Chapter 1

“I too call myself I”: Tracing Kamala Das

A poem, however perfect, is incomplete until the reader fills its frame with his own experiences, philosophy. If a poem is likened to a house, it is for the reader to inhabit it. [...] Poetry is like that. If you are prepared to go deep into yourself and aspirate the marrow of your essence, you become a poet. You have a new vision which is a poet’s vision. Everything is poetry.

Kamala Das

Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be ‘present,’ appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present.

Jacques Derrida

1.1 Introduction

Contemporary Indian women’s poetry in English —of which Kamala Das was a path finding and path breaking presence— deserves much attention because of “the deconstructive strategies of narrative and conceptual frames, along with the simultaneous assimilation of pan-Indian elements,” legitimising the need to study afresh this vibrant genre of poetry and the contribution of Kamala Das to it. As one of its stalwarts, the role of Das— with a literary career spanning from 1965 to 2009 and
beyond—in this vibrant discourse, is taken up for study here. Interestingly, one of the reasons that gives strength to the above argument is the apparent paradox that Das engaged with, in her life, and writing, which problematizes any analysis of her work as is attested to by Suresh Kohli,

KAMALA WAS AN ENIGMA EVEN to herself. She liked to dramatize, imagining narratives on the spur of the moment. People were often shocked by her actions and movements without realizing that such acts served the intended purpose. The same applied to her writings. She wrote things she did not herself believe in, but the consummate actor that she was, she negated the aura of disbelief. (vii) 

It is clear from this observation by Suresh Kohli, who closely followed her works, and had even collaborated with her for one work, that Das always played with language in order to induce a persona into existence. This is one of the major points of entry into a critical engagement with her oeuvre.

Incidentally, Kamala Das’ initiation into the Indian literary scene as a poet in English also takes precedence, due to two main reasons. Firstly, publication of her first collection of poetry in English, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), coincides with the introduction of modernism into Indian poetry in English, “[…]A new language of poetry began to emerge” started off by a group of poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra and others, “[…] a new breed of writers who wrote in a living language and refused to follow the traditions of British poetry that ruled the academic establishment of those days.”(104) Couple this with the larger critical movements/discourses which were sparked off in the Western academia such as postcolonialism and poststructuralism. Since then, it has been debated whether a text can
be considered as an innocent entity and consequently can it be approached without suspicion. This notion, other than proclaiming an ambivalence and open-endedness, legitimises the evocation of the image of palimpsest - all of which are powerful points of entry into her oeuvre and complemented Das’ unique style of writing and use of language.

Keeping these points as the loci, this chapter aims at deciphering the entity Kamala Das, through three main sections. At the outset, the implications of the use of the metaphor of palimpsest are evoked to understand the essential sense of multifariousness that she projects. Furthermore, the act of tracing is utilised, acknowledging the myriad possibilities abet in its wake. The second section calls into context one of her poems, “An Introduction”, which is considered as a polyphonic textvi. The title of the chapter “I too call myself I”- a line from the same poem highlights the fact that “I” in this poem is a palimpsest which contains within its surface various layers of the entity she calls ‘I’. The absent layers of this palimpsest which makes its presence felt, albeit subtly, -- those major events of her life that have gone into creating her verse -- are also traced out. The last section of this chapter, envisioned towards a better comprehension of her poetry, catalogues the various stages in her poetic evolution.
1.2 Situating the Research

Talking about Kamala Das today, therefore, means talking about not merely post-Independence Indian poetry in English but also a whole range of issues, issues relating to gender, violence, identity and difference, hybridity, contradictory coherence, and, perhaps more importantly, language and the art of writing the self, or, the poetics of subjectivity, issues that continue to be of great importance in all our lives…

V.C.Harris

The imagined narratives of Kamala Das, situated in an ambiguity, at times conscious, leads one to dub her not just as an enigma but more appropriately as a palimpsest waiting to be deciphered. However, the certainty with which one can trace out the many layers is another issue altogether, given the scope of engagements opened up by such an oeuvre as highlighted by the words of V.C.Harris. It is unlikely that her texts can be put through infra-red or digital enhancement techniques as such, as can be done with palimpsests. The closest thing possible is to try and lift up those layers of scripts or markings on the page or writing that finally went on to become the text at hand. This is possible, to a great extent, through the strategic act of tracing.

The evocation of this particular act of tracing is also not devoid of problems. This act starts off a long line of discourse associated with the use of this word – evoking the semantic as well as the metaphoric possibilities inherent in it. A reference to the dictionary entry in itself opens out the possibilities of this word. Moreover, both the ideas are also evoked by critical thinkers, with the significant intellectual turn after the middle of the 20th century, to comprehend the realms of literature, society and culture, human beliefs and practices at large. Thus, it is imperative here to look
briefly into the origin and development of these two aspects – palimpsest and trace.

1.2.1 Intervention of Palimpsest

Palimpsest: *noun* 1. an ancient document from which some or all of the original text has been removed and replaced by a new text. 2 (formal) something that has many different layers of meaning or detail.

The evocation of palimpsest is aimed at understanding the relationship between the text and the reader and the problematic presence of an agency coming into play in it (In Kamala Das it is the ‘I’). This stems from the basic notion that palimpsest refers to a manuscript from which the initial writing has been erased to accommodate another writing. Hence, metaphorically, the document or text becomes a site of multiple transactions and transformations. However, if the history of the palimpsest is probed into at length, there are certain aspects to be reckoned with, specifically in relation to understanding Kamala Das.

At the outset, more than the surface, there are certain acts that gain relevance. For instance the act of erasing. The idea of erasing the initial text was primarily utilitarian, as, in the middle ages the parchments (the future palimpsests) were created from vellum, which were scarce and hence recycling was necessary. Interestingly, due to certain intrinsic properties of the chemicals used to erase the initial writing, the traces of old writing reappeared, producing the surface which came to be known as a palimpsest. In effect, a palimpsest is a surface on which there is a superimposition of the new over the old, which reflected the evidences of the changes on it, and is an outcome of layering happening in the course of time.

Thus, the palimpsest, in itself, is a paradox, as on the one hand, even in its presence as a singularity, it implies a multiplicity or a convergence of many texts and
on the other hand, it is a surface whose presence is defined by an absence arising from
the act of erasure or destruction of certain layers. Thus, this becomes a surface which
plays with the notion of presence and absence on multiple levels and hence becomes
one of the crucial metaphors to aid in understanding the idea of text today. Apart from
acknowledging the dialectics of absence and presence, the many aspects highlighted
by the metaphysics of palimpsests points to the role of time/ change as an agent which
enriches a text. In short, what gives relevance to the evocation of the nuances of
palimpsest is validated by its essential nature:

… it preserves the distinctness of individual texts, while exposing the
contamination of one by the other. Therefore, even though the process of
layering which creates a palimpsest was born out of a need to erase and
destroy previous texts, the re-emergence of those destroyed texts renders a
structure that privileges heterogeneity and diversity.⁹

This is precisely the reason why there have been interesting studies on the
notion of palimpsest, tapping the myriad implications inherent in its use as a
metaphor, and more importantly why it is of relevance in the contemporary
discourses.

However, while engaging with the studies on this metaphor, the earliest
known work is Thomas de Quincey’s essay “The Palimpsest” published in 1845,
which was the first instance where the figurative aspects of the word was engaged
with and in it, he “refers to the structure as an “involuted” phenomenon where
otherwise unrelated texts are interwoven, competing with, and infiltrating each
other”¹⁰ an invigorating point of entry into the idea of intertextuality.
Gerard Genette’s *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982) by taking this basic idea forward engages with the dialectics of absence and presence by stressing on the notion of intertextuality and how certain texts remind reader of an earlier text implying a textual transcendence. Another significant text, Sarah Dillon’s *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007), by providing an in-depth theorisation on it, was a watershed in advancing the thoughts on palimpsest, implying the basic idea that the structure of the palimpsest is such that it provides a basis for understanding and advancing human thought. Apart from theorising the implications of the use of the metaphor on areas such as history, subjectivity, textuality and sexuality, she also undertakes a close reading of texts by D.H.Lawrence, Arthur Conan Doyle, Umberto Eco, Ian McEwan and H.D. Nonetheless, the most insightful contribution of Dillon is the introduction of the concept “palimpsestuous” which according to her is “a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation” (3) which is evident in almost all texts.

All these aspects contextualise the metaphor of palimpsest being summoned to analyse Kamala Das’ poetry. Thus, when it is posited that Das and the text she creates (which is closely linked to how she saw herself) is a palimpsest, it entails within it the evocation of almost all the implications entailed in the study on the metaphor so far. The polemics of absence and presence, the notion of intertextuality and the idea of layers being added onto a surface with time, and the change that is reflected on the surface are also aspects that point towards an understanding of Kamala Das’ life and works. As will be explicated in the course of this chapter, the only means of understanding the acknowledged ambivalence in her verse is to view the surface of the text (be it Das or her poetry) as a site of multiple transactions as is often associated with a palimpsest. Having recognised the presence of multiple texts,
beyond the surface, it is pertinent to point to the tool undertaken to decipher it, and the act of tracing, thus, becomes the most appropriate one as is explicated in the section that follows.

1.2.2 Tracing the Trace

Just as there are literal and metaphorical implications inherent to the idea of palimpsest, which contributes to the understanding of human thought, the idea of trace also imbibes within its folds numerous readings. The literal, figurative, and conceptual implications inherent in the word are relevant for the research undertaken here. Hence, in this section, a semantical reading of the word is undertaken first, then moving onto to the implications of the same, as part of the critical discourses of post structuralism.

