Chapter: 4

“Composition”

The structure of the unconscious in the language of Kamala Das

(This chapter engages with the use of language by Kamala Das and links it to subjectivity by inducting the psychoanalytical discourses of Jacques Lacan.)

The unconscious is that chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter. But the truth can be rediscovered; usually it has already been written down elsewhere

- Jacques Lacan

This creates an inevitable ambivalence in her poetry: she (Kamala Das) begins to distrust language or feels uneasy about it.

- K. Satchidhanandhan

4. 1 Introduction

Kamala Das admits poetry to be — “gut response” and employs a play with words that makes it difficult for readers to be immune to the pleasure of the writing itself, which at times, verges on incoherence. It is unconventional as it seems like an outpouring, a child’s babble that, with all its mysteries and evocation of private worlds, is unfathomable or at least not accessible to all. Moreover, the language of poetry is open-ended as opposed to the regular, seemingly coherent, use of language aimed at a fixed meaning. As far as Das is concerned, this aspect is something that stands tall. There is a plurality of voices in her poems and they seem to be born out of a silence reverberating from within. These voices evolve out of conflicts within her and ‘I’ is something that Das is preoccupied with, which becomes the rationale behind her being qualified as palimpsest.
When it comes to Kamala Das, the style of her writing itself focuses on the possibilities of the subjectivity that language can offer, as it is, in itself, performative. As this as the foundation, this chapter looks into the relation between language and subjectivity with the aid of a few concepts from the poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan.

This chapter starts off with an introduction to the key ideas of Jacques Lacan, particularly those pertaining to the link between language and unconscious and its subsequent association to identity. With the premises from Lacan, Kamala Das’ poetry is analysed with the aim of understanding her engagement with her multifarious selves and the apparent dichotomies and/ or multiplicity that she creates while engaging with the idea of ‘I’. Towards that end, the impact of memories on her poetry and her constant engagement with the ideas of loss and love is looked into with those poems that are rooted in Malabar and those that have at its centre her grandmother. Language and the process of using it to come to terms with loss and the notion of desire to fill up the loss as explicated by Lacan are imbibed into the understanding of such poems. Apart from this, this chapter also takes up an in depth analysis of the metaphors and symbols that have a recurring presence in her poetry.

4.2 Inroads into Lacanian psychoanalysis

Kamala Das’ poetry is characterised, on the one hand, with a play with language and on the other hand with a conscious engagement with ‘I’. It is as if she becomes the subject of her poetry to get an objective look at her self. Thus, it can be said that for her the idea of ‘I’ is constituted through her writings or her engagement with language. It is then imperative here to dig deep into the possibilities of the relation between the language and the self. The concept of subject being constituted in
language is crucial as far as Kamala Das’ writing is concerned. The post structuralist
psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has dealt with this aspect at length in his work.
According to him, a writer becomes a subject in his/her own work. This is evident in
Das, as Lacan says,

    It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that
    conforms to what I am but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of
    which I speak . . . And it is no less true if I take myself to the other,
    metaphoric pole of the signifying quest, and if I dedicate myself to becoming
    what I am, to coming into being, I cannot doubt that even if I lose myself in
    the process, I am in that process. (1977: 183).

The many nuances of this process that is evident in Kamala Das becomes the focus of
this chapter.

    Taking up three papers from Alan Sheridan’s translation of Jacques Lacan’s
    Écrits, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I” (abbreviated as
    MSFFI), “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”
    (FFSLP) and “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud”
    (ALURF), the keys ideas of Jacques Lacan—the orders of the Imaginary, Symbolic
    and Real, the Mirror Stage, the Subject of the Unconscious and the Unconscious
    structured like Language—are used to analyze the texts at hand. As Sheridan says in
    his translator’s note, it is impossible to view Lacan independently and while dealing
    with his concepts several contexts come into play (Lacan ix).

    Drawing on the phenomenological notions of “ex-istence” and “projecting
    outside” as formulated by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and Sartre’s notion
    of “nothingness” and “Subject-Ego distinction”, Lacan places Freud in a new light in
    MSFFI. The postulated pre-Oedipal phase, which covers the first six months of the
infant’s life, is where the child finds itself as part of the whole without any distinction of being from the surroundings. But with what Lacan calls the Mirror Stage, the period between 6 and 18 months, the infant is confronted with his image in a mirror—which can be any reflective surface, even its mother’s face. It sees itself or its body as a total form confusing the image with reality and a sense of pleasure and control is created when it thinks that it can govern the movements of this image and thereby its body. Even when the infant sees and feels his body in parts, the image gives its fragmented sense, a sense of unification. Thus the image is itself and not itself and a sense of alienation creeps in when the infant confuses the image and the self.

