CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Indian poetry in English has a long history. But what sort of recognition it has in India and abroad cannot be easily ascertained and established. Although Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar discussed the major Indian poets in English, starting from Toru Dutt to Kamala Das, he did not establish a widely accepted canon of Indian poetry in English. So it is not a simple matter to discuss Indian poetry in English within a broad and viable historical framework. The problem becomes more complex when one tries to respond to poetry by modern and contemporary Indian poets writing in English. Bruce King argues:

While there is no fixed canon or permanent Golden Treasury of great poems, as tastes always change, and new writings always challenge the status of the old, the present mixed opinion about what is or is not essential Indian English poetry reflects the newness of the poetry. In 1950 modern Indian English poetry hardly existed, and as late as 1960, when the Writers Workshop

started, was still fighting to survive. In general, those poems which have become established as classics have used Indian subject-matter, have been explicit in meaning, and not difficult in form. The best known poems of Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Das and the early Patel are examples. The more difficult poetry of Mahapatra and Mehrotra, the poems published abroad by Sarat Chandra, the recent poetry of Daruwalla along with the book-length verse sequences of Kolatkar and Parthasarathy, will need more time before favourites emerge.

The preceding critical observation seems to suggest that modern Indian poetry in English uses Indian subject matter, and is explicit in meaning and simple in form. Whether the meaning and form in the poems of Ezekiel, Ramanujan, and Das are simple cannot be categorically stated without a close analysis of their poems. Moreover, the difficulty one encounters in the poems of Mahapatra, Mehrotra, and

Sarat Chandra, Daruwalla, Kolatkar, and Parthasarathy is to be attributed to the subject-matter or to the vision they try to convey cannot be easily decided. On the whole, a more flexible methodology of analysis and exploration is called for in order to assess Indian poetry in English and the individual achievements.

Most of the theoretical and critical orientation of Indian poetry in English after 1950 seems to emerge from the Anglo-American modernism of the 20's and 30's. Most of the poets seem to have a good knowledge of the symbolist-aesthetic and the poetics of irony that constitute the core of new criticism. They seem to react adversely against the poetics of Aurobindo, which makes a poem mantra in the sense that the poem's symbolic spread and resonance have a holistic character. In the post-independent India, the cultural and linguistic cross-currents are such that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a poet to achieve a syncretic view of life. Hence Indian poets writing in English skate over their private
experiences with verbal subterfuges. No doubt what they behold in and around themselves is not all beautiful, if not wholly ugly. This situation leaves them with no choice, but to be ironical in the sense of perceiving a kind of incongruity in life and experience. Usually they juxtapose the ideal and the actual, myth and reality, not to clarify either but to damn both. Sometimes it takes the mode of a confessional poem in which the Gita is tucked in a girl's skirt, as for example, in the following poem:

At dusk Father shuffles us all around the coir-mat to pray.
We spout chants from the Gita:

'Feed not your desire
on objects of sense.
But like a tortoise
folding up its limbs within the shell
withdrew into supreme wisdom.'

A puff of deodar rustles
through a girl's skirt
and two tender legs
gyrating the air into fuzzy yearnings.

"Broken columns."

In order to notice some of the thematic alignments in Indian poetry in English, we may consider the following lines from Daruwalla's "Boat Ride Along the Ganga:"

Dante would have been confused here.
Where would he place this city
In Paradise or purgatory or lower down
Where fires smoulder beyond the reach of pity?

The concept of the goddess baffles you -
Ganga as mother, daughter, bride.
What plane of destiny have I arrived at
Where corpses - fires and cooking - fires
Burn side by side? 4

The above lines seem to invite the reader to participate in the speaker's experience. He says, "The concept of the goddess baffles you ..." The reader may or may not be baffled and may leave it at that. But the reference to Dante in the passage under consideration makes it look serious and poses a few

questions. Does the intrusion of Dante into the poem enrich the meaning and clarify its theme? Suppose Dante’s ghost appears and gets confused in the holy city of Varanasi on the banks of the Ganga, is there a spiritual or mathematical formula to resolve his confusion? The whole point is that Dante, had he seen the Ganga and Varanasi, would not have been confused or baffled. Most medieval poets were perfectly aware of the Augustinian distinction between the city of God and the city of Man. Dante never spared his contemporaries. He castigated them because they failed to come upto the ideal of the city of God. Varanasi is no better or no worse than Dante’s Florence in terms of the venial sins one commits or visualizes. Dante perfectly fused the Augustinian myth and Florentine socio-politico-philosophical climate of opinion with his personal vision and experience in his great poem. And to the post-Wasteland generation that has matured under the Eliotesque rubric of unified sensibility it sounds flat to read that “Dante would have been confused here.” The speaker’s problem in "Boat Ride Along the Ganga" seems to be how
to come to terms with the myth of the Ganga as mother, daughter, bride, while pondering over the reality of it. That this is not a problem to a different kind of sensibility is amply demonstrated by Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope*, and Arun Joshi in *The Last Labyrinth*.