Right at the outset, the relevance of the act of tracing is initiated by the use of the term in common parlance, from the meanings that is associated with it and for the same the entry from Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (8th edition) is worth engaging with in detail. As a verb there are six associations to the use of the word and the entries go thus,

To find or discover somebody/something by looking carefully for them/it.
SYN : track down; to trace something back to something: to find the origin or cause of something; to trace something from something or to something: to describe a process or the development of something; to trace something out: to draw a line or lines on a surface; to trace something: to follow the shape or outline of something; to copy a map, drawing, etc. by drawing on a transparent paper placed over it.
While, as a noun, this word has many readings within it such as: trace: a mark, an object or a sign that shows that somebody or something existed or was present; trace of something: a very small amount of something; trace (technical): a line or pattern on paper or a screen that shows information that is found by a machine; trace on somebody or something: a search to find out information about the identity of somebody or something. As an adjective, traceable: if something is traceable, you can find out where it came from, where it has gone, where it began or what its cause was.

Form tracing out the entry trace it is reckoned that, semantically, the many nuances of the word refer to an act of investigation – be it in following the trails left behind, trying to understand the origin and development of somebody or something, validating or ensuring its existence or in the idea of drawing or copying or superimposing lines over the original – implying that if something is traceable it is possible to find out where it began, where it has gone, and what its cause was.

On another level, it could also imply those substances that are present in every living being, even though in negligible quantity, which plays a crucial role in its growth and development. Hence, when the metaphor of palimpsest is evoked as a surface/text that has different layers of meaning, the act of tracing acts as its complement. Accordingly, these aspects play a significant part in the act of tracing as is undertaken in this dissertation.

On the other hand, trace is a term that plays an essential part in the path-breaking and constantly evolving poststructuralist discourses, and has gone onto entail within it various nuances as explicated by theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, among others. Even when all these theorists were part
of the same theoretical tradition, there are subtle ways in which each of them envisage the notion of trace.

For instance, Jacques Derrida engaged with it mostly to explicate the idea of play central to language, trace as something of an absent presence, hinging on the inherent shifts in language, coming into play in the transactions between speech and writing. Roland Barthes engages with a similar notion in his work *Camera Lucida* (1980) while explicating the idea of medium in elucidating the relationship between photograph, photographer and viewer and also that between the processes behind each process. Michel Foucault links trace to the idea of looking at history where trace is used to indicate the documents or any markings that are left behind by events or people which help us to gain an understanding as to what must have really happened. However, the act of tracing undertaken as part of this research subscribes mainly to the enigmatic and elusive conceptual outline as devised by Jacques Derrida, which is elaborated in the next section

1.2.2.1 The Elusive Derridean Trace

The trace is not a presence but it is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace (156)xiv

The theoretical discourses started off by poststructuralism has at its centre the polemics surrounding the use of language and hence it becomes the best possible tool to engage with, in this research, given the focus on the use of language by Kamala Das. This movement which has had a salient influence on the intellectual history of mankind was basically a reaction against an equally significant movement in Western
philosophy, structuralism, which in essence, favoured the notion of logocentrism, even when initiating the process of questioning it. In order to understand the implications of poststructuralist theories, particularly those of Jacques Derrida, it becomes imperative here to start from the basic premises of structuralism and how it fell into the same trap that it was trying to deflect, evoking post structuralism in its wake.

Structuralism as a critical discourse gained wide parlance through the works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who in his work “Course in General Linguistics” (1916/1959) established language as a signifying system, with an underlying structure governed by certain features, which were, in effect, the basic component of all signifying system. He also stated that the study of language is not merely the study of speech, but also included other components. In effect, he destabilised the very notion that language is a mere function of a speaker, by highlighting that language is something that is passively and arbitrarily assimilated by the individual.

Saussure’s basic premise was the idea of sign as constituted by two components – signified and signifier- and the meaning of a sign essentially depended upon the condition that the signifier and the signified were on equal footing. Thus, each sign, be it a word or a symbol, has as its centre a structure which determined the meaning of the same, which, to a great extent, was dependent upon the relation between the signifier and the signified. His theory based on the broader field of semiology – science of signs – had two crucial aspects — first, linguistic sign was essentially “a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms” and that this basic unit is constituted by a relation between a concept and a sound- image, and not that between a thing and a name.xv (66) Secondly, he put forth this idea that, linguistic
sign, the basic component of all signifying system is arbitrary and relative as each sign has two components – signified and signifier and the meaning of a sign essentially depended upon the ability of the signified and the signifier drawing up on the same level and that there was, essentially, no natural connection between the linguistic sign and the signified. (For instance, consider the sign “tree”. The sound created by this sign is signified and the idea/concept or meaning attached to it is signified. However, it is not mandatory that the idea invoked by the sound image tree is the same for everyone, even when there is an underlying structure that conditions it.) Thus, each sign be it a word or an image has at its centre a structure which determined to a great extent the relation between the signifier and the signified.

Language came to seen as a sign system which worked when the signifier drew up with the signified, which was based on an arbitrary set of significations. This basic premise of Saussure was taken forward by many cultural theorists such as Claude Lévi- Strauss applying it to the cultural systems at large and, as Simon Gikandi points out, “[…] sought to turn language into an objective system of signs, one that would reveal the laws of social formation through a symbolic order that was autonomous of individual subjects and was hence collective in nature.” (108) and “asserted that while language presented us with a dialectical and totalizing process, it existed “outside (or beneath) consciousness and will”” xvi(109)

Structuralism, thereby, posited a common structure of signification to all systems where meaning was determined to a great extent through the arbitrary creation of binaries such as absence and presence, centre and margin, day and night, light and dark etc…almost always privileging the positive entity and deriving meaning by its privileged position. For instance, speech is the norm, while writing is its derivative or deviant or something that originates from it. As highlighted by
Gikandi, “In addition, structuralism privileged structures (both social and linguistic) because they assumed these could clarify the relationship of things (the units that went into the making of the whole) while maintaining the natural or cultural differences that constituted these units.”*xvii* (109)

Poststructuralist thought spearheaded by Jacques Derrida through his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1967) had certain contentions with the logocentric view subscribed to by structuralism and its privileging of certain aspects such as speech over writing and the excessive faith on the meaning of words based on what is prescribed by hierarchical relations, which most often excluded the possibility of a reality beyond the privileged presence.

Moreover, logocentrism asserts that language originates as a process of thought that produces speech and thereby affirms that speech produces meaning. This has been a prominent practice in Western philosophy, where there was always a privileging of speech over writing, where the written word was seen as a mere reworking of a spoken word. In other words, language is called into existence, to a great extent, through the act of speech, as it is then possible to equate the word to a presence as the source/origin is visible. The premises of structuralism gave much impetus to this aspect too. Derrida, thus describes logocentrism as a metaphysics of presence that is motivated by a desire for a transcendental signified. Thus, Derrida highlighted the fact that even when an apparent structure had always been the distinguishing factor of the knowledge system of the West, through the tenets of structuralism, structurality of the structure gets reduced or neutralised by essentially being accorded a center or a point of presence or a fixed origin.

Derridean philosophy aimed to destabilise hierarchy by deconstructing the power struggle which determined the privileging of one component of the binary
existence over the other. Derrida bypassed the so called dualisms or binaries and believed that there is an emanating presence of the opposite category in the other. In other words, each category preserves a trace of the opposite category and had a relation of immanence and not of a power struggle where one is often seen as the other of one.

In order to explicate this basic premise, Jacques Derrida introduced various notions or concepts and chief among them was the idea of trace by which he referred to the peculiar condition where certain features inherent in a system is identified only by the prominent absence of certain others. In other words, every sign present has “trace” of other signs, which by differing from the sign also establishes it as the sign, as it is in the process of the never ending cycle of signification.

Trace is a term that derives from Derrida’s works in the early 1970’s such as *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*. These two treatises looked into the relations between speech and writing and was a means of criticising the logocentric view, particularly, privileging of speech as an act that is closer to the truth or logos of meaning and representation. According to Derrida, language develops through an interplay between speech and writing and notions such as trace, différance, arche-writing etc… was conceptualised by him to attest to this interplay.

Trace was used by Derrida to signify this play between speech and writing, which went on to define the play within any language. However, the Derridean trace cannot be pinned down as such, as in the style that is truly Derridean, trace was always elusive as the meaning of trace kept on evolving. One of the ways of looking at trace is, in the words of Derrida, as an always hidden transcendental signified. Another delineation of trace is done in relation to the act of writing. He posits that
there is a perpetual tension in the act of writing as it is not dependant on the graphie or
the script, but on what is not the graphie. In effect, writing becomes the site of the
articulation of trace. Essentially by introducing such notions Derrida was implicitly
claiming that there was a need to consider the act of writing as a kind of différance
and thereby attempt at comprehending the essential nature of sign which, in a way,
capsulated both presence and absence. In other words, the script or the graphie
relies on trace – an exteriority for its signification. Thus, trace, in the Derridean
universe is a paradox as it is never there yet it makes its presence felt even in its
absence. (This is the case with Kamala Das as is represented in her writings. Is Das
really there or is it a trace?)

Trace is established through the act of effacement, as Derrida states that
effacement must always be able to overtake the trace, otherwise it would not be a
trace but an indestructible and monumental substance. Thus, trace is the difference
which opens appearance and signification and “the present becomes the sign of signs,
the trace of traces” (156) and hence it is by the very presence of trace that
meanings are deferred. In the view of Derrida, supplement, trace and différance are
terms which help one understand the labyrinth that is language. Since writing
becomes the focus in the Derridean scheme of things and since writing becomes the
act and not the script it becomes the site of inscription of the trace and this is what that
gains relevance in this research too.

Even though trace as a concept is rather elusive, by focussing on this concept
Derrida suggested that almost all words have the capacity for an absent presence
which entails within it certain possibilities which can be taken advantage of. On the
one hand, it implies that language is unreliable and hence literature which is a play
with language is also unreliable. On the other hand, such a postulation implies the
possibilities of a horizon of meanings being attached to a word through the evocation of an absent presence. Accordingly, by utilising the tenets of poststructuralism, particularly Derridean trace, it is possible to understand the implications of a text as being open-ended; a text as being perpetually displaced and in constant motion calling into context the metaphor of palimpsest as well as one of the opening quotes of the chapter.

Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be ‘present,’ appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present.(142)

As explicated, the idea of trace implies an absence of certain features which in a way determined the presence of something, which consequently is associated with the theory of différence; implying a presence in an absence. Trace here indicates how it is impossible for a sign to gain closure, implying a reality beyond binaries or dualism thereby entailing within it a multiplicity or heterogeneity or a bridging rather than a relation of negation. Consequently, the notion of trace entails in itself the inevitability of an erasure and the impossibility of being erased, which could be termed as the palimpsestousness xix of the text.

Language, in a way makes this theoretical discourse possible and when engaging with an author like Kamala Das this idea becomes pertinent as she evoked a
deliberate playfulness with language in creating her texts, for in her texts, the process of signification is in a constant process of becoming and it is never in a state of being. Devika Nair\textsuperscript{xx}, rightly points this out, “One is fascinated by the ease and thrill with which she blurred boundaries, seasoning her Malayalam with English turns of phrase, spicing her English with a flavour of the Indian and the vernacular, garnishing both with a hint of urban Hindi.” Evidently, in Kamala Das, there is a conscious attempt at destabilising language and literary genres, and her works by positing a lack of closure, calls into context Derridean notions such as trace, différance etc… as “She moulded her fiction in poetic lyricism and cast her poetry in stark, unadorned prose, the modalities of one crossing over to the other – all of which render her writing more ‘interlingual’ than bilingual, as K. Satchidananan\textsuperscript{xxi} stated.” Thus the use of language by her largely becomes the site of trace.

Even when mired in the many possibilities opened up by the act of tracing, there is an essential thread running through all of this - motif of journey. Etymologically, the word trace\textsuperscript{xxii} implies the possibilities of journeys – external and internal, spiritual, physical or metaphysical - from the very moment when following a trial or investigating the ontological and metaphysical implications of something or somebody. Even when it is the act of creating, implying the inevitable act of superimposition, there is a subtle implication of an internal or intellectual or artistic journey, not to mention the inevitable parallels to the journey of the researcher. The act of tracing as conjured up here, thus, involves scrutiny of layers of meanings and presence of subtexts and the acts of interpretation taken up by a researcher. Considering the theoretical inroads into this act involves the privileging of the text and the situatedness of the reader/ researcher and the complexities involved in the dialectics between the two culminating in the enterprise of meaning making.
However, the situatedness\textsuperscript{xxiii} that such an act implies and the horizon of knowledge(s) brought to the text albeit by an invitation from the text is problematized here while approaching Kamala Das. At this juncture, it cannot but be helped than to be reminded of the philosophy of immanence\textsuperscript{xxiv}, which in essence talks about a presence which is ubiquitous; conclusively, the need to tap the presence of the text which is everywhere, which is present even in its absence. Ergo, in this particular act of tracing, the situatedness of Kamala Das also opens up new horizons of interrogations. So, the act of tracing, a prominent exercise here conjures up a phenomenon where the three entities – the reader/researcher, the text and the author radiate into the circumference of each other’s being, defined by the problematic polemics of presence and absence. This also the point of confluence of language, and location, in defining the creative output of Kamala Das. To initiate this process of tracing it becomes pertinent here to understand the palimpsest that is Kamala Das\textsuperscript{xxv} and the strategic point of entry is through her poetry. In short, the attempt here is to construct a bridge between her life and her works so as to understand the moments of trace in both.

1.3 Palimpsestous Kamala Das

Today let this paper receive my dripping blood. Let me write like one not in the least burdened by the thoughts about the future, turning each word into a negotiation with my life lived so far. I like to call this poetry. I like to call this poetry even if my words lose their music when, after raising in my innards a beautiful liquid turbulence, they come to surface in the relatively solid contours of prose. I had always longed for the strength necessary to write this. But poetry does not grow ripe for us; we have to grow ripe enough for poetry\textsuperscript{xxvi}
With panoramic vision and thought-provoking diction, Kamala Das, has left her mark in literature. Her writing, an evident offshoot of her experiences, is problematized by questions about identity, with the paradoxical complexities of rootedness and rootlessness emanating into it. She cannot be simply or singly positioned, marked or tied down biographically or professionally as much of her reflections has gone into the process of being named as an ‘other’— a stranger, a freak— not just by others but by her as well. Even when mired in complexities and controversies arising from these complexities, Das, tapping the essence of the languages accessible to her, has succeeded in establishing herself in the domain of literature as a bilingual writer, making her presence felt in the regional Malayalam literature and in the New Literatures in English xxvii.

Kamala Das published eight volumes of poetry in English in her life time, (one volume of poetry in Malayalam titled *Ya Allah*) even though volumes have come out after her demise. She also has to her credit autobiography, short story collections, one-act plays and novels – both in English and Malayalam. In addition to this, she has dipped her hands into the world of journalism and drawing, although “She always saw herself only as poet and short-story writer, and maintained till the end that she wrote poetry for herself and prose only for money.” (xxv) xxviii In all these outputs one thing stands out; they are insightful rendering of what she came to perceive as life and captures very subtlety how she accepted the invitation extended by the many manifestations of life. As Das herself says, “I wanted to fill my life with as many experiences as I can manage to garner because I do not believe that one can get born again.”xxxix Underlying her writing is a sense of urgency or restlessness which provokes the image of an active volcano – her work as a sudden explosion, spontaneous, full of energy, thereby alluding to the possibilities of destruction and
death in its trajectory, calling into context the lines from her autobiography, which acts as the prologue to this section, “I like to call this poetry. I like to call this poetry even if my words lose their music when, after raising in my innards a beautiful liquid turbulence, they come to surface in the relatively solid contours of prose.” (viii)

To be more precise, from the deep abyss of her self, gushes forth a vast oeuvre of poems, which proclaims its refusal to be categorized, much in tune with how she herself refused to be pinned down to a singularity, like the palimpsest. Some poems are simple— perfect word pictures— while, some are abstract verging on the point of philosophy, yet some are like flashes of lucidity merging into chaos, evoking the elusive trace. Most of her poems are a collage of random thoughts and after thoughts grabbed from life, which leads her poetry to be dubbed as “too loud, too melodramatic and obsessively self-flagellant.”

But, she does not limit it to herself, she goes into the issues that make and break the world at large. Her oft-quoted and much anthologised poem, “An Introduction”, hailed as her poetic manifesto, is proof enough and an appropriate point of entry to the palimpsestous agency called Kamala Das.

1.3.1 Intervening through “An Introduction”

‘An Introduction’ is itself a polyphonic text with several of the poet’s voices seeking articulation in a single verbal construct. [...] she situates herself more specifically using nationality, complexion, place of birth and the languages known, an ironic filling up of an ungiven form. (12)

“An Introduction”, one of Kamala Das’ oft-quoted and anthologised poems was first published in her 1965 collection *Summer in Calcutta*, has come to be understood as the poem that defines and defies her. The choice of this poem as an entry point into Kamala Das is legitimised by the words of the critic K
Satchidhanandhan quoted above and who viewed this poem as a comprehensive articulation of the different individual and social components that go into the making of women’s writing, which contextualises this research. (Das 1996: 11) Evoking the image of palimpsest and the idea of tracing out the apparent layers also get a push from the above words which very poignantly highlights the irony at the centre of “I” in the universe of Das. “I” as stated above, becomes an ironic filling up of a non-existing “I” - a presence which has at its centre a discernable absence -- a black hole to put it metaphorically-- and powerfully evokes the Derridean trace.

On the other hand, the engagement with ‘I’ on multiple levels in the poem points to the inevitability of it being qualified as a palimpsest. The pattern discerned on the surface, — the “I”— is not composed of a single layer, but there are multiple layers that go into it, enriching it— ‘I’ — as a whole. This section goes on to unveil each layer and interrogates the possibility of other layers which makes their presence felt even in their absence. The poem by touching upon many aspects that define a person also problematizes ‘I’ starting off with the lines:

I don’t know politics, but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I am Indian… (1965: 62)

These lines consciously link ‘I’, the idea of self, to the inevitability of a political awareness or consciousness, ironically positioned from an apparent vantage position of ignorance. Clearly, the tinge of sarcasm has to be understood here as she alludes to the fact that the only fact needed to assert the identity of ‘I’ as an Indian, is to merely by heart the names of those in power. Thus, the first ‘I’ that is encountered— highlighting a political consciousness linked to the self— is, in itself, a paradox
This particular idea of the self becomes pertinent while engaging with the idea of cosmopolitanism too, particularly if its roots to the early Greco-Roman engagements with the idea of citizenship are considered (taken up for a detailed discussion in the next chapter). The debates around the aspect of universality in being a citizen of a nation, such as India, given the notion of unity in diversity that is upheld and the implications of an apparent proclamation of locality, which is in itself beset with problems, is problematized by Das, as is evident from the lines that follow: “I am Indian, very brown, born in/Malabar,…” (62)

Clearly, this ‘I’ linked to the initial ‘I’ and among the many ‘I’s to be encountered, engages with a physical situatedness— ‘I’, here is an entity defined by geographical space, and on a broader plane looks into the political subtexts of a self— ‘I’ being a citizen of India, ironically, called a dark skinned Malabari. It is a conscious act here evoking the paradox of existence – yoking together a universalist discourse and a regional one— a pertinent part of the discourse of postcolonialism, popularly known as postcolonial paradox— while engaging with the notion of a nation or national identity. Interestingly, her play with locality within the nationalistic paradigm points to those skeins of cosmopolitan thought which, in effect, critiques the notion of homogenisation at the centre of postcolonial discourse. This is along the lines of what Robert Spenser saw as cosmopolitanism - self-awareness imbibing within it the broader sense of moral and political responsibility.