At this point the Ego starts developing, which for Lacan, is an effect of these images- an integrated self image before acquiring language is formed by the identification with the image. Hence an Imaginary Function and a blurring between these leads to the process of self construction. Lacan puts it thus: “We have to understand the mirror stage as identification . . . . the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image . . . this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination . . .” (Lacan 2). The critic Sean Homer is of the view that the ego’s function is to maintain the illusion of coherence and mastery refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation (25). This sets up a conflict or a sense of “otherness” or a need of the self to be recognized by the gaze of the other comes into play thereby placing the infant’s sense of mastery outside of itself, a “lack of being” or the Subject being alienated in its very being. Sheridan views Imaginary as a conscious or unconscious world of images perceived or imagined by the infant (Lacan xi) and the dilemma that it finds itself in stays at the core of its existence and plays a pivotal role at later stages in the formation of identity. This can be projected onto Kamala Das’ engagement with nostalgia, particularly through those poems
evoking her grandmother and the ancestral home, which in a way tries to articulate a sense of loss at the core of subjectivity, and the dilemma in forming a unified sense of self.

Radically deconstructing the Freudian notions of the Oedipal Complex and the Primary Process by using Claude Levi Strauss’s elementary structure of kinship, Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of Linguistic Sign and Roman Jakobson’s work on metaphor and metonymy, Lacan came up with the concepts of the Symbolic order and established the revolutionary role of language in psychoanalysis. When Lacan states, “This moment in which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates . . . the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations . . .” (Lacan 6), he is taking the Freudian Oedipal stage to a new level, where we are born into language and its structure and enter it at a certain point of mental development. By virtue of a proper name the subject becomes a slave inscribing with birth its place in universal discourse. The subject differs from “I” and gets conceptualized in and through language which is a system conditioned and governed by political, sociological, cultural and ideological stances thereby determining people’s social position and relationships without their being aware of it. In FFSLF Lacan points out:

It is in the Name of the Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law. This conception enables us to distinguish clearly, in the analysis of a case, the unconscious effects of this function from the narcissistic relations, or even from the real relations that the subject sustains with the image and the action of the person who embodies it. (74)
In the symbolic order the child is banished into an empty world of language where there is endless difference and absence. The name of the father as a symbol of authority and law thus intervenes to produce a sense of lack and evokes desire by prohibiting it with power. This overwhelming presence, in Lacan’s view, leads to the oedipal complex which can be seen as a transition from Imaginary to Symbolic. With this sets in a double alienation—unlike the “otherness” found in the earlier stage, here it is the big “Other”—the language and the core or the unconscious of the subject thus becomes the discourse of this combined otherness. In its essence the being is defined by a lack and a desire for the other thereby concluding the existence of the subject as the subject of the signifier created by the discourse.

The Imaginary if considered as the order of Nature, the Symbolic as that of culture or social reality, the Real, then, in the Lacanian universe is a paradox. It is not the reality of our conception but something, “…the unknown that exists at the limit of this socio symbolic universe and is in constant tension with it” (Homer 81) and it supports the social reality by being at the same time a part of it and also undermining it. In the early stages of Lacan’s formulation, the Real is something beyond appearances and images and cannot be symbolized as it is beyond the grips of language and has an independent existence. But it influences the other two orders, leading to what Lacan calls the “Trauma of the Real”. Since the Real cannot be completely absorbed into social reality without language, it becomes something that cannot exist but exists in the effect it has on our lives. Lois Tyson in his *Critical Theory Today* explains the Real as the moment when we see through ideologies, and the Trauma of the Real as the realization that the reality hidden beneath them is created as beyond our capacity to know and explain and hence beyond our control (Tyson 32).
 Completely reversing the relationship between the speaking subject and language and elaborating the concept of Signifier, Lacan’s most important thesis—“. . . what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. . .” (Lacan 163)—changed the fate of psychoanalysis. Transformed Freud’s idea of the Talking Cure, Lacan pointed out that language is central to the unconscious, which is not a chaotic mass but a structured and ordered network of signs and signified. Reversing the Saussurian concept of the Linguistic sign, Lacan’s capitalized Signifier takes precedence over the signified. The bar between them represents its fundamental division, leading to the notion of signification as a chain process as is said in ATURF that the meaning is “insisted” and is not “consisted” in its elements, thereby pointing out that meaning is not fixed and there is only an incessant sliding of the signified under the Signifier. But he also talks about “anchoring points” or “Points de caption” where the sliding stops and allows for stable signification (Lacan 170).