II

Most poets whose poems are included in *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* and in *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* seem to depend more on the poetics of image than on the poetics of symbol. As Parthasarathy observes "In Ramanujan, Kālatkar, Mehrotra and Kumar, the image is not only the spring-board of poetic composition, but the Kernel as well. Underneath the

5*Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, ed. R. Parthasarathy (Madras: Oxford University, 1976). All subsequent page references are to this edition.

6*Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*, ed. Saleen Peeradina (Madras: The Macmillan Company of India Ltd, 1972). All subsequent page references are to this edition.
poem one can decipher the pattern in which they seem to think - the pattern of images. Thus, their basic means of expression is subliminal, and it lies below the threshold of language. The images are primarily visual. Words tend to collocate together into an image which then triggers off the poem. The entire poem is, in fact, one image or a complex of more than one image. It is in this context that the use of image is seminal. In our time poetry is becoming increasingly concise. Parthasarathy's observation has the smack of a theory of poetics which reminds us not of the imagism of Pound but of the anti-romantic thesis of Hulme; whereas, Pound's definition of image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" accommodates the emotional aspect of man.

7 R.Parthasarathy, Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets, p. 9.

Parthasarathy's view of image seems to bypass it. He is more concerned with conciseness in poetry than with the emotional character of the image. He seems to toe the line of F.R. Leavis and the American new critics who elevated wit and irony to such a level that irony becomes the hallmark of the greatest kind of poetry. As Jeoffrey Thurley rightly argues:

I believe that preoccupation with irony and self-knowledge has secured a dislocation of sensibility exactly the reverse of the synthesis Richards, Eliot and Leavis intended to guarantee. In striving after a unity of vision, compact of serious experience and ironic awareness, the intellectualist critics drove a wedge between the mind and the free exercise of its highest and strongest faculties. In fact, their greatest achievement was to rob poets of a sense of the importance of their task—of living the life of a poet in the sense which has been integral to Western poetry since Dante, if not earlier. They succeeded in making poets sceptical of a wide or an exalted scale, in making them
nervous of taking on the most important themes for fear of seeming portentous, above all in inhibiting the capacity for frank and full self-declaration which must in the last analysis form part of the poet's utterance. They destroyed the capacity for intense feeling by inculcating the fear of appearing naive: 'Am I being absurd? Am I deceiving myself? Do I really feel this?' These are the questions that intellectualist criticism taught poets to ask themselves; they are questions and doubts which are basically incompatible with the creation of 'the greatest kind of poetry.' This was the harvest of irony.  

III

From the foregoing discussion an interesting point seems to emerge. Most poets represented in the various anthologies of Indian poetry have good formal education.

and some of them have good knowledge of literature, criticism, and critical theory. Kamala Das, as a poet, does not have any of these academic assets. Her achievement as a poet has to be assessed keeping in view the limitations of the existing evaluative criteria. One may get a doubt whether the evaluative methods outlined in the foregoing paragraphs would help in making sense of her poetry. Some times, her poetry is compared with that of Judith Wright, perhaps, with diminishing returns. But what is to be noted is the way in which her poems differ from those of the ironist school. The difference may be illustrated by a brief comparative review of Ramanujan's "Of Mother, Among Other Things," and Kamala Das' "My Grand Mother's House."

**OF MOTHER'S, AMONG OTHER THINGS**

I smell upon this twisted
blackbone tree the silk and white
Petal of my mother's youth.
From her ear-rings three diamonds

Splash a handful of needles
and I see my mother run back
from rain to the crying cradles.
The rains tack and sew

With broken thread the rags
Of the tree-lasselled light.
But her hands are a wet eagle's
two black pink-crinkled feet,

One talon crippled in a garden-
trap set for a mouse. Her saris
do not cling; they hang, loose
feather of a onetime wing

My cold parchment tongue licks bark
in the mouth when I see her four
still sensible fingers slowly flex
to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.11

MY GRAND MOTHER'S HOUSE

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

11 A.K. Ramanujan, "Of Mother, Among Other Things."
Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets, pp. 99-100.
Among the books I was then too young to read, and my blood turned cold like the moon. How often I think of going there, to peer through blind eyes of windows or just listen to the frozen air, or in wild despair, pick an armful of darkness to bring it here to lie behind my bedroom door like a brooding dog ... you cannot believe, darling, can you, that I lived in such a house and was proud, and loved ... I who have lost my way and beg now at strangers' doors to receive love, at least in small change?  