The subtle implication of the presence of traces or subtexts that go into the creation of ‘I’, in these lines alludes to the motif of palimpsest. ‘I’ that is encountered is not just limited to the same ‘I’, it enters into a play with the absent ‘I’— effecting a
trace of ‘I’ to allude to Derrida. This oft-quoted poem of hers is an epitome of how her words move beyond superficiality, creating an effect similar to ripples in a still pond, ripples which carry reverberations from the depths of the pond and can go on to manifest itself to the very ends and circumference of the pond. Interestingly, the next ‘I’ to be encountered is linked to the linguistic domain powerfully forcing our attention to the role played by language in locating the self, as Octavio Paz proclaims in *Alternating Current*:

> Literature is the expression of a feeling of deprivation, a recourse against a sense of something missing. But the contrary is also true: Language is what makes us human. It is a recourse against the meaningless noise and silence of nature and history. Living implies speaking, and without speech man cannot have a full life. Poetry, which is the perfection of speech —language speaking to itself—is an invitation to enjoy the whole of life (172)

These lines allude to Das’ preoccupation with language, one of the themes that she deals with throughout her poetic career. She rightly proclaims:

> I speak three languages, write in Two, dream in one. Don’t write in English, they said, English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, Every one of you? Why not let me speak in Any language I like? (62)

At the outset, the reference to more than one language here evokes a new set of problems and simultaneously evokes a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence.

She does not spell out explicitly which are the languages that she refers to in these lines. It can be assumed that the three languages here could refer to Malayalam-
her mother tongue, English- the tongue she adopted and/ or Bengali with which she might have had close encounters as she spent a considerable part of her childhood in Calcutta. However, as it was Bengali that she was not competent in, it could be posited as the reason why the three slowly diminished into two. The two could very easily be posited as English and Malayalam as she refers to it as the languages she writes in. Yet, the move towards one is still a matter of contention as it could be either of the two or a unique language of her imaginary realm.

Underlying all these is her reference to a language in which she dreams – the presence of the third language, beset with ambiguities could imply a kind of prototypical language shared by all and which for her radiates from somewhere within. This aspect becomes crucial in implying a going back to a consciousness, an oneness with nature as is also implied in the aboriginal tradition of dreamtime xxxvi or a female language as outlined by the theories of Luce Irigaray. xxxvii

While engaging with her negotiations with language, the journey from three to two and finally to one has to be scrutinised. However, it is also possible to see her slow migration from a dialectics arising out of the encounters between the three to a sort of a binary relation in the two, moving onto a continuum, establishing an emanating merging of the two into each other forming a single language. Hence, the trajectory from three to two to one need not be seen reductively as a shrinking down of languages but could be seen as a means of the three converging into one which gains relevance as the poem progresses.

However, apart from the polemics surrounding the use of languages she is also acknowledging the very dominant presence of dualisms that privilege the act of speaking over writing and in the dynamics and the dialectics involving these two acts the act of dreaming is somehow sidelined. She emphasises on this third language as a
language without any barriers as such. But she does powerfully evoke the need to endorse this quintessential language within and tap its many resources. However, it has to be noted that she does privilege Indian English, (which makes one wonder if this is the one that she talks about) as is evident from the following lines from the same poem: “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,”

On the other hand, another pertinent aspect here is the privilege of choice when it comes to a language which gets contextualised in the polemics surrounding the same in postcolonial discourses. This aspect of choice, thus, becomes a pertinent issue not just in the case of Kamala Das but also with the whole oeuvre of postcolonial literature. As is evident, from the lines quoted above, she is vehemently advised against using the language of her choice, against writing in English, as it is not her ‘mother tongue’. This is an issue that she will be revisiting throughout her career and on many levels too and she rightly reasserts and reiterates her choice when she proclaims: “It is as human as I am human, don’t/ You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my/ Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing/ Is to crows or roaring to the lions,” (62)

Inadvertently, if these lines are scrutinised, there is an added layer of contradiction, where, at one point, she talks about English as the language she writes in, against which she is warned, as it is an alien tongue, — an ‘other’ tongue — and not her mother tongue. But, then, she moves on from the language she writes in to the language she speaks, but here she is referring to it as “half English, half Indian” which is the most honest and is claimed by her as the speech of her mind. It is interesting to see the evolution in the play with language in her universe. The journey from three to one runs parallel to the journey of English as the other to “half English,
half Indian”, from a language she writes in to the language she speaks. The view of Pritish Nandy on the same has to be used in this context: “She never wrote the English that others expected her to. She wrote it as it came to her. It was an unlearnt, unkempt language which turned into magic in her hands. It was the true language of poetry and it made Kamala Das what she was, one of the finest and truest poets of her generation.”(103) xxxviii

These lines also points to the polemics of language that was central to the intellectual debates in India at that time. It is a fact attested to by history that when the constitution was framed in the year 1950, it was proposed that English as a language will be phased out by 1965 and Hindi will be reinstated as the only language. However, following the protest against the eradication of English as such there was an “Official Languages Act of 1964”, xxxix which added English as “one of the official languages of India”. The protest against the continuance of English in its official capacity was at its height in mid 1960s when Kamala Das published this work. So her engagement with language here gains an added relevance.

Another substantial insight into her play with languages can be intervened through “interlingual”, an idea proposed by K.Satchidhanadhan to comprehend the language created by Das, while talking about 'Kamala Das and the tradition of bilingual creativity' xl: “Her works in English look like a translation of Malayalam and her works in Malayalam are like a translation from English. Her language gave a kind of peculiar quality to her works. She was more interlingual than bilingual. Lack of formal education in both languages forced her to create her own language. She was not obsessed with grammar. That made her language different from that used by other writers” xli

There could be one more dimension to this. As a bilingual writer, equally
proficient in Malayalam and English, she does not really have to question the use of her mother tongue, Malayalam, as it is natural for her to use it. She does not have to really question her choice or to ponder on the limits of liberty to waddle in it. But while writing in English— an apparent alien language— she has to be conscious about it and probe into why such a language suits her purpose. Ironically, she designates this half and half language as “honest” and “as human as I am human.” It is the real self, as she goes on to explicate. However, she claims that it is a language that is unique. A language that is her niche, a language that differentiates her from others, which is, “Not the deaf, blind speech/ Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the/Incoherent mutterings of the blazing/ Funeral pyre.” (62)

The ambivalence that she finds herself in when it comes to her language, the language she speaks in, with its distortions and which implies a sense of fragmentation as evident from her description of it as ‘half and half’, powerfully evokes the dividedness that she senses in the essence of her self. This fragmentation is, in a way, something that reiterates the impossibility of the process of meaning making or of properly putting across a message even with the resources of languages at hand. The various implications of her verse, particularly, those arguments on language, in a way, alludes to Jacques Lacan’s thesis that language essentially takes us away from a realisation of self. This leads to the possible conclusion that she was a translingual rather than interlingual, as she, through the language she used communicated a sense of ambivalence and the impossibility of gaining closure.

Needless to argue then, that the concerns of Kamala Das dwell upon notions of identity and its articulation, with language playing a crucial role in it. The ‘I’ here is a post-colonial Indian, plagued by questions such as — “Who am I?”, “Am I an Indian?” “If yes, then why am I marked out because of my skin colour or my
domicile?” — “Which language do I speak in and why?”; “What is it that defines my choice of a language?” “What are the problems evoked if I speak in an ‘other’ tongue?”— “Where do I belong as a person in all of these discourses?” The questions that surge up are numerous and it is her engagement with these kernels that added a touch of contradictory hues to her poetry, simple image continuing into a narrative of complexities. Each of these questions goes onto create layers onto the patterns on the surface of the ‘I’.

The ‘I’ constituted by an in-betweenness— a différance, “a contradictory coherence” is relevant to understand Kamala Das. The notion of the national subject that she evokes right at the outset governed by a set of knowledge about political leaders, the founding fathers of the idea called nation, does not hinge on a notion of homogeneity. On the other hand, a heterogeneous existence comes into the picture as the poem progresses. 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 these aspects. Clearly, all these entities come into play in determining the human in her, a sense of the essential being, a being which taps the natural self as the real subjectivity; transcending all other entities created by the externalities –stressing a psychological or archetypical engagement with the self. As Honey Sethi observes, “In the twilight zone in which the creative mind dwells, there is the natural feminine ability to turn inwards, to accept intuition and tenderness as values along with the gentle sensitivity to one’s natural environment and to the latent human communications among human beings which mobilize the feelings and imageries and bring forth the new feminine voices creating new terrains.”

It becomes imperative here to see the new terrain she created as a palimpsest,
into which she transposes her multifariousness and the only way to grab at those many layers of scripts is to understand her life and the complexities that eventually got superimposed into the earlier layers. A propos to this are certain layers which make their presence felt even in their absence and the next section moves on to those layers in order to understand the ‘other’ layers evident in the poem – those layers that engage with her gendered identity, a paradoxical persona.

1.3.2  “Who are you, I ask each and all. The answer-is, it’s I”:

The Persona and ‘I’

I’ve heard Kamala compare the world she creates through writing to “shadow” and the external world to “substance”, describing how both worlds can coexist within her. But these poignant identity shifts blur the distinction between “real” and “masquerade.” She seems to be saying that her “naked mask,” her vulnerable openness, is just another mask. Yet when she defines “naked mask,” she says “this person with tears in my eyes.” It seems that for her the real and the masked are indivisible. (181)\textsuperscript{xlv}

While engaging with the palimpsestous nature of the text “I”, it is imperative here to acknowledge how in understanding the self as “I” there has always been the distinction between “I” and “me” - former referring to the subjective knower and the latter as the object that is known. The engagement of Kamala Das with this sense of dualism at the core of subjectivity is also presented as layers within the text of “An Introduction”, as the poem also goes into the personal realm— the other realm— engaging with changes both physiological and psychological, as a girl transforms into a woman, and hence the questions of stereotyping and the possibilities of ‘I’ beyond
dichotomies as she says: — “Who are you, I ask each and all. The answer-is, it’s I” (62). This section looks into the objective aspects that went into the creation of the subjectivity, as she herself states: “A woman writer takes herself apart and recreates a new identity. For this transformation we have first to locate alternatives, search for the roots of a self-hood to create a transformed self.”(147) This section endeavours to locate these roots and routes that led to the metamorphosis of ‘I’. (Engagement with roots and routes is central to the debates within the discourses of cosmopolitanism too)

Kamala was born on 31 March 1934 into an aristocratic Hindu Nair family—the prominent Nalapatt family — in Punnayurkulum, Thrissur district of Kerala, the erstwhile Malabar region. Her mother Nalapatt Balamani Amma was a renowned poet in Malayalam. Her father Vadakkekkara Madhavan Nair, a practicing Gandhian, was a senior officer in Walford Transport Company — a British automobile company in Calcutta— who later became the managing editor of the Malayalam daily, “Mathrubhumi”, when they settled down in Kerala.

