Chapter: 3

“Someone Else’s Song”

Kamala Das: A Ventriloquist of the Vernacular

(This chapter takes forward the language question that was engaged with at length in chapter two, by focusing on the tangible and intangible presence of vernacular in Indian English through an analysis of Kamala Das’ poetry)

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other.... Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world.... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

- Ngugi wa Thiong’o

English in India is a nowhere language; spatially it does not belong anywhere, and so its poet, as one who would make his very habitation in the language of his most vital speech necessarily grasps himself as exiled. And those who have not raised or sunk their voices to consciousness of exile everywhere bespeak it by virtue of the tongue they use.

- Meena Alexander

3.1 Introduction

The scope of modern Indian Literatures in English is lies in the importance given to the sense of self-reflexivity. This has largely to do with the use of the language – Indian English, to be precise Indian English ‘es’ - a chutneyfied version of the original ‘other’. This engagement with language is common to all writers of Indian Literatures in English, irrespective of genres, as it is an inevitable part of
existence, and literature by its play with language, is able to make sense of this existence. In a way, language makes the existence possible and meaningful. It can be reckoned that Kamala Das has a peculiar engagement with it. She played with its limitations and tapped the many possibilities. A crucial aspect of the play undertaken by her pertains to her use of vernacular, and how her engagement with languages becomes a fertile ground for negotiating her regional identity, becomes the focus of this chapter.

Right at the outset, there are certain aspects that are problematized. Firstly, Kamala Das was a writer who was well versed in her native tongue Malayalam. So when her poetry in English is approached should one be worried about the possibility of the vernacular presence? If there is a presence was this a deliberate thing or is it just an unconscious part of her being? Even when she wrote in English she had it rooted in her land. Hence, it is not wrong to say that this element of localization is what makes her poetry cosmopolitan. (which was touched up in chapter two) Thus, this chapter deals with the ways in which Das brings about a certain transformation, localization to the English that she uses in her poetry. In a way, this has largely to do with how she responded to her lived reality.

At this juncture the main argument is problematized by the words of P.P.Raveendran, a prominent scholar of Kamala Das in his preface to the collection *Best of Kamala Das*: “For in opting to write creatively in a language that is not his or her own, the Indian English writer is to a certain extent affecting a deliberate retreat from the world of lived experience. This of course is a much discerned question, the intricacies of which can be debated endlessly.” (ix) Is Kamala Das retreating from her reality? If so, is she doing it deliberately? And how far is it possible for a language to communicate the lived experience?
For a migrant like Kamala Das the language that she created was a unique one precisely because her lived experiences could not be communicated through her own language. To understand this peculiar situatedness of Das, this chapter calls into context the notion of ventriloquism. In effect, this chapter starts off by contextualising the presence of vernacular in the genre “Indian Literatures in English” by engaging with the nuances of the use of vernacular in the discourse, then ventriloquism as a notion is explicated to approach the apparent paradox that the presence of vernacular initiates. The third section goes into an analysis of Kamala Das poetry, particularly her engagement with local and national myths, traditions and customs as a means of ventriloquing the vernacular.

3.2 Indian Literatures in English and the Question of the vernacular

The popular definition of Indian English Literature as given by Wikipedia is the body of work by writers in India who write in the English Language and whose native or co – native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is a bit problematic here to quote Wikipedia as a source but this is a conscious thing as the intention here is to start off from a popular notion which becomes pertinent to the upcoming narrative. The debates on the use of English as a language was discussed in the earlier chapter also where the many nuances of the process of Indianisation and the possibility of Indian Englishes was dealt with at length.

By stating that English could be a native or co – native language also entails within it more questions, which implies that it is possible for the languages to work off both ways, English colouring the native language and the native language colouring English. Is it then as critics like Makarand Paranjape point out: “By its very definition, it is a hybrid, a sort of liaison literature, mediating between the contrary
pulls of the metropolis and the nation, between a cosmopolitan modernity and ethnic traditionalism.” (1049) In both the cases there is an aspect of displacement.

