the Poetics of Subjectivity”. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*