By using Jacobson’s distinction between metaphor and metonymy on Freud’s Condensation and Displacement, Lacan demonstrates that the unconscious structured like language operates according to the rules of metaphor and metonymy and designates the notions of lack and desire to it, where words are used as stand-ins and desire becomes a movement from one signifier to another. The language in the Imaginary can be considered as disrupting rules and logic and in symbolic it relates to the realistic texts of patriarchal order and logic. These orders can be used to analyze the subjectivity and identity constructed through the structure and forms of the texts. Regarding language in Lacan, Homer says:

Language, for Lacan, designates not simply verbal speech or written text but any signifying system that is based upon differential relation. The unconscious
is structured like a language in the sense that it is a signifying process that involves coding and decoding, or ciphering and deciphering. The unconscious comes into being in the symbolic order in the gap between Signifier and the signified, through the sliding of the signified beneath the signifier and the failure of meaning to be fixed. In short, the unconscious is something that signifies and must be deciphered. (69)

It is pertinent here to call into context the opening quote of the chapter. In a style that is truly Lacanian, these words highlight the complex relationship between the unconscious and language. In Lacan’s essay, one can discover the various ways in which the unconscious gets written down—the way language gets used, unconsciously surfacing the suppressed guilt, lies and secrets, through childhood memories, the vocabulary one uses, through the traditions and legends and the ways in which incidents are restructured and narrated (Lacan 55-56), all of which gain relevance when Kamala Das’ poetry is taken into account. Furthermore, he says in *ALURF* that the unconscious gets depicted according to the rules of metaphor and metonymy—words that stand-in for desire and lack. In the case of Das images such as sea, ancestral home, grandmother, etc… play this part.

It is not wrong then to say that every man thus is unsettled by the idea of the self, right at the outset and the idea of language standing in for self then implies that, our identity marked by a mere word consequently is highly relative where we all become a word, a name, a noun, with certain qualifications, experiential meanings attached to it. It is on this ground that Lacan pointed out that self exists outside—“I am where I do not think”. The words of Jill Barker point in the same direction: “. . . the self is not a single, consistent entity, but a divided or multiple selves located within and constructed by its many different discourses” (Wolfreys 99). The focus of
Lacanian criticism, therefore, is not upon the unconscious of the character or the author but upon the text itself and the relationship between text and reader. These aspects are powerful tools to critically engage with Kamala Das’ Poetry.

### 4.3 ‘I’ as the Doppelganger in Kamala Das’ poetry

As stated by Lacan, as an unconscious part of the process of becoming ‘I’, at any moment each self occupies a number of subject positions inscribed through the various societal, political, religious, cultural, ideological and familial intercourses, evoking Bill Ashcroft’s idea of subjectivity within a transnation. Even when a meaning is aimed or imposed onto a subject, the meaning making process itself continually undercuts any fixed meaning. With the vast amount of thought and work that has gone into the notion of ‘I’, one thing is certain, the ‘I’ as we know is not a singular subject. It is an intricate dovetailing of other words that could be the ‘I’.

“One says I as language allows or forces one to say it, according to a fiction of selfhood built into the first – person singular and the rules of syntax.” (Greene 1985: 83) ‘I’ is something that is still / always in the process of being answered and re-questioned. This notion of the ‘I’ or the ‘self’ or ‘identity’ is a void one tries to fill up using language.

While analyzing any text the clues to subjectivity are revealed through the use of memories, metaphors, and repetitions. Clearly, in the poetry of Kamala Das, the notion that identity has to be seen in relation to something outside oneself makes her place herself in a complementary relation to others. The writing of her experiences puts her at ease, a certain ease that comes in after long struggles, out of a knowledge gained from experience. ‘I’ as defined against ‘that other’ (An Apology for Gautama), ‘I’ as the monster, “. . . like frankenstein’s brutal toy I shall rise one day” (The Swamp), “. . . I am a freak” (The Freaks) ‘I’ as the stranger inside her. The idea that
the alienated subject is the subject of the signifier; and it is the subject that is determined by the symbolic order and language and constitutively split or divided is something that comes alive in the poems of Kamala Das.