So there is a sense of being exile without a physical or geographical movement as such. This aspect takes an added significance in India by taking into account, the possibilities inherent in vernacular languages – which by definition refers to the language spoken in a particular area or by a particular group, especially one that is not the official or written language. Most often these languages are the first tongues (mother tongue) Thus, these Indian English writers who are not yet an exile bring their native/ vernacular languages to the English that they write, which brings into context the opening quote of Meena Alexander and also alludes to the transformation that she talks about in the essay “Exiled by a dead Script!”:

In order to make poetry in India with English and yet resolutely refuse exile, the language itself must transform. It must concoct itself to become mimetic of muteness- their muteness which is appropriated as the poet’s own – and so subvert the invisible ideology of Indian English

(Kulshrestha 1980: 24-25)

Interestingly, M.K.Naik in his essay “Echo and Voice in Indian poetry in English” says: “Two voices are there in Indian poetry in English: the first is an authentic voice, the voice of the true poet, — a man speaking to men : the other voice is not so much a voice as a sheer trick of ventriloquism, which make puppets masquerade as men.” (Kulshrestha 1980: 32) however, which voice is the true one and which the puppet’s is the question. Though the views on Indian English poetry are many, ( a significant portion of it was discussed in the earlier chapter) it is important to dwell upon M.K.Naik’s notion of imitation against authenticity and Meena Alexander’s exile and muteness all of which gains significance when we
engage with the idea that what Indian writers in English are doing is effecting a
ventriloquism of the vernacular. This metaphor enables one to move beyond the
problems beset in labelling this English as Indian English – which is seen as an
offshoot of the process of indianisation. However, on close scrutiny it is reckoned that
it is not exactly an indianisation – a homogenisation, but a hetrogenisation through
vernacularisation that is taking place. In order to go deep into this aspects it is
pertinent to look into the nuances of the concept of ventriloquism.

3.3 Ventriloquism and the contexts to Indian Literatures in English

Certain aspects of the vernacular presence has to be understood with the help
of the metaphor of Ventriloquism. At the outset, ventriloquism is the art of speaking
without moving ones lips and of making it look as if the voice is coming from another
person. It is a form of entertainment in which the presence of two entities are crucial–
the ventriloquist and the ventriloquist’s dummy, which becomes the crucial aspect in
delineating this metaphor further. The underlying confusion between the voice heard
(the ventriloquist’s dummy’s) and the voice spoken (the ventriloquist’s) in the act of
ventriloquism is linked to the subtle existence of plural voices in Indian Literatures in
English, particularly in Kamala Das’ literary universe.

The act of ventriloquism is commonly called in English as the ability to throw
one’s voice, to give the impression that there is another source for the voice. It could
also mean on a literary plane the expression of one’s views and attitudes through
another; through a fictional character or a literary persona. The “ventriloquism effect”
refers to the perception of speech sound as coming from a direction other than their
true direction due to the influence of visual stimuli from an apparent speaker. A
‘dummy’, usually, a puppet is used as the medium. The existence of this
‘ventriloquist’s dummy’ is totally dependent on the ventriloquist. In other words,
some strings are to be pulled from outside for the dummy to work. However, the existence of and the relationship between the ventriloquist and the dummy opens up many debates. Ironically, their existence is relative – in order for the ventriloquist to exist, there should be a dummy and in order for the dummy to exist there should be a ventriloquist.

Apart from these pertinent components, the voice also needs to be engaged with at length. It is the voice that is listened to, irrespective of the source. What is got is the voice, what we are worried about is the voice. Then what about the source? Which is important – the original source – the ventriloquist or the evident apparent source- the dummy? This can be put to rest by contextualising ventriloquism with acts such as mimicking and parodying.

Ventriloquism is used because, unlike mimicking or parodying, the act takes into account the dovetailing or an apparent interaction of two sources and the presence of these two in the voice that is sensed or heard. If the act of parodying is looked into there is one person who does the act and there is an allusion to another person whose absence is made use of. However, in the case of ventriloquism, there is the conscious presence of two agents or two sources and the dummy becomes an agent which can articulate anything, by tapping the element of visibility/accountability of this agent. For instance, people are there to listen to the inanimate dummy speak. So the ventriloquist makes use of this privileged positioning of the dummy to articulate things which do not usually get a rapt audience. In other words, ventriloquist dummy might be taken to be same (as it is inanimate), and the ventriloquists might change (no one is bothered about the change), but people pay to listen to the dummy speak because it has the ability/power to project the silence of the ventriloquists.
Projecting these aspects into the context of Indian Writing in English it is can be reckoned that even though the dummy seems to be speaking in an alien tongue the voice is actually a vernacular one. The voice does change here; we perceive it to be coming from somewhere else. In other words Indian English is affecting a process of ventriloquism to the vernacular. For instance, English – it is never a native Indian tongue but when the dummy speaks it seems to bring to us a perceived sense of nativity or ingenuity. The dummy, if taken to be Indian English, depends to some extend for its own survival on the ventriloquist who could quite naturally be the writer who is conversant not just with the language he projects into the dummy but also with the native, the vernacular, whose hues, no matter how lightly, colors the speech of the dummy.