At the outset, Kamala’s roots was beset with contradictions. Her maternal side, a prominent Nair family of Malabar, had a legacy that can be traced back to the Rajas of the region. (This aspect is foregrounded in many of her poems such as “Blood”, “The Swamp” etc…) However, with the advent of British rule there was a decline in their supremacy in the region and it was at this time that Balamani Amma was married to V.M.Nair, bringing “for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin.” and in this regard Das says in My Story:

In the year 1928 when my father got married, Mahatma Gandhi’s influence was at its highest. The simplicity that he preached appealed to the middle
classes. My father soon after the betrothal stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but khaddar and preferably white or off-white. […] The Nalappat family’s financial position at that time was precarious. All the jewellery had been sold for fighting off litigation and bankruptcy. My father was not an idle landlord. He worked for his living in Calcutta. (11) Thus, as a child, Kamala was unwittingly entwined in a paradoxical root — the legacy of an upper caste family, which her mother held on to, and the novelty of an egalitarian and proletarian debate brought in by her father. Right from the beginning, she was placed in an intricate situation as Honey Sethi (2013)xlvii observes: “The combination of “royal” and “peasant” identities along with the atmosphere of colonialism and its pervasive racism produced feelings of inadequacy and alienation for Das.”(26)

Moreover, she was born in colonial India, and her childhood was divided between Calcutta and her ancestral home, the privileged Nalappat tharavaadu, albeit a bit faded, as the glory of the Nair communityxlviii changed with the onset of British rulexlix. When she was a student at St. Cecilia European Catholic School- a convent school reserved for British children in Calcutta, she felt alienation for the first time sparked off by the color of her skin – she realized then, that she was different. 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, reiterating how Jacques Lacan links the notion of desire and loss to our initiation into language. Interestingly, it can also be observed that for Das, the question of an identity marker such as language or the skin’s color did not matter till then.
She began writing quite young and could handle Malayalam and English with panache. Her strong literary lineage is a contributing factor – as apart from her mother, her maternal uncle Nalappat Narayana Menon was also a prominent literary figure in Kerala. However, influences that go beyond her ancestry is present in her writing, pointing to an implicit presence of cosmopolitanism. Ironically, the cosmopolitan element in her is largely due to the influence of her roots. She was introduced to her rich heritage by her grandmother’s stories, and the other — the western literary world — opened up in front of her in her uncle’s library, where she devoured the works of Lord Byron, Walt Whitman, Abbe Prevost and more. It creates in her a need to cling onto both the possibilities and her imaginary world was a bridge between her grandmother’s tales — the folk tales/lores from Malabar — and those writers from across the ocean, both of which she encountered at Nalappat.

Moreover, there is the privileged creative space that was provided by the nair ethos¹ (her maternal legacy) when she encountered the familiar image of her mother at work. On the other hand, there is the less privileged middle class set up that she encountered, first, as a child in Calcutta (her paternal legacy of drab Gandianism) and later, as a middle class child-wife. Thus, she had to shuttle between these two apparent dichotomies which went onto become her constant companion, on many levels, till her death. Thus, this sense of universality coloured by locality has been part of her ethos since childhood, but the unique aspect about Kamala is that she made sure that there was no convergence of the two, but a constant interaction between the various entities, a neat dovetailing.

The nair ethos as well as the changes to it with the impact of colonialism and its newfound notions of social reformation reverberated in her life and work to a great extent. Before she could comprehend the extent of the complexity of her varied
legacy, came her marriage in 1949 at the age of 15 to Madhava Das, a person older
than her, with whom she could not relate to on any level as she says in the poem:

I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman- body felt so beaten.(1965: 62-63)

Clearly, these lines poignantly capture the metamorphosis of a child into a
woman.

Madhava Das was an officer in the Reserve Bank of India and later he worked
for the United Nations. His career took them to metropolitan cities such as Calcutta,
New Delhi and Bombay and this haunting dislocation from 1949 till 1981 is what
unsettles Kamala Das, at least, in the first part of her career. She is drastically
uprooted, when she begins a new life, in the city, as a wife to a man who is modern by
certain standards. Dislocation, on many levels becomes a recurring motif in her life –
be it physical, physiological, or psychological, as she says, “The weight of my breasts
and womb crushed me. I shrank / Pitifully. Then… I wore a shirt and my/ Brother’s
trousers, cut my hair short and ignored/ My womanliness.” In other words, she was a
migrant in her own land, within her body and more poignantly in her mind scape. This
aspect of dislocation, inherent in her, also paved a poignant path to her being a
cosmopolitan spirit.

Interestingly, Kamala Das’ move to the cities gave her a novel insight to
approach her self. The urban space became a liminal space— a place of transition,
threshold, interstice— a place where the self stands at the limit of that self, waiting to move into the ‘other’. It is evident in her poetry that there is an implicit engagement with her self in relation to the many Indian cities that she has traversed such as Kolkata, Pune, Mumbai, Cochin, Trivandrum etc. and how they get projected, and represented as interstitial spaces, both in her life and her writing.

For instance, as an Indian, her identity marker as a Nair woman belonging to an aristocratic family has no meaning in a city like Calcutta where she was just one among the teeming millions of middle-class housewives as she cries out through these lines: “Dress in sarees, be girl/ Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, / Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,/ Belong, cried the categorisers.” There, she is situated in two prominent discourses – one involving herself as a political entity and as an entity coming to terms with the stereotypical roles. “Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better/ Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to/ Choose a name, a role.” (63)

On the one hand, she was a citizen of India but hailing from a land filled with dark-skinned people, speaking a different language – Malayalam. On the other hand, she was a woman – a wife and home-maker, coming to terms with the complexities involved in the stereotypical representation of that role. Somewhere between these two roles or spaces is a liminal space— the middle-passage, the threshold— where she enters the vocational realm and becomes the writer, as she states: “My poems epitomise the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who tries to free herself domestically from the bondage sanctioned by the past.”(147)

It must be noted here that the liminal spaces that Kamala Das inhabited and which, poignantly paved the path to her creativity is not just limited to her physical displacements. The liminal spaces that she occupies is not just to do with a physical geographical space, but, to a large extent, it is a psychological threshold, which one
can encounter while searching for the evolution in her poetry. Thus, this space is favourable to her work as it traverses her own experiences as a migrant or a dislocated individual.

As an Indian, her identity is often contextualized, as has already been encountered in the poem “An Introduction”. She had to come to terms with the idea of a national identity when she migrated to these metropolises and had close encounters with its many reverberations. She was, thereby, inducted into the process of differentiation where national identity is pitted against regional identity, an issue quite prominent then and now. She reinstates her roots even when proclaiming her pan-national self—one of the many she has to come to terms with. These aspects gets foregrounded while engaging with the theoretical interventions into cosmopolitanism.

Having said that, her sudden, second move, after her wedding, to Calcutta from her ancestral home and her grandmother, brought new sprouts of loneliness and loss in her. There was a sense of finality to this move as she was not at an apparent liberty to come back, at least, not as often as she used to, when she had moved to Calcutta as a child. Earlier coming back was an assurance, when she used to spend her vacation at the Nalappat house. Thus, strangled in a domestic life she felt alienated from her own self.

The alienation she encounters in metropolitan life after her marriage is on many levels— from her roots— especially from her grandmother, from her land and language— from love, as she was incompatible with her husband on every plane. Kamala Das has referred explicitly to the homosexual yearnings of her husband in her autobiography as well as in her memoir with Weisbord, however she has also stated outright that he was the one who inspired her to write even if it is for supporting the family (one of the many paradoxes that is often associated with her). In one of her
interviews with Suresh Kohli she says about how she chose her penname in Malayalam Madhavikutty, “Madhavi because I was Madhava’s wife and Kutty because I was just a child.” (2009: 73) However, her marriage and her sudden shift to a cityscape had a huge impact on her psyche and her writing, as her moves to cities and multiple dislocations—physical, psychological and geographical—led to her nervous breakdown, leading to a long stay in Malabar in the early 1960’s, when “she found herself doubting the reality of the world outside”, which gets articulated thus in “An Introduction”: Don’t play pretending games./ Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a/ Nympho.” (63)

The kind of evolution that she alludes to subtly in her poem “An Introduction” is a motif that runs parallel to her career. At this stage, she was trying to comprehend the multiplicity. She is overwhelmed by the changes, the movement, the journeys–from being a malabari nair woman to a mere middle class house wife in a city in Calcutta, the journey both physical and psychological from a girl to a woman, as she says:

Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when/
Jilted in love… I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love

The journey through the many roles inducted by the conventional discourses of gender and stereotypes and its impact is further reiterated. Das was a witness to life both in colonial and post-colonial Calcutta and the process of stereotyping went a long way in determining her identity and haunted her throughout her life.

Who are you, I ask each and every one,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
I in this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath.