An innate sense of alienation creeps into her and this ‘I’ / ‘the other’ dichotomies are a means of filling up this gap or a lack of it within her. Pictures of fragments of herself, picking up different identities come up in poems like “The Freaks”, “The Stranger and I”, “Forest Fire”, “The Siesta” and many more. In “Composition”, she says:

Ultimately

I will feed only the hunger
to feed other hungers,
that basic one.
To crumble,
to dissolve
and to retain in other things
the potent fragments
of oneself. (Das 1967: 42)

For her, writing equates to the filling of this gap between many fragments. Writing as a way to a place called home. Her writing is also an attempt at understanding writing. To demonstrate this are lines from the poem “Feline”:

We have so few symbols to use as motifs
in our creations. We weave the fabric
of our art, settling and unsettling an ancient
design, the earth, the sun, the yellowed leaf, pain,
ilness, death and of course some inconstant love.

Another lives in me, I fear, a twin left unborn,
Unnamed, unacknowledged, bitter with defeat,
and, she with her new- mood eyes stabs my face
and turns me so often, half human,
half feline.(Das 1996: 43)

In these lines, she connects the ways in which writing is done to the otherness inside
her. She is conscious about the sense of alienation inside her and she is consciously
bringing up what ultimately become ingredients in a work of art, say like a poem, like
this poem or any other one for that matter. The way in which she makes words bring
this effect – a playful self – reflexiveness and self – parodying, that is at the core of
her poetry, which endows her poems with a post- modern hue. A perfect example of
this is her poem “Loud Posters”

I am today a creature turned inside
Out. To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire,

I’ve put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter’s click as my only speech; I
Click- click, click-click tiresomely into your
Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of
Me, I go on and on, not knowing why… (1965: 22)

As stated, in Kamala Das, the ‘I’ that is represented through language dons the part of object and subject simultaneously. It can also be concluded that this ‘I’ is brought into existence through this language, which ironically is the medium which takes away the ‘I’ from the quintessential self. This reading legitimises the sense of ambivalence in her verse.

**4.4 Memories as selves in Kamala Das’ poetry**

“Remembering has never been a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha, 90)

Another important aspect of her poetry is the way she evokes a sense of self through nostalgia. She writes poems elucidating herself in relation to someone in her life, or with respect to her past. Memories define her in many ways. She looks for herself in the past, in the lost love of her grandmother, in the safety of her grandmother’s house, which is also highlighted by V.C. Harris thus:

> Memory operates in Kamala Das in at least two ways, or let us say, in two domains: one the way in which the relationship with the ‘you’ figure, and everything connected to it, is sought to be articulated in all its bewildering, not to say frightening, complexities; two, the way in which a more distant past is to be recollected and placed in near opposition to the other domain. This distant past has to do with her centuries-old ancestral home in Malabar, its idyllic surroundings including the pond and the serpent-shrine, her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and even the servants in the household.”(xiv)

Without a doubt, subjectivity, as far as Das is concerned, is connected to memories. In “Night”, she says:
But when I am about to sleep
the past catches up
and bullock carts rumble
on the dirt road
of my village where
a grandmother lulled me to sleep. (Das and Kohli 2009: 10)

She identifies something of her old days in her Grandmother’s House as something
more of herself. She connects an ‘I’ to love and another ‘I’ to loss. Evidently, “My
Grandmother’s House” says it all:

There is a house now far away where once
I received love . . . That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence,

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

. . . you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved . . . I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger’s doors to
Receive love, at least in small change? (Das 1967: 13)

The image of the Grandmother and her house recurs through many of her poems like
“Suicide”, “Captive”, “A Hot Noon in Malabar”, “Composition”, “Blood” etc . . . In
all of these poems what shines through is a yearning for her days as a granddaughter.
She is at home in that role. She associates a fullness of life to that part in her life.
Once her tie with her grandmother is broken she seems to have lost love and as a
result the feeling of being loved, as she says, “while the others sleep i have no name
of my own/ and my past is a desolate terrain where/ memory like tall trees grow to my
The desire for love and its lack is filled up in her verse by alluding to her grandmother as in this section from “Anamalai Poems”: “If I had not learnt to write how would/ I have written away my loneliness/ Or grief? (1996: 136)

She connects innocence and love, as she knows it, to her grandmother and herself as the mother. She says in the poem “Captive” that her grandmother is the first one she loved and since then “. . . for years I have run from one/ gossamer lane to another, I am/ now my own captive.” (Das 1967: 23). This is taken further in the poem “Morning at Apollo Pier”:

But, hold me, hold me once again,
Kiss the words to death in my mouth, plunder
Memories. I hide my defeat in your
Wearying blood, and all my fears and shame
You are the poem to end all poems,
A poem, absolute as the tomb,
Your flawed beauty is my only refuge
Love me, love me, love me till I die

In the poem “Jaisurya”, she describes the birth of her son, as the light that shattered the darkness of her life. In the same poem, she states, “Love is not important, that makes the blood/ Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his/ Lust. . .” The stir in her womb she considers as significant. “Only the treasures matter that were washed/ Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them/ In.” (Das 1967: 33-34)

This cannot be dismissed as mere philosophy; it has the watermark of experience. When she talks about the love she had, her images tend to be that of
water, and that of the womb as for her, love might be something fluid having no
definite shape, no definite beginning or end. This impossibility of love is projected as
the impossibility of a self. A striking motif in her poems is this search, which is at the
core of her sensibility. This search forms a part of her writing. She says in a
conversation with the poet Suresh Kohli: “It is the looking that makes the poet go on
writing, the search. If you find someone, the search is over, poetry is over.” (2009: 72).

It can be reckoned from her poetry that it is her search for love, which she
often related to her grandmother that gets displaced into the search for her self. The
issues of being a woman constructed through certain notions, of identities imposed on
one and the ways in which ‘I’ becomes just a name are some of her preoccupations.
Her poems point to the fact that the self is not a single entity but a divided or multiple
selves located within and constructed through various discourses. Her poetry does not
assert or define a notion of self but her attempt seems to be to stress that it is
impossible to find a unitary self that is true for all times which again communicates
the presence of cosmopolitanism in her and in her poetry, evident in the way
differences co-exist even in an apparent sense of singularity. However, it is memory
that poignantly allude to this aspect within her self. A poem from Closure

“Thrombosis” is relevant in this context:

A lone thrombi

driving into an artery,

a clot that lost its way,

nothing more.

The moment, the last of ‘

the very last,
wipes out memories.

The fences are down
the past and the present
merge and dissolve. (2009: 21)

Memory defines her on many levels and this is further accentuated by a study of the recurring symbols in her poetry, which is undertaken in the next section.

**4.5 Symbols in Kamala Das**

this is to be a
blind walk this is to symbolize my life I have always had a passion for symbols

the poets ultimately lose their way inside their own minds on dark rovers 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 1979: 17)

When viewed from the Lacanian theoretical point, it is possible to make sense of a lot symbols that figure in Kamala Das’ poetry. As is highlighted in the earlier part of the chapter the unconscious surface through the symbols which is articulated through language. As can be discerned from the discussions so far the prominent symbols in Das' poetry are her grandmother, her ancestral home and sea. When her poetry is taken up in its entirety, these three symbols reflects those aspects which characterise her self and her oeuvre.
For instance, if one goes by the division set out in appendix c, in the first group, there are poems evoking nostalgia and in the second are poems in which sea figures a lot and if one is to analyse those poems it is clear that it also reflects a phase of transition that is there in her life. Thus, the sea reflects a change, a transition as well as memories as in the poem, “The Dictation”:

There is nothing to tell

when hope deserts you,

hope of a renewal

or rebirth,

a confrontation with the past

in the present.

………………………………………

Diving into the depths

of today to come up with

yesterday’s finds, the corals,

the plants, the treasures of  the sea. (2009: 39)

There are also instances where Das or the “I “that is scattered throughout her poetry draws up with sea on many accounts, reflecting the importance of sea. ’The Suicide’ is one prominent poem that evokes sea on many levels. It plays with her grandmother’s memory and also merges with her sense of self as is evident in the following lines:

O sea, I am happy swimming
Happy, happy, happy…

The only movement I know well

is certainly the swim.

It comes naturally to me.

I had a house in Malabar

and a pale-green pond.

I did all my growing there

In the bright summer months. (1967: 9)

And she goes on reminiscing about her grandmother and the blissful, holistic experience she had then as her grandchild in the ancestral home. A similar engagement with sea is evident in the poem “Subsitute” which is reflected in the lines: “Memory/ Great moody sea/ Do not thump so/ Against my shore./ Let me lie still/

Without thought or will. / For a benign hour or two. Dear night, be my tomb (1967: 12). The poem “The Invitation” also utilises the image of sea extensively.

Oh Sea, let me be. Shrink or grow, slosh up,

Slide down, go your way.

I will go mine.

……………………………………………..