In Indian literatures in English what is found is an act of throwing one’s voice. Here specifically the voice that gets thrown is the vernacular\textsuperscript{v}. Even when using English in India these writers do not become exiles as they transform English, they “deterritorialize”\textsuperscript{vi} it not with a mere muteness but with the muteness of a ventriloquist, which is paradoxically the muteness that gives voice to the dummy. Even when the vernacular is muted visually, it is spoken through the dummy. The act of muteness even when it is problematic renders the act of ventriloquism with many resonances. Moreover, since the existence of the ventriloquist and the dummy being co–terminous evokes the idea of treating English and Indian English(s) as an extension of each other. But here in the case of the act of ventriloquism the idea of mirroring entities is taken a step more.

The process of ventriloquism is visible on two levels in Indian Literatures in English. On the one hand, the nuances of Indianness, is expressed in such a way using English where only a person conversant in Indian culture can understand it where the
language is simple everyday conversational English, yet the images do stand out with certain Indianness, whether it is the words used or the situations described which has already been discussed in the last chapter and an example for this is Kamala Das’ poem “The Bangles”. English is put through the process where there is a tangible presence of the vernacular, in order to communicate the essence of that experience. This brings us to the second level of ventriloquism, wherein we make that word; we make the mould of that word from the vernacular. When there are no equivalent words in English it is used like that without any attempts at translating. These two aspects that are present in Das’ poetry is delineated in the following sections.

3.4 The ventriloquist in Kamala Das

It is posited that Kamala Das’ poetry is an outcome of a process affecting a ventriloquism of the vernacular, in the way she subjects the language, English, to certain modifications communicating on one level her lived experiences which opens up many more layers, and on another level the sense of her roots. The first aspect has been touched upon in the earlier chapter where it is clear that she utilised the modified “Indian” English as a viable medium to communicate her immediate reality. The second aspect as to accommodating her roots, is manifested in the dovetailing of the myths, legends, folklores and traditions of her land into her verse and in the presence of vernacular words without translations in her verse. It has to be stated here that the presence of vernacular words without translation is not something unique to Kamala Das. Almost all of the writers in India unconsciously revert to it. However, the focus of this chapter is on how she dovetails her roots into her contemporary world, away from it in essence.
De-territorialising representations of the myths, the traditions and customs of India could be a way of bringing in the process of ventriloquism. However, deterritorialisation here, is evoked with same nuances as that of defamiliarisation – bringing in an estranging effect. Incidentally the rationale behind the action here is not exactly a awakening of the people from the complacencies into which they have fallen prey, but because a new way of articulation was needed to communicate the ambivalence that was inherent in the precarious conditions that governed subjectivities in the postcolonial scenario. This is highlighted in Das through a nuanced intervention into the national and regional myths.

3.4.1 The Ventriloquist’s intervention into the myths

The most prominent aspect in Kamala Das’ poetry is her interpretation of the Radha Krishna myth. Kamala Das highlights the Indian myth of Radha and Krishna, the epitome of eternal love. She gives the myth an earthly and bizarre touch. The poem “Radha Krishna” goes thus:

This becomes from this hour

Our river and this old Kadamba

Tree, ours alone, for our homeless

Souls to return someday

To hang like bats from its pure

Physicality… (Das 1965: 39)

Even when evoking the myths she had a faculty of linking it to her immediate lived reality and the images she uses are quite striking. On the one hand, there is the reference to “homeless souls” and on the other hand, the reference to pure physicality and the rather uncanny reference to bats. Comparing Radha and Krishna to bats could
be a bit outlandish. The bat imagery is also present in one of her poems “The Bats”, which even when not evoking the Krishna figure alludes to the concerns that are a poignant part of the Radha Krishna poems as is highlighted by the lines below:

My soul today is on its blinded, most
Frightened flight, like a bat that finds itself
In an alien zone of light.