Engaging with these clear multiplicities was what plunged her into poetry, as is evidenced by her poems in the confessional mode,

I am sinner,

I am saint. I am beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (63)

The ease with which she used English somehow makes things easier for her.
The strategic location of hers both in space and time, after her marriage in 1949 till 1981 in cities like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta, particularly in the mid 1960’s -- the turning point of Indian literary history -- lend to her poetic career a strong voice.

Though, this was rather a traumatic time for her, she was able to sublimate those emotions into poetry. Thus this decade becomes the watershed in her life, initiating her into an ‘other’ existence altogether.

From this poem which is, in itself, a microcosm, it can be concluded that Kamala Das was initiated into Indian writing in English mainly as a means of coming to terms with her complex identity which was witness to various changes and displacements. How this gets reflected in the evolution of her poetry is discussed in the next section.
1.4. Locating Kamala Das and her works

She claimed her space by refusing to conform to socially defined roles, even while fulfilling them, and in the process reinvented herself, and at times deliberately blurred the line between life and poetry, only to offer another paradox: “It’s my poems that are my life, and not my prose.”

Devindra Kohli

The literary career of Kamala Das in English was initiated at that point of the history of Indian Literature when it was declaring that it was the time to change. It seems as if this clarion call was imbibed by Kamala with an ardour which was garnished by the trauma of her existence. Striking a balance with the whole linguistic debate she decided to write in English but her own version of English. She published her first collection of poetry in English, *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965 which launched her as one of the prominent new voices of Indian English Poetry. The Times journalist Jenny Booth says in Das’ obituary that her debut into Indian English poetry was a far cry from the “19th century diction, sentiment and romanticized love” which had dominated the Indian English Poetry (2009) and she was hailed as the mother of modern English Poetry. Also Das became a visionary and “an important voice of her generation exemplified by a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists.” (Sethi 25)

This is clear from Kamala Das’ proclamation: “I/ have come, yes, with hunger, with faith and/A secret language, /All ready to be used.” (Das 1965: 40). Going by these lines from the poem, “A New City”, the realm of poetry is given a new dimension through her work as is maintained by Devindra Kohli, “Kamala Das’s homespun style- her speech rhythms, with their almost total disregard of the traditional iambic line of English verse, her imagery drawn from immediate contexts of experience, her
individual tone of voice at times assuming a ‘loud poster’ persona and yet disarmingly
owning and sometimes playing on ‘its distortions, its queernesses’—struck a
refreshingly new chord in English poetry in India.”(xi)

Her poetry is unconventional born out of a silence, but reverberating with
many voices – a clear articulation of the multifariousness she felt within her. This
depth could be the strength of her poetry. She chose poetry as her vehicle as it gives
her flexibility, fluidity and elusiveness that she passionately desires.

A blind acceptance of life and a yearning for past comes alive in her second
collection The Descendants (1967). Her poems reflect the way her thoughts meander
through her life sewing together bits of present to the past. Yet she claims in the
poem, “Composition”, “What I narrate are the ordinary/ events of an/ordinary
life.”(Das 1967: 35). However, her rendering of these seemingly ordinary events exist
on the verge of epiphanies, at times evoking a Joycean world where we encounter
epiphanies in the everyday.

Interestingly enough Kamala Das lashes out at the world through The Old
Playhouse and Other Poems (1973). These poems are attempts at critiquing the
societal customs and constructs. She highlights how changes are imposed on the self
and how those impositions somehow transcend the reality and hence how it becomes
problematic, when trying to reconcile both. The image of old playhouse is very
poignant for the themes in this collection. Sarcasm reaches the high point of revenge
in many poems as is evident from “The Old Playhouse”:

... You called me wife./ I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and/ To offer at the right moment the
vitamins. Cowering/Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and/ Became a
dwarf.”(Das 1973:1)

There are many poems in the collection that hint at how the self is forced to
change, to fit into a certain role dictated by the so-called norms and values. In short, these three collections of poetry established her Raj among the Indian English writers. Early two decades of her career was quite significant not just in terms of her own career but also in terms of her contribution to Indian English Poetry and her influence on the other poets of her time. She had created a literary circle called Bahutantrika, which was very active during the 1960s and had a lasting impact on the next generation of poets too.

So she channelled her social and creative energies by founding Bahutantrika, ‘a club of talents’, where every Saturday of the month poets, playwrights, dancers, editors, and publishers gathered for readings and performances in the spacious room of her Bank House apartment. For Kamala Das, ‘this monthly fiesta’ served a therapeutic, social and creative purpose. (xxvi)

There was a temporary relapse to her literary endeavour due to the declaration of emergency from 1975-1977 and the complications in its wake, where the meetings of Bahutantrika was seen as anti-government, leading to her temporary state-sponsored exile to Kerala. She also began experimenting with other genres in English such as novel and short story with the confidence that she has gained from the limelight of the novelty of her poetry. Even though her novels and short stories in Malayalam were well received, the publication of her first novel in English Alphabet of Lust (1977) failed to make an impact like her poetry. Yet in the same year was published a collaborative work of poetry with Pritish Nandy titled, Tonight, this Savage Rite: the love poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy (1979), which brought back her much sought after, powerful and poignant love poems, and was an outcome of the Bahutantrika meetings.
In 1981, the entire family moved back to Kerala and settled in Trivandrum. However, her husband’s job in UN took her to Srilanka intermittently between 1981 and 1984 during which she was also a witness to the Sinhala- Tamil conflict in Srilanka. From the 1980’s onwards her poetry took a turn towards a sense of social consciousness, which could be a cumulative effect of the kind of dislocations she had, mainly due to the Indian emergency and also the conflicts she encountered in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, in 1984 she stood as a candidate for the Constituent Assembly of Kerala, but failed to garner any support. As Devindra Kohli explains:

It was probably a combination of several factors that had led her to take that decision. Her experience of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, her meeting with Mrs. Gandhi earlier in July, the anti- Sikh riots, and her sense of growing religious tensions in her home state had ignited her commitment to the social causes of women and children and of promoting religious harmony. And thus was born her grand ambition ‘to help rid my homeland of religious animosities’ and ‘write a poem to end all poems, a poem absolute as the tomb’

Besides, in 1984 she was nominated and shortlisted for Nobel Prize in Literature along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer proving her exceptional literary value.

Mimicking and reworking the classical Tamil akam\textsuperscript{l,x} (interior) poems she wrote *The Anamalai Poems* which was published in 1985. These poems contrast the internal turbulences and dialectical nature of man with the grandeur and permanence of nature. This introspective take on life was a result, among others, of her failure as a contestant in the Assembly Election. The second stage of her poetry starts off from here with a marked shift towards social consciousness in her writing, moving beyond the dialectics of loss and desire (characteristics of her early poetry), she brings in
issues that make and break the world at large.

The publication of her autobiography, My Story in 1988 catapulted her into fame and controversies as it explicitly described her personal life and eccentricities, shocking the complacencies of the Indian society. She was keen on breaking the taboos defining Indian women especially women on the domestic realm. However, she later admitted that there are many fictional elements in her autobiography and that she wrote it in order to make money, opening up a fresh new series of polemical enquires into the truthfulness of life writings which has not, in effect, abated yet.

In 1992, her short story collection Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories, centered on female identity and quest for freedom came out and it was also the year in which she lost her husband to death. Even though she went through a stage of depression and did sense a bit of writer’s block, she came out of it in 1994 with an exhibition of her drawings which was poignantly titled “Unfinished Woman”.

Only the Soul Knows How to Sing, a selection of her poems in English, was published in 1996, with a preface by K. Satchidhanandan- “Transcending the Body” – which expertly and subtly captures the essence of the writer in Kamala Das, and is a crucial text in understanding the poetry of Kamala Das and its relevance and scope.

Her conversion to Islam in 1999 at the age of 65 was another milestone, impacting, her life and creativity. (A collection of her poetry in Malayalam, Ya Allah by Islamic Publishing House, Kerala, came out in the year 2002.) It found her mired in controversies once again. The reason for her conversion, yet another of her quests for love, is clearly stated in her Biography - The Love Queen of Malabar by Merrily Weisbord (2011) - which is a key text in understanding and demarcating the thin line between her life and her work. But she is again jilted in love and her conversion leads her into further complications and confusion. This is well articulated in her last
collection of poetry, *Closure: Some poems and a Conversation*, another collaborative work, but with Suresh Kohli- published in 2009, the year she passed away. There are many poems rooted in her experiences from and experiments with religion, some hinting at the disturbing presence of post-independence cultural and religious fundamentalism.

One more collection of her short stories *The Kept Woman and other stories* was published posthumously in 2010. A documentary on her, “An Introduction” came out in the year 2012 and in 2013 a collection of her unpublished works was brought out by Suresh Kohli titled *Wages of Love* and in 2014 came out *Kamala Das: Selected Poems* with a penetrating introduction by Devindra Kohli.

**1.4.1 Tracing the trajectory of the poetic persona**

My forms are direct expressions of an autobiographical voice. But that-individual voice also asks to be read symbolically… (147)

While engaging with the poetry of Kamala Das, it is not possible to take her entire poetic output as a homogenous whole. While traversing through the eight volumes of her poetry in English (works published from 1965 to 2009) taken up for study, it becomes necessary to look into the apparent thematic diversity in each of her collection or more precisely in each stage of her creative output. There is an evident inconsistency and ambiguity if one is to gauge her oeuvre in the chronological order as and when it was published. Hence, there is a need to classify her poems on the basis of certain parameters to aid in its comprehension. (Even when this is undertaken her poetry often tends to move beyond classification) This is undertaken in the following sections, and is aimed at situating her poetry within this research.
1.4.1.1 Thematic delineation

When engaging with Kamala Das’ poetry in totality, there are a few themes that dominate her verse and there is an apparent consistency that can be drawn if her poetry is approached from these angles. At the outset, there have always been poems that evoke a sense of nostalgia. Though, it was more prominent in her early verse, particularly those poems about her childhood in Malabar, — her family home- the Nalappat House, and her grandmother— all of which reflect a yearning for that ideal world— a hanging onto her past and her memories, flavoured her poetry consistently till her end.

