Chapter 6

“A Journey with no Return”

Poets are edible

material, even one at

death’s door can provide

a research scholar

a memorable feast.

- Kamala Das

6.1 Introduction

The initial point of entry into this research was the ambivalence that characterised Kamala Das’ poetry. Hence the focus of this research was to identify the aspects that created this ambivalence in her. Two aspects form the points of entry in tackling this – language and location. As has been discussed in the earlier chapters, it is Das’ engagement with languages, particularly her choice of writing in English that gets problematized at length.

From my research it is concluded that language is what creates ambivalence in Kamala Das and her writing in English, because it is through language that Das posited a multiplicity of selves to her self, — “remains in the remaining”. This aspect led to her poetry being viewed as a palimpsest as in essence, this surface also worked off on the idea of remains.

While engaging with the idea of remains or the notion of a trace – an absent presence – it becomes imperative here to point out how these various remains worked off each other in her poetry and even when there were
attempts at overriding certain remains, the ultimate reality that was
communicated was that the only possibility is to retain “the potent fragments
of oneself.” With this aspect as the given, the theoretical discourse of
cosmopolitanism was inducted to make sense of the co-existence of such
unsettling and uneasy remains/fragments as it is a theory that had the scope of
dealing with roots and routes simultaneously.

Having outlined the broad trajectory of my research, this chapter now
aims at collecting the findings of the research, tackling the question whether
cosmopolitanism is a viable theoretical tool to understand Kamala Das and her
oeuvre. At the outset, this is done by summing up the findings of each chapter,
by highlighting the significance of the chapter titles. The next part takes up for
discussion the title of the dissertation and tries to arrive at answers to the
questions that problematizes it. Having summed up the findings of this
research, the last section alludes to the possibilities of further research within
Kamala Das studies.

6.2 “What is in a name?”: Dissecting the chapters

This dissertation comprises of five core chapters. The title of each of
the chapters alludes to Kamala Das’ works in some way or the other. For
instance, the first part of the title of chapter one – “I too call myself I” is a line
from her poem “An Introduction”, and similarly the first part of the title of
each section in Chapters two, three, and four take up the title of her poems.
The first part of the title of chapter five “Unfinished Woman” refers to the
name she gave to the exhibitions of her paintings. The choice of each of these
title is linked to the prominent concerns of the research and highlights crucial
features of Kamala Das’ works. The significance of each is highlighted in the sections below.

6.2.1 “I too call myself I”: Tracing Kamala Das

At the outset, the line “I too call myself I” is used as means to highlight the difference between ‘I’ as the subject and ‘I’ as the object. This has to be read in conjunction with the ‘I’s that are traced out in the chapter through a detailed analysis of Kamala Das’ poem “An Introduction”. The differences between the ‘I’ which is characterised by an ambiguity, an ambivalence, is linked to the idea of trace -- an in-betweenness, an interstitial space-- where the ‘I’ and the other ‘I’ posits to meet but somehow does not draw up with each other, implying the impossibility of a cognitive coherence. Hence, it is argued in the chapter that the best possible way of making sense of this situation is by positing that Kamala Das and the ‘I’ reflected in her poetry is characterised by a sense of palimpsestousness, which put at considerable ease the question of ambivalence.

However, an outcome of the chapter’s engagement with this sense of palimpsestousness is the finding that it the play between language and location that creates this peculiar situation in Das. Paradoxically, these two aspects do not offer an easy point of entry, as, in Das there are multiple engagements with language as well as location and these aspects somehow gets projected out into the representation of self in her works. In effect, both these indices act as roots and routes in the case of Kamala Das, and legitimises a new theoretical point of entry such as cosmopolitanism to tackle it.

A crucial part of this chapter is the analysis of an oft quoted line from Kamala Das’ oft-quoted poem “An Introduction”, “I speak three languages,
write in two, dream in one” – which is also a part of the title of the dissertation. The notions of roots and routes also gets reflected here, as in the journey from three to two to one, there is a transcending of the notion of multilingualism, to the possibility of a translingualism via the possibility of a “interlinguality” (formulated by K. Satchidhanandhan), which is explicated in detail in the chapter. However, this movement is intrinsic in highlighting the element of cosmopolitanism in Kamala Das’ poetry as in such a scheme, none of the languages are given up for the other, but each emanates into the other retaining aspects that characterise each. This co-existence of differences within a sense of universalism is what characterises Das’ oeuvre, and cosmopolitanism. In the case of Das, be it in the use of language, or the openness cultivated towards belonging to various places, cultures and religions, cosmopolitanism becomes a viable tool to understand the multifariousness that characterise her works, and the perception of her lived reality.

6.2.2 “The Inheritance”: A Disinherited Self.

“The Inheritance” is one of the poems in the oeuvre of Kamala Das which poignantly captures the shift towards a social consciousness which characterises the second stage of her poetic evolution. This poems captures the dangers of narrow parochialism that was imbibed into Indian reality at the wake of emergency (1973-1977) and consequent events such as the Assassination of Indira Gandhi and anti Sikh riots. The choice of this poem’s title is deliberate as it points also to a shift in the postcolonial scene, where, in the 1980’s it was defined by movements across borders and within. A significant outcome of this was a sense of uneasiness in articulating one’s self
or one’s identity, as within India, regionalism came into being, and a sense of being disinherited by the nation was a reality for many communities.