Ramanujan's poem is quite nostalgic in tone and it depends on the juxtaposition of the image of eagle with that of the parchment. The poem is concise and imagistic in character. The verbs, "smell," "see", and "lick" do not convey any strong feeling; on the contrary, they diffuse any emotional involvement that may be there. Das' poem, on the contrary, is a forthright expression of feeling and experience. The

discursive part of the poem is reinforced by a non-discursive image, especially in the lines "Pick an armful of Darkness to bring it here to lie/Behind my bedroom door like a brooding Dog ..." The total effect of a realized experience is specified by the muted image of a beggar begging for love at strangers' doors. The poems under consideration are not the very best of either of the poets. But their juxtaposition makes us see that Kamala Das' poem is more evocative, and it gives us an intellectual satisfaction as well. Whereas Ramanujan's poem, although appears to be neat, suffers from intellectual thinness. As Alicia Suskin Ostriker says, "Within the symposium of the self, the women poets evidently wish to reverse Yeats' dictum that from quarrel with ourselves we make poetry. Instead they struggle to make poetry about healing the self through reconciling internal antimonies." Parthasarathy thinks, "Kamala Das

13 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 194. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
impresses by being very much herself in her poems."¹⁴

We, on the other hand, feel that Kamala Das' strength as a poet consists in not entirely depending on the deflationary irony which is the stock-in-trade device of most Indian poets writing in English. This point may be reinforced by considering the following poem of Mamta Kalia:

I no longer feel I'm Mamta Kalia
I'm Kamala
Or Vimla
Or Kanta or Shanta
I cook, I wash
I bear, I rear,
I nag, I wag,
I sulk, I sag,
I see worthless movies at reduced rates
and feel happy, at reduced rates
I get a free plastic bucket
With a large packet of super-surf,
and feel happy.
I put on weight every month
like Kamala or Vimla

¹⁴Parthasarathy, "On Kamala Das," *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, p. 22.
Or Kanta or Shanta,
and feel happy,
I am no longer Mamta Kalia. ¹⁵

The above poem raises the issue of a woman's identity making use of the idiom of the street-hawkers and cheap advertisements, and by repeating the phrase "I feel happy" thrice. The speaker of the poem dramatizes the loss of her identity. Given the Indian social context, the poem successfully conveys the preoccupation of a middle class woman. The line "I sulk and I sag" indirectly suggests a deep rooted hostility to the situation in which she is placed, and at the same time, its acceptance. We shall discuss later how Kamala Das dramatizes the theme of loss of identity in her poems. But suffice it to say here that Kalia's poem conforms to the standard set by the ironist school in Indian poetry. The male view of Indian womanhood as dramatized by an ironist poet is unmistakably there in the following poem:

INDIAN WOMEN

In this triple-baked continent
Women don't etch angry eyebrows
On mud walls.
Patiently they sit
like empty pitchers
On the mouth of the village well

Pleating hope in each braid
Of their mississippi-long hair
looking deep into the water's mirror
for the moisture in their eyes.

With zodiac doodlings on the sands
they guard their tattooed thighs
Waiting for their men's return
Till even the shadows
roll up their contours
and are gone
beyond the hills. 16

The above poem may not be the typical statement of the
male view of Indian womanhood. But it unmistakably

16 Shiv. K. Kumar, "Indian Women," Ten Twentieth
Century Indian Poets, p. 54.
suggests the place of women in an underdeveloped society. It is against this sort of portrait of an Indian woman that Kamala Das recoils. Hailing from a rural based society of Kerala, Kamala Das explores in her poems the place of woman as a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a creative artist.