From stranger to guest, from guest to
Lover, my beloved, when you take,
When you at least win, ignore the stain
Beneath dead eyes, the fatigue in my smile. (1965: 48)

When read in conjunction with the other Radha Krishna poems of Das, the conflict between body and soul and love and lust etc… (Engagement with dualism is a significant feature of Radha Krishna poems) is quite evident in these lines and another poem titled “Krishna”:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,
I cannot see beyond it.
Your darkness blinds me,
Your love words shut out the wise world’s din. (1996: 82)

The same meaning is communicated through a unique imagery in the poem “Ghanashyam”, where she says:

Shyam o Ghanashyam
You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows
Of my mind
And towards you my thoughts today
Must race like enchanted fish. . . (Das and Nandy 1979: 24)
In both the poems the image evoked for comparison is quite striking. In the first poem the comparison is to bats hanging while in the second Krishna is the fisherman and Radha the fish, also alluding to another myth that of the fisherman and the enchanted fish. These images do bring into the picture a transmutation of sorts – a kind of metamorphosis of the human into the animals – a kind of transposing of selves evoking a kafkaesque world.

Das evolves the myth especially Radha through her many poems. For instance in the poem “Radha” she presents Radha who, “. . . in his first true embrace” says, “O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting/ Nothing remains but/ You.” When it comes to the poem “The Maggots”, Radha answers to the question: “do you mind my kisses love, and she said/no, not at all, but thought, what is/it to the corpse if the maggots nip?”. Das describes Radha in the first poem as “. . . she was girl/ And virgin crying” and in the latter “That night in her husband’s arms Radha felt/ so dead . . .” (Das 1967: 15, 28) The words highlight the contrast that sets in a relationship’s evolution, from an elation of love to pure sarcasm at its intense physicality. Even when talking about the immortal love of Radha and Krishna she gives Radha the touch of any woman and links it with her own experiences. In “The Cobwebs” the transformation of Radha is so down to earth she can be any women who is jilted in love,

Do not look into Radha’s eyes O friends
For her soul lies dead inside
As cobwebs block the doorways, unused,
Grief now mars her lonely eyes
He has been gone for years, that Krishna who
Once was hers alone. Perhaps
Another holds him now, a lovelier and
More fortunate one. And yet

Poor Radha must live on, for life is long.

Radha is defamiliarised in many ways and to such a great extent that she is just like the familiar faces of the common woman that we encounter on a daily basis. Das connects her to the common people also when she says, “Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind.” (Das 1996: 128, 154) What is to be noted is the way in which the myth is yoked together with the mundane through the imagery Das utilises.

When Kamala Das transcends the Radha Krishna myth, she is giving Radha a universal significance. When she compares Radha or when she de-territorializes Radha she is acknowledging the fact this myth can have different dimensions. What is found here is a negotiation between cultural identity and national identity which form a peculiar dialectics in the Indian scenario. What could be a national identity - a pan Indian identity is problematized to a great extent by the regional cultural identity which is more prominent that the larger cultural sphere in reality. Radha – Krishna myth maybe a pan Indian myth, but in the verse of Kamala Das it gains a nuanced cosmopolitan touch wherein Radha mutates, where Radha’s issues become the issues of any random woman. This can be better understood from the following words:

Most postcolonial writers turn to local and indigenous myths and folk tales, even as they write in a form that is western. In most cases the western form is subverted and adapted through a process of indigenization, through the incorporation of local strategies, themes and images. The result is often a form that is … modified to suit the postcolonial’s requirements of a “nativized” genre. Thus myths have a certain political role – interrogating and undermining the monologic control of western forms.

(Nayar 2008: 228)
On another level there is a sense of identification with Radha which is evident in the way Das articulates the reaction of Radha. Radha has also started to talk back. Interestingly, it is possible to find links between the eternal quest of Radha for Krishna and that of Kamala Das for a self or for love as is explicated by the lines from the poem “A Phantom- Lotus”:

Any stone can make
An idol. Loving this one, I
Seek but another way to know
Him who has no more a body
To offer, and whose blue face is
A phantom- lotus on the waters of my dreams… (Das and Nandy: 12)

Another interesting take on this is given by Fritz Blackwell in his article “Krishna motifs in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das”. He takes up two poems of Das “Radha” and “Maggots”. He says in the article:

A favorite motif of the medieval bhakti or devotional poets of India, as well as of the later Himalayan Schools of Bhakti miniatures was the abhisarika – a woman going to meet her lover, braving the elements, blackness of night and dangers of the forest – including snakes and various categories of ghosts and goblins. She is, of course, Radha, or at least a gopi, and the lover she is risking life and social acceptance to seek, is Krishna. And it is all metaphorical of the Soul’s (Radha) quest for God (Krishna). Very often the poet identified himself with the heroine in the conventional signature line at the end of the poem.