Thus even when this title evokes a paradox, it highlights the possibility of positing an existence through the theoretical inroads paved by cosmopolitanism. (co-existence of roots and routes). However, when read in relation to Kamala Das and her situatedness in Indian Literatures in English, the second part of the title reflects the opinion of P. P. Raveendran in understanding Kamala Das. He asks this poignant question in his essay “The Ideology of Intimacy”, “Is it true that Kamala Das’s poetry expresses nothing but the lusty hungers of a disinherited self?” This is a question that largely pertains to the early stage of her poetry. However, the idea of “a disinherited self” gains relevance throughout Das’ poetic career as in trying to combat the many differences at the core of her self she always seemed to communicated a sense of being disinherited particularly when viewed from her longing for her roots. However, even with a sense of disinheritance Das embraces the many routes that come her way powerfully bringing into context the basic concerns of the theory of cosmopolitanism which this chapter takes up. Thus, it can be concluded that cosmopolitanism offering such a broad spectrum for co-existence, enables one to tackle a contested site like Indian Literatures in English as well as the poetry of Kamala Das.

6.2.3 “Someone Else’s Song”: Kamala Das as a Ventriloquist of the Vernacular.

“Someone Else’s Song” is a poem of Kamala Das which highlights the presence of multiplicity of voices within her which gets articulated through her poetry. This becomes a crucial aspect while engaging with the inevitable
presence of vernacular in Indian Literatures in English through the metaphor of Ventriloquism. In this chapter, what is highlighted is that there is a multiplicity of voices possible in the realm of Indian Literatures in English, as even when the dummy which is inanimate essentially posits an existence as a singular entity, the possibility of ventriloquists to change, induces an added tinge to the voice or the language that is heard by the people who witnesses the act of ventriloquism. This metaphor is read in conjunction with cosmopolitanism, where there is no effacing of languages, but there is an acknowledgement of the reality of multiplicity. However, the aspect of Kamala Das where she imbibes the elements of locality – both her Malabar roots and the pan-Indian roots- qualifies her poetry as an epitome of cosmopolitanism, and the element of trans-lingualism makes it impossible for one to sieve out the particular languages.

6.2.4 “Composition”: The structure of the unconscious in the language of Kamala Das

This chapter also engages with the indices language and location, but from a psychoanalytical point of view. The findings of this chapter is connected to those aspects that are highlighted in one of her most important poems - “Composition”. In this poem she brings in a substantial level of self-reflexivity – talking about all those aspects that characterise her verses. There is the overbearing presence of sea, reference to her childhood at Malabar, the lost love of her grandmother and the sense of loss or fragmentariness that she feels at the core and the need to “extrude autobiography” even when she warns the readers that she is not theirs for the taking. Incidentally, the thesis of Lacan that the unconscious is structured like a language also takes into
account these aspects – memory, the presence of recurring symbols, and language as a means of moving beyond loss by trying to fill up a liminal space and the relation between text and the reader etc. However, the underlying factor that subjectivity is, in essence, characterised by a sense of fragmentation, where many differences converge becomes the common denominator of Lacanian take on unconscious and the theory of cosmo-politanism.

6.2.5 “Unfinished Woman”: Mythographies of the self in Kamala Das’ Life Writings

From the title itself it is clear that this chapter engages critically with the many selves that Kamala Das creates through her works. However, the title is not from one of her poems. It is the title she gave to the exhibition of her paintings that she held in the year 1994 to mark a coming back to creativity after her husband’s death. However, it poignantly captures the method behind Das’ madness. What is evident in her works —be it poetry, short stories, biography, or autobiography— is a deliberate play with language, or words to create a persona or a shadow of a self. This is also reflected in the many names that she treaded with ease. Thus, in effect the evocation of an image of an unfinished woman takes on two nuances here. One is that she deliberately leaves all her self-portraits incomplete and unfinished, which explains to a great extent the ambiguity that is evident in the “I” that is encountered in her works. Another aspect is the fact that by creating mythographies she affects a sense of incompleteness as a myth is rarely seen as the part and parcel of reality, and is in effect, seen as tale that is a part of the imagination and myths are never
stationary they are on the move, as it gets transmitted down the ages. This can be linked to the notion of cosmopolitanism by calling into context Bill Ashcroft’s notion of transnation, where subjectivity is seen as a fluid entity, never gaining a sense of closure, occupying different subject positions implying a sense of being unfinished.

Having outlined the concerns in the core chapters the next section look into the aspects linked to the title.

6.3 “I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one.” Is this cosmopolitanism?