Another prominent aspect of her poetry is the self-reflexivity that is evident in terms of language use and creativity. This can be understood in relation to the various stages of transition in her career, as what gets communicated through such poems is the search for something to fill in the gaps that she encounters in her life and the rationale for writing is maintained as a means towards filling up the gaps or to settle the feeling of loss that pervaded her universe. In this regard, an excerpt from one of her interviews is worth quoting at length,

Maybe it was the absence of love, the emotional component as against the physical, to begin with, and ill- health later on. If I had been a loved person I wouldn’t have become a writer. I would have been a happy human being. Poetry came to me much later. I suppose I started writing because I had certain weakness in my system. I thought I was weak and vulnerable. That’s why we attempt poetry. Poets are like snails without the shells, terribly vulnerable, so easy to crush. […] It is the looking that makes the poet go on writing, the search. If you find someone, the search is over, the poetry is over. (71-72)
The third prominent aspect of her poetry and the most popular is her obsession with dualism – body and soul, love and lust, spirituality and physicality, etc... Taking off from these, is her engagement with the mythical duo, Radha and Krishna. While engaging with the notions of love- its physicality and spirituality, Das plays with this myth on many levels. There is a group of poems that highlight a heightened sense of social consciousness and also those touching upon religion, and a few poems about illness which can be dubbed as hospital poems. Last, but not the least, are her poems on old age which evokes a cyclicity, in the sense that they also imply a looking back – a nostalgia of another kind.

1.4.1.2 Engaging self in poetry

An engagement with Kamala Das’ poetry, particularly, with regard to the evolution of her self as a creative writer, it has to be acknowledged that there is a marked difference in her depiction of self across her poetry down the ages, and this aspect plays an important role in determining a step wise or stage wise evolution in her poetry. It is possible to tentatively allot a three stage division to her poetic output based on this. The first stage would be the part of her career from 1960’s to the end of 1970s, the second stage starts off with the mid 1980’s particularly with the publication of her *Anamalai Poems* till the publication of *Only the Soul knows How to Sing* and the third stage is post her conversion to Islam and takes up the last collection *Closure* and the collected works that came out after her demise which had a few of the poems she wrote at the fag end of her life.

For instance, the first three volumes with poignant images of ambivalence and multiplicity of selves embodied in a sense of physicality is engaged with a growing trepidation, unease and restlessness. This stage is characterised by her overtly erotic poetry – declaring that side of hers governed by the elements of her sexuality. This
could in a way also reflect the trauma of her encounters with her homosexual husband. The apparent discord between them on all levels centred on her identity as a woman. This is the stage when she is experimenting with herself and how she powerfully questions the taboos relating to the gendered role of women and inviting interpretations that dubbed her as feminist. Thus, the early phase of her poetry dealt with trauma and sexuality, loss and desire, repression and sublimation, reality and pleasure and could be a means of articulating the confusion inherent in her as to which self to assert – the private or the public, which in a way highlighted the uncertainty and the anger within her at the changes that were brought into her life.

These poems in a way was her engagement with change – be it physical, psychological, physiological, linguistic or political. This is a phase which highlights her state as a migrant on all spheres of her life. This is also the point in her poetic career when she engages with the mythical duo of Radha and Krishna. She starts playing with the myth engaging with the notions of love inherent in it and evolving the dialectics of physicality and spirituality as explicated by these mythical figures.

A marked shift comes in with a rough patch in her life, what with her many diseases and near death experiences. So there are many poems that are centred on diseases and hospitals as setting. Interestingly, death was a theme that she engaged with even before her real life encounter with death. With this bleak turn to her verse is also a very lucid engagement with the socio-political events in the world at large. There are many poems which highlight social consciousness of hers. This is also the second stage in her poetic career where she seems to be attempting an assertion of self, but here it is mostly a social self as K.Satchidhanandhan points out:

This double commitment – to the self and to others- is what defines Kamala’s poetics of complementarity and lends to her creative universe a
comprehensiveness seldom encountered in the stereotypical feminist poetry of the 70’s and 80’s with its oppressively repetitive concern with the body, its deliberate and aggressive anti- male stance and its jargonised confessional or indignant idiom. (17)

Towards the fag end of her career as a poet in English, are those poems on old age which seems inevitable but there are poems which take on a religious note particularly highlighting her shift to Islam at the age of 65. However the third stage in her poetry hints at the idea that gaining a sense of closure to the sense of self is a myth.

1.4.1.3. Situating Kamala Das’ poetry in his research

Since the focus of this research is on the elements of cosmopolitanism in Kamala Das’ poetry, the approach that is adopted is to look at the thematic concerns in her poetry that establishes her as a migrant in space and time and by doing so how does she use language to comprehend it. It is at this point that both the notions of palimpsest and trace come into play. When undertaking to classify her poetry on these terms it becomes important to find a common parameter and in this case it is liminal spaces that is evident on a close scrutiny of Das’s poetry.

Poetry itself, for Das, can be said to start off from such a liminal space. For instance, in the early phase of her writing, there is an interstitial space that is created by her various displacements. The idea of a trace as an absent presence gains contextual relevance here. The displacements here are on many levels – physical displacements mainly in her being located/ relocated to cities like Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta; psychological displacement - being displaced from love; emotional displacement - her distance from her ancestral home and grandmother; linguistic displacement, physiological displacement and religious displacement etc. This is
evident in her writing in her creation of dualisms and her attempts at moving beyond it. For instance, there is a liminal space that is evoked between her longing for her childhood and her migrations to cities, in her early verse.

In order to tackle this, the entire oeuvre of her poetry is divided into six sections—1. Poems centred on the idea of nostalgia, 2. Poems of transition which prominently figures sea as the most pervading presence, 3. City poems and Radha Krishna poems which engaged with dualisms, 4. Poems evoking social consciousness, 5. Hospital poems and 6. Poems on old age evoking a new looking back or nostalgia. The list of the poems in each section is given as Appendix 3.

1.4.1.4 Note on the Appendices

Towards a better understanding of Kamala Das’ poetry and more prominently to aid with the analysis of her entire gamut of poetry in English, three appendixes have been prepared, which classify her entire poetry collection in English. Given as appendix one is a list of all her poems in English in chronological order (listed out from her eight poetry collections in sequence)

Appendix two gives a list of her poems written in each decade starting off with the 1950s. This appendix follows the poetry collection of Kamala Das which was edited by one of her most prominent critics P. P. Raveendran and those which do not have a mention in this collection have been inducted onto the appendix based on similarities.

Appendix three has been created for convenience, while engaging with this dissertation, as this appendix classifies her poetry into different phases which is meant to aid in the discussion of her poetry as an entity that carries within it the many nuances of cosmopolitanism. The third appendix essentially cuts across the
chronology and clubs together all those poems which highlight a liminal space in her creativity. So, in effect, it traces the many nuances of cosmopolitanism as the poet Kamala Das evolves from the first volume to the eighth.

1.5 Conclusion

The exposure to various life changing experiences has given Kamala Das a profound vision which is evident in her works, particularly her poetry in English. The multifarious experiences, creating a plurality of existence and her response to it are expressed through her ambivalent verse. Through her confessional writing, she brings out her self(ves), a portion of which was encountered in the earlier section. In effect, the cosmopolis of her self has been traced, the way many footprints of her experiences in life has been imbibed by her self and consequently into her poetry and how she invents herself through her poetry. All these texts and subtexts alludes to Kamala Das as an entity which is defined by differences which is highlighted by the poem “An Introduction”, which is qualified as an user’s manual by Prof. Udaya Kumar lxv.

This chapter titled ““I too call myself I”: Tracing Kamala Das”, by evoking the metaphor of palimpsest and her poem “An Introduction” tried to look into the possibilities of erasure and presences evolving from it and in spite of it, in her poetry which enriches the text. In her case it is not just poetry but the ‘I’ that is encountered becomes a palimpsestic presence. Moreover, it is clear from the encounters with the ‘I’s in the poem, that it is language and location that become the indices in the creation of this ‘I’. Thus, the ‘I’ by being multifarious, by being elusive and indefinable, also posits the possibility of a trace of an ‘I’ too.

It is at this juncture that cosmopolitanism gains importance as it complements the postcolonial emphasis on a dialogue among differences, an underlying feature of her verse. When the concept of cosmopolitanism is accounted for in this research,
what is being stressed is the dialogue between universality and locality, as well as the many reverberations that goes into the creation of an ambivalent subjectivity as is evidenced both by the many theoretical inroads of cosmopolitanism and the many nuances of the subjectivity that is created by Kamala Das.

To sum up, when the act of tracing is undertaken, almost all the aspects that have been delineated in the earlier part of this chapter is considered, and the endeavour is to explicate how in Das there is a play with the notions of absence and presence, which, in a way, impacted her psyche and has gone a long way in defining the subjectivity that gets put across through her poetry. The metaphor of palimpsest and the act of tracing is linked to the way Kamala Das utilised language to locate herself within the many dislocations that she encountered. Moreover, the notion of location is engaged with from the angle of movement and more importantly dislocation – another paradox. How did she locate herself amidst her many dislocations? A dissection of the many polemics of Das as an entity and in particular how her poetry reflects it and how she entails within her the many nuances of a cosmopolitan entity is attempted here.