In a way Kamala Das also identifies with Radha and maybe that is the reason why Radha has a very ironic and sarcastic tone at times. However, a lack of closure as to
the relationship with Krishna is what is highlighted by the poem “Radha’s Dream” from her last poetry collection *Closure*:

Oh Krishna

I did not for a moment believe

that you were a dream.

…………………………………………

How could I, poor Radha,

believe that you were

but a dream,

was paradise to be,

yet another dream? (2009: 9)

Kamala Das invokes a sense of de-territorialisation to the Indian myths, through imageries that are unconventional. Radha – Krishna is a reality that is there in the Indian ethos. However Das brings in a change through a creative dovetailing of the myths and language, a perfect blending of the voices of the ventriloquist and the dummy. In the section that follows, hoe Das effects the same by utilising the myths rooted in her regional ethos is looked into.

**3.4.2. Ventriloquist’s intervention into vernacular through myths**

Throughout many of her poems, she brings in images of Indian beliefs rooted in centuries old traditions as well as those traditions and customs and practices that are very particular to Nair ethos. In effect the element of vernacular in Kamala Das is something that transcends the meaning of the vernacular too. She engages with the nair ethos as well as the perceived Indian ethos on the same wavelength. For her the apparent differences in the customs disappear creating a kind of continuum where the
ultimate reality is what is perceived. For instance, her preoccupation with death and the rituals connected with it is one. In the poem “A Souvenir of Bone” she says:

The fugitive flame of the evening lamp on
The patio was the seed of the fire true, the seed of a gorgeous death

They will
Burn me then on a log and pick for each grieving son
A souvenir of bone (Das 1996: 99)

This is a clear reference to the culture mores of the Nair community and has largely to do with the rituals that are practised there.

On the other hand, in the poem “The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road”, she describes a typical Indian funeral procession, and the burning of the body on the funeral pyre, but ends the poem “My husband said, I think I shall/ Have a beer, it’s hot, /Very hot today.” (Das 1967: 29) The poem becomes a mélange of the old and the new. The old losing its significance in the midst of the new and the paradox where both co exists peacefully. This aspect is significant when we term Kamala Das as a cosmopolitan. In a way she is cosmopolitan as she sticks to her roots. Is she asserting her roots because she is trying to come to terms with her rootlessness? Is she trying to reproduce an identity that she recognizes by evoking the folklore, myths and traditions? The answer could lie in these words:

Postcolonial cultures’ reliance on myth and local legend is an effort at de-contamination, a process of freeing their cultures from colonialism’s pervasive influence. The return to roots – while running the very real danger of fundamentalism, reactionary nativism, and chauvinism – is an
attempt to gain a measure of self-affirmation that is not tainted by colonialism (Nayar 2008: 235)

Along with the subtle presence of the nair ethos, her grandmother and her ancestral home play a significant role in the many images that she evokes in her poems particularly those in which many of the customs prevalent in Kerala feature. Her poem “Blood” talks about her grandmother and in doing so alludes to many customs like going to the Shiva temple on Monday, burning her great grandmother over logs of mango tree etc., also referred to in “Anamalai Poems”: “in the southern wing of the ancestral/estate where the coconut trees have nailed down/ the matriarchs’ bosoms with thirsting roots. (1996: 138) In the poem “Evening at the Old Nalapat House” she says:

No lamps are lit at the Nalapat House
when the first star comes.

only my grandmother walk there
Then, though dead for eighteen years and wispy
As a shed of mist, walks on the white sand
Of the courtyard where she watched us play (Das 1996: 183)

And in “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/ …A dead Nayar gets only the cold floor to lie on. (Das 1996: 143) The period of mourning is evoked through two cultural points – onam – the harvest festival and the flower carpet that is created which is a main ingredient of the festivities. There is a strange coaxing
together of the festivities of Onam and the funeral rites both evoking the role of flowers in the cultural practice.