Oh Sea, just leave

Me alone. As long

As I remember, I want no other.
Please end this whiplash

Of memories, cries

The sea.

The sea shall bear some prying and certain

Violations, but I tell you, the sea

Shall take no more, the sea shall take

No more… The tides beat against the walls, they

Beat in childish rage…

Darling, forgive, how long can one resist? (1967: 20-21)

Here there is this notion of sea merging into the self and vice versa. The poem “Composition” from which the title of the chapter is derived plays with almost all the symbols and there is an intricate dovetailing of the sense of memory, the image of her grandmother, the ancestral home, the merging of the self with the sea and very conscious and self-reflexive take on the act of writing that is taken up by Das as a means of making sense of this evident dilemma is captured in the poem, a crucial part of the poem is as follows:

I must let my mind striptease

autobiography.

The only secrets I always

withhold
are that I am so alone

and that I miss my grandmother.

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

Reader….

But I am not yours for the asking (37-38)

This poem thus becomes a specimen that attests to the fact that Das is making sense of her self – the ‘I’ through her writing. It is the unconscious desire for love that defines her and is reflected in her through her writing. However, the overbearing presence of sea in her verse also alludes to the fact that the sense of self she highlights is characterised by fluidity, as she says in the poem, “I shall Live On”, “Yes, listen to the sea/ Don’t you hear me sigh?” (2009: 32)

Just as sea is a prominent symbol in her poetic universe so is her ancestral home or a home. It also coincides with the great many poems on nostalgia also. For instance, in “A Half-Day’s Bewitchment” she says, “Ultimately the house and I became one. My heart’s door/ Swinging ajar with each vagrant breeze was the wrought iron gate./ Its hinges rusted from disuse, creaking to let / A traveller in,”

Just as with the sea there is a sense of being one with the home here and the longing for a traveller also implies the engagement with the other as was discussed in the earlier part of the chapter. She continues in the same poem: “I am also the sea that roars behind the house, roars out/ Its passion at the high tide hour; but, later the ebb arrives/ To tell a different tale. I have, like the sea, some silt/ At the core” (1996) This poems draws up the poem “Composition” on many accounts. Apart from these there are poems such as “My Grandmother’s House”, “Blood”, “Nani”, and “The Swamp”
“The Family Home” etc…On a similar footing is the poem “Sleeping Scorpions”, but it comes with a poignant lesson and symbolically refer to the possibility of destruction when relying too much on the past to make sense of the present or the future or even of the self as these lines highlight:

In my grandmother’s house
a long time ago, there were
some sepia-tinted photographs
framed and hung on the walls.
Whenever I lifted one by its edge,
a scorpion stirred itself
from its stupor and raised
its tail. They hurt so
when they sting, cried
my grandmother, they have
a venom stored within…

The past is best when left alone. (56)

4.6 Conclusion

From the discussions so far it can be reckoned that the multifariousness that becomes the characteristics of Kamala Das’ work is a reflection of her deeper engagement with the notions of herself or the sense of her identity. It is at this point that the idea of a composition takes on an added significance. Composition as a noun refer to the different parts which something is made of; the way in which the different parts are organised, it could also refer to a piece of music or art or a poem and a short text that is written as a school exercise.
Transposing these nuanced meanings into the poetry of Kamala Das it becomes evident that through her compositions – her poetry and prose- she was composing not just a piece of literature but in the process was composing herself. As she says in her poem “Composition”:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude autobiography

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

I must linger on,
trapped in immortality
my only freedom being
the freedom to

decompose

The central motif of her poetry -- a sense of fragmentation-- points to the impossibility of a unified self. However, it gains a significance in the light of cosmopolitanism’s stress on heterogeneity and the idea of a transnational subjectivity as highlighted by Bill Ashcroft while elaborating on the notion of a “Transnation”. But, while projecting the idea of an engagement of other which is prominent to the theories of post colonialism, into Cosmopolitanism, the notion of a self of selves created out of an interaction with the other selves as highlighted by Kamala Das’ Compositions take an added significance. What is more, it alludes to the primary idea that Das is in effect creating a palimpsest through her writings. However, if one has to dig for the persona in the composition then it is as elusive as the Derridean trace which is a presence validated by an absence. The negotiations with myriad subject positions as undertaken by Kamala Das is further delineated in the next chapter.
Notes

i See Jacques, Lacan. *Écrits*

ii See Satchidhanandhan, K. “Transcending the self” in *Only the Soul Knows how to Sing*

iii See Das, Kamala. Interview with Shobha Warrier