As was highlighted in the Introduction of the dissertation, there are many questions that this research tries to answer. Majority of them stem out of Kamala Das’ engagement with language through the words she uses to move beyond the apprehension of her lived reality and attempting to create spaces of her own within this language. How has Kamala Das deftly manoeuvred language? What are the multiple ways in which she has engaged with words? Are there apprehensions in her engagement with words? How does she bring out her own spaces through the narratives? Hence, language takes centre stage here, highlighting the relevance of the title, a line from her poem “An Introduction”: “I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one.”

To answer all these questions is one aspect of the evolution of her poetry. In the beginning, even when her poetry was characterised by an experiential quality, the approach was to a great extent solipsistic, with undue stress on the idea of “I”. There are many reasons for this preoccupation as has been discussed at length. However, the same experiential quality, in the latter part of her poetic evolution, renders her poetry with a sense of open-
endedness which culminated in the belief that closure is a myth. This aspect, I believe, came into being mainly because of the “interlingual” transactions that was evident in her writing in English and Malayalam. This crucial aspect answers three questions. However, when engaging with the question whether there are apprehensions in her engagement with words, the answer is yes and it is evident in the ambivalence that her verse is privy to.

This ambivalence is tackled in the dissertation with the help of notions such as palimpsest, traces, liminality and nomad. All these are terms which have been used to come to terms with the problem of ambivalence in her verse, and it is by a careful delineation of the presence of these in the evolution of her poetry that a theory like cosmopolitanism has been inducted. This in a way links the two parts of my thesis title. However, it is to be noted here that cosmopolitanism is a tool that can be used to engage with a contested category like Indian English Literatures and this is not something that is unique to the poetry of Kamala Das.

6.3.1 Transnation: The journey with no return

In the course of the dissertation many critics and ideas under the broad spectrum of cosmopolitanism was dealt with at length. However, when approaching the Indian Literary scene, Bill Ashcroft’s idea, transnation, within the discourse of cosmopolitanism, becomes a powerful point of departure, as he states:

Clearly, cosmopolitans are not defined by a particular subject position but by an orientation to the other and to diversity. Cosmopolitans even when they tend to be footloose, are not necessarily immigrants, travellers, expatriates or exiles; they are not necessarily diasporic
subjects, they almost certainly aren’t refugees or labour migrants, and according to Appiah, are generally not anthropologists. Yet these are people who inhabit the transnation. (77)

When he posits the idea of transnation, the focus is specifically on the situation in India and China – where there are multiple internal migrations. In this sense transnation can be taken as the diametrically opposite aspect of transnationalism. The idea as envisaged by him refers to the space occupied by local mobile subjects, who being situated in a globalised world are forced to assert the ambiguous relation between the nation and the state. So when transnation is envisaged it is not an abstract “object in space” but rather, a migratory, and even to some extent even a diasporic aggregation of flows and convergences, which in a way effectively describes the precarious situation and the multifarious cultural positions of these evident ‘national subjects’. For instance, Ashcroft highlights:

Transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. The ‘outside’ is geographical, cultural and conceptual, and is possibly most obvious in India where the ‘nation’ is the perpetual scene of translation, but translation is but one example of the movement, the ‘betweenness’ by which the subjects of the transnation are constituted. The transnation is a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in between the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted. (73)

Thus, it can be reckoned that it is not the state or the nation that has the upperhand, but the subject or the subjectivity of an individual and how these roots and routes impact them. Just as Stuart Hall states, “Subjectivity is always
a matter of flow, of locations, or of subject positions rather than
subjectivities”. In effect, what we encounter in literature is the representation
of this subjectivity and this essentially makes the aspects posited by Ashcroft
in relation to transnation a powerful tool to engage within the rubric of Indian
Literatures in English, especially while tackling aspects such as liminality,
ambivalence or the sense of being a nomad.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

In my engagement with Kamala Das’ poetry, the most prominent
outcome is the possibility of utilising cosmopolitanism as a theoretical tool to
approach any writer. However, my endeavour has been to highlight how Das
was different from the others. This was undertaken by critically engaging with
the sense of multifariousness at the core of her subjectivity. In proving that
Das is a true cosmopolitan I have analysed most of her poems categorised in
appendix c. Even though some sections such as hospital poems were not really
engaged with in depth, there are scope for more analysis and study in her
work. In fact a look at the three appendices will provide an idea about the
scope of future research in her poetry. The presence of nature in her poetry is
one such aspect, and so is the notion of queering the self that is evident in
quite a lot of her poems. However, as an all-encompassing idea
cosmopolitanism makes it possible for all such aspects to be brought under its
rubric.

At this juncture I also put on record that I am not side lining the many
feminist discourses on her. However, my endeavour is to point out that there is
more to her than that. Having understood whatever I have understood, the
only certainty that I have at this point is that what I have penned down would be capturing only the tip of the iceberg. There is more scope of research within Kamala Das as well as within the discourse of Cosmopolitanism. Even this research does not end here and what this dissertation reflects is a mere summing up of the work I have done so far. True to the spirit of Kamala Das this dissertation also closes on the note that the chances of attaining closure on a study of Kamala Das is a myth.
Notes

\(^{1}\) See Das, Kamala, “Researchers” *Closure: Some Poems and a Conversation*