Again in the poem, “Honour”: “Honour was a plant my ancestors watered/ In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres.” All these subtle renderings of the traditions and customs of her land are used by her expertly. Interestingly, what is found is the ease with which she talks about all these without thinking about a need to clarify its significance. For her these are in her being and it surfaces unconsciously through her writing. Is there any need to highlight the significance here or translate it for her reader. She does not tend to do that as for her it is a reality just as marigold flowers adorn the dead body in any Indian funeral procession.

In poems like “The Swamp” she alludes to the folklores of the place which was imbibed into the customs, all images of something that highlights the strangeness of its use in another language. For instance these lines from “The Swamp”:

the bhagavatis oracle took two steps forward to swing
back again the chosen one with the long hair the waistlet of bells and the scimitar he spoke to my grandmother in a warble not his own I shall protect your descendants from illness and untimely death is this not enough and the old one her hands folded her eyes closed said yes it is enough i cannot ask for more (1967: 52)

Evoking another of the customs prevalent in the Nayar household are these lines:

i am the tainted bush the poisonous snakes retreat at three a.m while the others sleep i have no name of own and my past is a desolate terrain where memory like tall trees grow to my Malabar home years ago on hot noons the
devil dancers came walking past the bright rice fields behind them the pariahs reed wailed a long wail rising from the heat like a ribbon of pain (1967: 53)

The presence of the native sensibility in her ethos is evident in these lines: “i lit one/thousand and one lamps at our snake shrine praying for a mate such as he” (53) The sense seems to be misplaced when used in English. She is also, in a way, ventriloquing the muteness – an attempt at representing the sub-alternity in her poetry, as these lines from the poem “Nani” show:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself

In the privy one day.

. . . . . . . . . . . . .

Another Year or two, and, I asked my grandmother

One day, don’t you remember Nani, the dark Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother Shifted the reading glasses on her nose And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she? With that question ended Nani. Each truth Ends thus with a query. It is this designed Deafness that turns mortality into Immortality, the definite into The soft indefinite. They are lucky
Who asks questions and move on before

The answers come, . . . (Das 1996: 40)

But what we find here is a new kind of ventriloquism – where in there is a mingling of everyday reality – a chronicling of events of day to day life with the sudden introduction of fantasy as in the tales told by her grandmother or any other grandmother’s tale which had a strange way of transforming reality into fantasy and fantasy into reality. That is what happens here in the poems “Amavasi” and “the Palmyra Tree”, the latter alluding to the local myths of “a celestial being/ though not quite visible/ they hover as apparitions/ in spaces between the trees.” and the rest of the poem narrates the tale evoking the simplicity of a grandmother’s tale:

I saw it glimmer on
a moonless night but
my grandmother shut
the door and said tonight
is the Amavasi night,
girls must remain within. (33)

As,

On Amavasi nights the ghosts
get busy, they wander
among the trees which
they planted years and
years ago or peer in through
the bedroom windows to
catch a glimpse of their
descendants…(34)
The transformation of the celestial being (ghandharvan in Malayalam) into a mere ghost as the poem concludes has to be noted. Interestingly, complementing this male celestial being is the tale of Yakshi as told by “Ammalu Amma, ancestress of mine,”

It was said, long ago,
That a Yakshi, a celestial
Ogress, lived on the tree,
who descended at dusk,
disguised as a maiden,
to lure an unwary male
into her abode, and then
after a tumultuous mating
devoured his flesh and
flung down his bones.
Padmavati, the sweeper,
sware that she had many
a time swept away with
her broom the Yakshi’s
leavings: bit of bones.
Some nights when strong
gales rose from the
Arabian sea, lying beside
my sleeping grandmother
I heard the loud flapping of
the palmyra leaves and
the sound of bones cracking. (2009: 15-16)
The deterritorialisation to the myths is undertaken by Das on two levels. First, she writes in English these tales which have a sense of existence through orature as tales passed on through generations and told and retold by grandmothers. Secondly, these myths are brought down to the level of lived reality by bringing in mundane presences such as that of the sweeper in the poem quoted above. Thus she effects a sense of ventriloquism to the local myths.