IV

In Kamala Das' poems, one notices a dichotomy between the role of a woman in society, or the public sphere, and her role in her personal sphere, or in achieving a specific and significant self-hood. In the discussion of women's poetry in contemporary American literature, the term split-self is frequently used. As Deborah Pope says, "The term split-self was first given significance for women's poetry in Florence Hoe's introduction to No More Masks. It describes an opposition women feel between the essential aspects of the self, between what is socially prescribed on the basis of the general and what is defined on the basis of the self, between what a woman feels she
should be and what she feels she is.  But what is
to be noted and emphasized here is the fact that it
is hard for a woman, especially for an Indian woman,
to free herself from the shackles of cultural legacy.
But a creative writer can transform the experience of
the tradition and even the tradition to which he or
she is born, by achieving symbiotic relationship between
them. In most poems of Kamala Das, we see the split-
self operating in terms of the traditional distinction
between body and soul. Often the poet achieves a pre­
carious balance in which body and soul co-exist. Their
complete fusion is rarely contemplated. But as V.K.Gokak
rightly observes, "What moulds the writer's expression
is the depth and range of his sensibility and experience
and not his philosophy. The extent of the Indianness
of a work of art will depend upon the intensity and mani-
foldness with which an Indian writer responds to this

17 Deborah Pope, A Separate Vision: Isolation in
Contemporary Women's Poetry (Louisiana State University
tradition and recreates it in his own consciousness. The entire problematic we have been discussing may be illustrated by comparing Kamala Das' poem "The Suicide" with Sylvia Plath's "In Plaster." In "In Plaster," Sylvia Plath dramatizes the relationship between a self and a plaster cast. They are presented as follows:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one.


In the initial stages of the relationship, the old yellow one does not like the plaster saint because she is cold and slavish: "She had no personality." Aching for love and consideration, the yellow one accepts the voluntary love of the plaster saint. The white person meekly places herself at the disposal of the yellow one. In course of time, the yellow one realizes that her dependence on the white saint is working to her own disadvantage. She says, "I had even forgotten how to walk or to sit." The old yellow one also realizes that there is a condescension on the part of the white one, who waits on a half-corpse. Resentment and hostility increase. But the old yellow one is not in a position to dislodge the dominance of the white saint. So she feels,

She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.


23 Ibid., 45, p. 159.
I'm collecting my strength; One day I shall manage without her, And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.\textsuperscript{24}

As one commentator points out, the last line is "an expression of the sentiment that lies behind many suicides, shows that the author, if not the speaker, realized how unlikely it was that the yellow one could dispose of the plaster saint without disposing of itself."\textsuperscript{25} Sylvia Plath's poem suggests that by destroying the saintly self, the sinful self also faces the threat of annihilation. Kamala Das' poem "The Suicide," on the other hand, does not contemplate the threat of the annihilation of the self. The poem begins with a cryptic statement, "Bereft of soul/my body shall be bare./ Bereft of body/my soul shall be bare."\textsuperscript{26} The speaker asks the kind sea which of the two it would take. The sea would

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Sylvia Plath, "In Plaster," 53-56, Collected Poems, p. 160.}


\textsuperscript{26}\textit{The Suicide," The Descendants, 1-4, p. 1.}
like to have the soul because bodies rot and smell. Envy the simple duties of the sea, the speaker says, "I must pose, I must pretend, I must act the role of happy woman, of happy wife. I must keep the right distance between me and the high. I must keep the right distance between me and the low." The preceding confession seems to relate to the gender roles which a woman's body is expected to play. This inference is possible because of the caution given by the speaker's grandmother, when the speaker was swimming naked in a pond: "Darling, you must stop this bathing now. You are much too big to play naked in the pond." This suggests that posing and role-playing are body conscious acts which may be distinguished from the soul and soul-consciousness. But as we proceed to the concluding lines of the poem, it appears that the speaker's body and soul are terribly wounded. The speaker appeals to the sea, "Sea, toss my


28 Ibid., 78-80, p. 3.
body back/that he knew how to love./ Bereft of body/my soul shall be free./ Take in my naked soul/That he knew how to hurt./ Only the soul knows how to sing/At the vortex of the sea." In Kamala Das' vocabulary love, in some contexts, is synonymous with lust. Hence the love to which the body is subjected hurts the soul. The freedom the soul gets bereft of body is not tangible but invisible. According to the Hindu thought, body is only a garment for the soul and death is like discarding old garments and putting on new ones. But this seminal idea is given a twist in the poem so as to make body - consciousness distinct


30 Dehino 'śmin yath ā dehe Kaumāram Yauvanām jarā\| tathā dehāntaraapūptir dhrīras tatra na muhyati!\"

The Bhagavad Gita, Samkhya Yoga, Chapters 12-13, Sloka 16.