In the next chapter, taking off from the notion of cosmopolitanism and the possible impact of the theory in approaching Indian Literatures in English, with special focus on poetry is discussed. Kamala Das is placed within both the discourses – Indian English Literature on a broader level and the concept of cosmopolitanism to be specific. This chapter also looks into the possible reason or influences that have gone into creating an ambivalence within the self and poetry of Kamala Das by highlighting the displacements or dislocations that she has gone through and how it has gone into the evolution of her psyche and her vocation.
Notes

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


iv See Kohli, Suresh. “Preface”, Wages of Love

v See Nandy, Pritish. “Remembering Kamala” Tonight this Savage Rite: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy.

vi See Satchidhanandhan, K. “Preface to Kamala Das’ Only the Soul Knows how to Sing

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

viii I refer here to the 8th edition of Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary which has a rather long entry on trace. As a verb there are close to six possibilities. It indicates the act of finding or discovering somebody or something by looking carefully for it/ them, evoking the synonym of track down. Another meaning is to find the origin or cause of something as in tracing something back to something. The entry also touches upon acts of describing a process or a development of something, to draw a line or lines on a surface, to follow the shape or outline of something and to copy a map, drawing etc. by drawing on transparent paper placed over it. Along the same lines, trace as a noun refers to a mark, an object or a sign that shows that somebody or something existed or was present, a very small amount of something and a line or pattern on a paper or a screen that shows information about the identity of somebody or something.

ix See Palimpsest, 8th Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary

x See Palimpsest. https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/palimpsest/

xi Ibid

xii See Trace, 8th Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary

xiii See Trace Element, 8th Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary

xiv See Derrida, Jacques. Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs

xv See Saussure, Ferdinand de. Course in General Linguistics

xvi See Gikandi, Simon. “Poststructuralism and postcolonial discourse”

xvii Ibid

xviii See Derrida, Jacques. Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs

xix I refer here to the idea of palimpsestousness as explicated by Sarah Dillon in Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory. This work talks about the many reverberations of the metaphor palimpsest by employing palimpsestousness as a concept that impact the act of reading and modern thought thereby aiding in our perception of literature. In the book the author while tracing the history of the use of Palimpsest as a metaphor touches upon the theory of Derrida also.

xx See Nair, Devika, “Kamala Das: many selves, many tongues”

http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/kamala-das-many-selves-many-tongues/article7056859.ece
Reference here is to the keynote address of K Satchidhandhan at the Symposium ‘Kamala Das and the tradition of bilingual creativity’ jointly organized by the Sahitya Akademi and University of Kerala at the Institute of English on March 25th, 2015.

Middle English (first recorded as a noun in the sense ‘path that someone or something takes’): from Old French trace (noun), tracier (verb), based on Latin tractus

Phillip Vannini while engaging with the many horizons of the notion of situatedness also hints at the possibility of the word referring to a certain extent of involvement with in a context. Hence, situatedness here when considering the path of the researcher also takes on a new height, as there is also a need to take into account the researchers situatedness. How a researcher is part of the discourse being created and how much of it is shaped by personal as well as linguistic, biographical, historical, political, economical, cultural, ideological, material and spatial aspects.

Immanence refers to those philosophical and metaphysical theories of divine presence in which the divine encompasses or is manifested in the material world. Immanence is usually applied in monotheistic, pantheistic, pandeistic, or panentheistic faiths to suggest that the spiritual world permeates the mundane.

The various discourses centering on the idea of Palimpsest has opened up the possibilities of even referring to a person as a palimpsest as in referring to a palimpsestic or palimpsestous nature. For instance, Sarah Dillon in Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory talks about the many reverberations of this metaphor by employing palimpsestousness as a concept that impact the act of reading and modern thought thereby aiding in our perception of literature. In this work she is in a way re-molding popular concepts such as subjectivity, textuality and sexuality among other things. Gerard Genette’s Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree engages with the aspect of inter-textuality and how texts remind reader of an earlier text implying a textual transcendence which gains prominence when engaging with Das.

New Literatures in English is used deliberately here to highlight the debates surrounding the use of terms such as Commonwealth Literature, Postcolonial Literature etc… to refer to the literature coming from the erstwhile British colonies, which failed to see the diversity within such a genre. However, the plural marker in New Literatures in English closed the gap pertaining to a homogenization, even when there were contentions with the use of terms such as New.


See Nandy, Pritish. “Remembering Kamala” Tonight this Savage Rite: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy.

See Satchidhanandan, K. “Transcending the Body”, Only the Soul Knows How to Sing


Malabar was a part of the Madras presidency till the division of India into States on the basis of the regional languages in 1956. The derogatory reference to a South Indian as madrasi is subtly hinted at here.

Postcolonial paradox refers to the ambivalence that is often associated with the conflicts between the roots and routes, between the one’s own culture and that of the adopted culture which becomes pertinent in the formation of identity. The most prominent example is that of a rooted rootlessness.

Spencer, Robert. Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature
The Australian Aboriginal belief in the phenomenon called dreaming and
dreamtime has its roots in the indigenous Arandic (language of the Aranda people of
Central Australia) word Alcheringa, which subtly alludes to the possible meanings
such as “eternal, uncreated”, “time out of time” or “everywhen”. The animist
mythology of these indigenous people dreamtime refers to the sacred era in which the
ancestral totemic beings created the world. It also stems from the belief that an
individual’s entire ancestry exists as one, thus leading to the idea that all worldly
knowledge is accumulated through one’s ancestors. In conjunction with this concept
is the idea of dreaming, which refers to an individual’s or a group’s sets of beliefs or
spirituality. For instance, a native indigenous person might say that he has a Kangaroo
Dreaming – which implies that s/he has the spirit of that animal within the self. Thus,
dreaming existed before the life of the individual began and continues to exist when
the life of the individual ends.

See Irigaray, Lucy. *Speculum of the Other Woman*

See Nandy, Pritish. “Remembering Kamala” *Tonight this Savage rite: The Love
Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy.*

Continuance of English language for official purposes of the Union and for use
in Parliament.-(l)Notwithstanding the expiration of the period of fifteen years from
the commencement of the Constitution the English language may, as from the
appointed day, continue to be used, in addition to Hindi:- (a) for all official purposes
of the Union for which it was being used immediately before that day, and (b) for the
transaction of business in Parliament; Provided that the English language shall be
used for purposes of communication between the Union and a State which has not
adopted Hindi as its Official Language.

K Satchidhandhan’s keynote address at the Symposium 'Kamala Das and the
tradition of bilingual creativity' jointly organized by the Sahitya Akademi and
University of Kerala at the Institute of English on March 25th 2015.

See “Kamala’s concerns were beyond feminism: Satchidanandan”
http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/Kamalas-concerns-were-beyond-feminism-Satchidanandan/articleshow/46685275.cms

Jacques Lacan posits three stages – the first, Imaginary refers to the first 6 months
in the life of an infant when it feels itself to be complete and in harmony with the
world at large, where its incomprehensible talk is taken to mean something significant
by others around it, the second stage, the symbolic starts when the child is initiated
into a language as well as a process of unlearning where it is asked to give up on the
words it had used as an infant and is encouraged to use the ‘real’ words and hence
ironically here the child gets confused as the process of meaning making or
identification of self is many times removed from reality and the third stage Real is in
fact an imaginary stage where there is the possibility of the signifier and the signified
colliding which could be a reference to those moments of epiphany or ultimate self-
realisation which is a next to impossible task according to Jacques Lacan. These
aspects are further delineated in Chapter 4

See note vii

See Sethi, Honey, “A Feminist Wisdom in the Poetry of Kamala Das”,

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

Ibid

See Sethi, Honey, “A Feminist Wisdom in the Poetry of Kamala Das”,
There are many theories which look into the origin of the Nair community, who played a prominent role in Kerala society till the onset of the 20th C. They were considered as a warrior class and this legacy that they took forward through their martial arts form – Kalaripayattu went a long way in establishing them as feudal lords and hence they slowly rose up in the society as a propertied class and went on to become a prominent presence in the intellectual circles of Kerala including the civil, administrative and military circles. However, with the advent of colonization and the introduction of land reforms in the 1950’s that stipulated on the upper limits on land holdings, led to the splitting up of tharavaadu which referred to relations of property shared by a group tracing descent from a common ancestress. This bid eventually split up the matrilineal joint family system practiced in Nair tharavadu and led to the establishment of nuclear families and eventually resulting in their steep decline.

The British viewed this warrior caste with suspicion and saw their military prowess and skill as a threat to their existence in the land and even went on to ban Kalaripayattu and prohibited them from holding weapons. 

1 The Nair community was a matrilineal community and hence these upper caste women enjoyed a privileged position with minimal household work and an ample number of female servants to look after their needs as well as the needs of the entire family. And the practice of polyandry in a way freed these women from the chores of wifehood too. Thus, they enjoyed freedom to their own space and time which in a way was conducive to the literary career of Balamani Amma – Kamala Das’ mother. However Das was not that privileged as she, under the strains of the post-colonial reforms had to adjust to the life as a middle class house wife whose hobby was slowly converted into a vocation which could fetch in some money in running the household.

li See Weisbord, Merrily. The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das.
lii See Das, Kamala and Suresh Kohli. Closure
liii See Kohli, Devindra. “Introduction” Kamala Das: Collected Poems
liv Time to Change was the title of Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry collection which came out in 1953 initiating the modernist phase in poetry.
lv At that point in the history of Indian English Writing, the question of the appropriation of a language like English by the Indian authors were debated at length and it was also the time when Modernists like Nissim Ezekiel, Gieve Patel etc. were playing with the idea of an Indian English which was more Indian than anything else. The contribution of Kamala Das to this is also poignant
lvi Booth, Jenny. "Kamala Das: Indian poet and writer"
lvii See Kohli, Devindra, “Introduction” Kamala Das: Collected Poems
lviii Ibid
lix Ibid
lx Akam forms one of the two division of the ancient Tamil Sangam Poetry. Akam having the meaning interior, reflects poems which are based on aspects of interiority as opposed to Puram which referred to poems which reflected the themes of War, based on an exteriority.
lxi See Weisbord, Merrily. The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das
lxii See Appendix 1 for the list of poems based on the chronology of her published works.
I refer here to the comment made by Prof. Udaya Kumar during the discussions at the Symposium “Kamala Das and the tradition of bilingual creativity” jointly organized by the Sahitya Akademi and University of Kerala at the Institute of English on March 25th 2015.