3.5 Conclusion

According to the critic Sachidhanandan (Das 1996: 17) she is a “voleuses de langue”, a female Prometheus who steals the fire from her roots and life and infusing it into her poetry and language to bring out a certain kind of warmth. She steals certain nuances of her mother tongue Malayalam and infuses it into English with a unique tinge, which was tested in this chapter. It can be reckoned that Kamala Das holds within her psyche a genuine Indian sensibility, which is in essence cosmopolitan to revert to P.Lal. However she subtly dovetails it with the questions that are crucial to a postcolonial, cosmopolitan citizen. Her poetry thus informed by all these aspects is also a way of looking at her self. It has to be reckoned that her poetry becomes a kind of veil, but interestingly we are left with the question whether she was trying to hide things or reveal certain others. She is a cosmopolitan, which is evident through her openness, her acceptance of universality and the possibilities of plurality and differences. It is pertinent here to contextualise the quotes with which the chapter opened.

Ngugiwa Thiongó talks about a relationship with culture and how language and literature becomes means to engage with that relationship. Language as a means to perceive ourselves. And interestingly, Meena Alexander in her essay points to the “habituation” of each poet in the language which, in effect, by being a “nowhere
language” evokes a sense of exile within. Thus, all the poets in India find their existence as transmitters of culture in relation to a lived reality has to encounter an ambivalence. Overriding these two ideas is that proposed by P.P. Raveendran about the inability of a language like English to express the lived experience as in essence English is far removed from our day to day encounter with lived reality. But why then is it being used to express the same is the logical question?

A way to move beyond the contradictions or ambivalence can be observed in the way Kamala Das, has dealt with it. She has declared that English is the language that helps her to make sense of her reality. However, if by using a language like English she is able to make sense of the reality and by logic of its being an ‘other’ language emphasises the sense of ambivalence to a great extent. But on the other hand by bringing in the nuanced presence of vernacular, by inducting the ‘other’ into the normal isn’t the language being induced into the lived reality. In Kamala Das, what we find is the dovetailing of the mundane and the everyday with the mythical, which sometimes renders itself with an element of a schizophrenic distractedness. Thus, what is effected is a way of deterritorialising both the language and the experience, which is the only way possible.

However, as a bilingual writer, Kamala Das was a curious specimen. She did not set aside the two languages, neither did she stick to both. What she effected was a unique use of language which in a way highlighted a sense of immanence, where the nuances of one language can be traced in the other. The interesting thing about her is the way she manipulates both the languages and the bilingual is not the word that can be used to describe her, the most appropriate term seems to be “translingual” – as for her both the languages are felt as same as intrinsic part of her being and we do not
find her setting both the languages aside but she creates a continuum—where one
language emanates into the other and at times moves beyond the reality.

The idea of a translingual can be transmuted into the notion of ventriloquism
to describe the peculiar situatedness of Indian authors writing in English. There are
terms such as “multilinguality” and “polyglot fluidity” that have been used. And Bill
Ashcroft rightly asks if the colonial language releases the writing subject from the
myth of a fixed identity. All these are valid claims. However, when an act like
ventriloquism is inducted to engage with these questions it is possible to bypass the
problems in discerning the relation between English, vernacular languages and Indian
English. The only problem arises when we privilege the ventriloquist over the
ventriloquist’s dummy but if one is able to see beyond the need to validate a presence
then the whole problem is solved.

Language has been the essential focus of the two chapters, but from a broader
framework of postcolonialism and the discourses of cosmopolitanism. However, in
the next chapter this question is engaged with from a psychoanalytical point of view,
by calling into context the theories of Jaques Lacan who posited a relationship
between language and unconscious. The many nuances of this theory is engaged with
in order to mark down the ambivalence that is central to Kamala Das’ literary
universe.
Notes

i See Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind*

ii See Alexander, Meena. “Exiled by a script!”

iii The term is often associated with Salman Rushdie

iv I revert here to the word popular as a means of highlighting how the Indian English writers are perceived.

v In the 8th edition of Oxford advanced learners dictionary the term vernacular refers to the language spoken in a particular area or by a particular group, especially one that is not the official or written language. However, in India the use of vernacular is not as simple as that. The vernacular, to a large extent, is given the status of the official language with literature coming out in the same. Hence when the writers of the vernacular also writes in Indian English it becomes a debatable issue.

vi See Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*

vii She has written a story for children which is titled Panna which also has a similar setting

viii See Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari. “What is a Minor Literature?”