As the indweller in the body experiences childhood, youth and old age in the body, he also passes on to another body. The serene one is not affected thereby.

from soul-consciousness instead of being complementary. In view of this we may not be wrong in saying that Kamala Das uses "soul" in the sense of "the self." In Sylvia Plath's poem, the contemplated defeat of the white saint may not materialize without the destruction of the yellow one. In Kamala Das' poem, if we assume, for the time being, the yellow one as the body, there cannot be a tangible soul, i.e., Sylvia Plath's white saint without the body. The speaker of the poem may not be aware of this; but the poet seems to be aware of this. So she says "O, sea,/You generous cow,/You and I are big flops/We are too sentimental/For our own/Good." In her longest poem, "Composition," the poet writes:

To be frank,
I have failed,
I feel my age and my Uselessness,
All I want now is to take a long walk into the sea and lie there, resting, completely uninvolved.

But, rest is only a childish whim, a minor hunger. Greater hungers lurk at the basement of the sea. Ultimately I will feed only the hunger to feed other hungers, That basic one, to crumble, to dissolve and to retain in other things the potent fragments of oneself.

The ultimate discovery will be that we are immortal, the only things mortal being systems and arrangements, even our pains continuing in the devourers who constitute the world. Even Oft-repeated moves of every scattered cell will give no power to escape from cages of involvement.
I must linger on, 
trapped in immortality, 
my only freedom being 
the freedom to 
discompose.32

The above citation amply demonstrates the idea of the split-self or the divided self we have been discussing. A sort of complete uninvolvement is proposed as a goal, only to be rejected as a minor hunger. But the major preoccupation appears to be to make the best of what is possible here and now, signified by the image of "cages of involvement." Although her major preoccupation seems to be with man-woman relationship, she does not romanticize it. Though the word "love" often appears in her poems, we notice that it is de-glamourized. Perhaps the de-glamourization is the result of the role body plays in man-woman relationship. The repeated reference to the body and frequent recurrence of anatomical imagery in her poems is the consequence of her awareness

32
Kamala Das, "Composition," 229-68, Kamala Das: The Descendants, pp. 29-35.
that love in its pure disinterested form is impossible to attain. A reader may feel that in her poems there is unabashed celebration of sexuality. But what is to be noted is that from a woman's point of view, sexuality is not a taboo, and that to be self-conscious about her sex is to disown her identity as a woman. The poem "substitute" is a good example of the way in which Kamala Das de-glamourizes love:

Yet, I was thinking, lying beside him
That I loved, and was much loved.
It is physical thing, he said sudienly.
End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free.

This freedom was our last strange toy.
Like the hangman's robe, even while new
It could give no pride. Nor even joy.
We kissed and we loved, all in a fury.
For another short hour or two
We went all warm and wild and lovely.

After that love became a swivel-door,
When one went out, another came in.33

The speaker of the poem obviously thinks that love is not a physical thing; but love in its physical aspect is too strong to resist. When love has no transcendental goal, it becomes "a swivel-door." Any exalted notion of love would give woman a sense of identity and a feeling of participation; but love in the sense of love-making would deprive her of her identity, and causes pain.

Like Anne Sexton, Kamala Das devalues most of the romantic notions like love, beauty, and the objects that evoke pleasurable feeling. To illustrate the point, let us consider the poem "The Moon." The emergence of the moon after the sunset normally induces a feeling of longing for the loved one. But in the poem, the moon "swathes gently the embarrassed/Loneliness of middle age, so/That again the desired words/Are said on balconies, and faded/Eyes glitter with hope." It makes a leper dream of his own wedding day. For all practical purposes, the moon has not changed its ancient ways. But the ancient ways and the measured tread of the moon cause a devitalization in the present state of our civility:
It is a trained circus dog
That shall never miss its hoop.
Endless healing, it waits for
The new day's wounds, just a witch who
Fattens on others' mishaps, lying in
Wait behind the mountains for its
Appointed hour, them emerging
Round-faced like a female seer to
Seek out the sad and if all else
Fail, prescribing a draught of lunacy to remove
the pain.

The foregoing observations reinforce the point
that Kamala Das is not a love poet in the sense that
Judith Wright is a love poet. While exploring the
domain of Man-Woman relationship, Kamala Das is compelled
to confront the question of woman's identity. Speaking
from the point of view of a woman poet there are no
specific answers to the question whether a woman in a
male dominated society has an identity of her own.
The problem of identity in the poems is dramatized by
bringing the self into focus with itself. It is in this

"The Moon," 17-26, Kamala Das: Collected Poems
sense that the poems of Kamala Das constitute a bold creative endeavour of making the self. In the following chapters, an attempt has been made to analyse Kamala Das' poems by comparing them with other women poets so as to give a comparative slant to this study.