Chapter III
Re-Reading Kamala Das:
An Indian Ecofeminist Perspective

Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (Das ‘96)

My poems [works] epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian
cwoman who tries to free herself domestically from the bondage
sanctioned by the past. My forms are direct expressions of an
autobiographical voice. But that – individual voice also asks to be
read symbolically. 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 (Das qtd in Weisbord 248).

Das’ great bilingual literary legacy, shouldn’t be read as two different
streams, they exist in continuity. She had taken up writing as early as the
1950s when the vernacular literature was still in its infancy, with very few
women on the scene. In fact her literary career needs an evaluation for her
pioneering strides in the field as she “is acutely conscious of her
femininity” (Satchidanandan 9) for which she is branded a feminist, taking
cues from her indictment of the ‘phallocentric sadism’ (Weisbord 133).
But it is clear that the objectives of Western Feminism and the socio-cultural
factors which stimulated its birth are far away from the feminism featured
in Das’ works. It is a position she herself was least comfortable with. In “My
Instinct, My Guru”, she speaks against the so-called Women Liberation Movements in India:

I don’t want to be ‘emancipated’, because I have seen so many of them [women] ‘totally emancipated’, they irritate their husbands. I hear complaints from men, their wives have become ‘so emancipated’ that they dictate and they frighten them, all the men turned to mice. I don’t think there is much difference between a man and woman (qtd in Mishra 3).

A host of scholars have argued in her defence saying that “to view Kamala Das as a feminist would be an attempt insufficient to limit her literary ideology within the canvas of feminism” (Madhavan 7); “her works never present a woman who weaves a cocoon of self centredness” (Chandramathi 40); “her ecstatic literary flights were never on the wings of feminism” (Saradakkutty 44). Satchidanandan makes a clear distinction between the postulates of feminism and the Indian concept of womanhood to evolve an indigenous approach for the purpose.

The kinds of feminist criticism that naturalize the experiences and issues of Western Feminism . . . are easily co-opted by the academy and align themselves with the apparatus of power. The Procrustean set of critical procedures and the straitjacket of prescriptive categories provided by western theorists might not help one understand the differences between one Indian author from her western counterpart though they might help one grasp
certain similarities at the very fundamental biological and pre-linguistic levels. The universalizing theories of Western feminism alone cannot explain . . . Kamala Das’ concepts of love and transcendence (Satchidanadan12).

Her feminism is drawn from a very familiar matriarchal socio-cultural background, now almost extinct, that had bestowed on Das the acumen to revolt against the patriarchal oppressions both in life and literature. Iqbal Kaur looks for ‘a new morality’ in her works as

. . . Kamala Das displayed tremendous courage in revolting against the sexual colonialism and provided hope and confidence to young women that they can refuse victim positions, that they can frustrate the sexist culture’s efforts to exploit, passivise and marginalize women (qtd in Mishra 3).

A further exploration into the hitherto overlooked factors of her upbringing and cultural tradition substantiates these views. Das resists the tendency to be categorized along with her Indian counterparts by the very virtue of her cultural and hereditary attributes like Nair matriliny, the literary legacy she imbibed from her mother Balamaniamma and her South Indian (Keralite) upbringing. C. D. Narasimhaiah comments that “she is perhaps the only Indian poet who owes little to Yeats or Eliot and trusted to her own resources and to her culture - thanks to the poet -mother and her indefatigable Keralite upbringing, it is possible she felt re-assured in the opulence lying all around her to kindle her imagination” (11).
A bilingual writer, she is “a past-master in genre-crossing” (Satchidanandan ix) “with a habitual inclination to rework on the same theme” (Raveendran193). The critical business goes lop-sided with the focus falling on her poetry alone, for its English rendering. Madhavikkutty, the adept short story writer in Malayalam is often left in the shadow of the fame of Kamala Das, the English poet. But “the best way to tackle the gender issue in Kamala Das is to read her poetry along with her prose narratives”(Raveendran193). The quest for a unique tool to read Das, whose particular vision of the female is still a mystery to many, ends up in Ecofeminism. As a theory, Ecofeminism makes a claim over the age-old Earth/Woman bond, that binds together the life nurturing abilities of both. Some of the theory’s variously attributed features - “a goddess religion, an animal rights campaign, an anti-militarist movement, an environmental ethic, a celebration of feminine essence, or simply a critique of the enlightenment project” (Vance1) resonate in her works. Her Calcutta exposure imbued in her a cosmopolitan outlook that strengthened her outspokenness to expose the victimisation of women. As most of her works revolve around her intense preoccupation with the female body as a sexual object for patriarchy, one can discern the latent binary opposites namely male/female, nature/culture, body/mind, private/public, felt experience/wilderness constructs in the Ecofeminist interpretation of her works.

She never denied the continuum of her matrilineal heritage which helped her to realize the power of the female. She therefore asserts: “I am an Indian,
very brown / born in Malabar, I speak three languages / write in Two, dream in one” (“An Introduction” 62). But the reflections of the self in her writings gradually change and she declares her revised credo which celebrates “every woman who seeks love”.

For a deep understanding of the “roots” of the author’s creative persona and the dimensions of her craft, one should begin the task with her memoirs scribbled in the pages of Balyakalasmaranakal (Childhood Reminiscences, 1987), Varshangalkku Munpu (Many Years Ago, 1989) and Neermathalam Poothakalam (When the Pomegranate Bloomed, 1993) and in her other works. These memoirs function as her bildungsroman at one level and also serve as an “account of the vanishing rural peasantry” (Weisbord179) at the other level. Her poetry also clearly bring to light the continuum of growth from childhood innocence to a mellowed maturity as in “Nani”:

Each truth

Ends thus with a query.

It is designed

Deafness that turns mortality into

Immortality, the definite into

The soft indefinite (Best of Kamala Das 19).

Again in her poem “Advice to Fellow Swimmers”,Das employs a very powerful image from Nature to remind her fellow men that life is an ever flowing stream and purposeless swimming leads to suffering and misplaced
agitation. Here Das is bringing in ‘water’ the life sustaining elixir to remind man of the need to harness the powers of Nature in a positive way for his own as well as posterity’s well being:

When you learn to swim
Do not enter a river that has no ocean
To flow into one ignorant of destinations
And knowing only the flowing as its destiny (Collected Poems1. 100).

All her works provide sufficient insights into Das’ perception of Nature. Both in her poetry and prose, Das launches the female figure as a metaphor for Nature. It is specifically an Ecofeminist literary practice.

An appropriation of the body construct is propounded by the Ecofeminist critic Stacy Alaimo who interprets the female body in the context of Nature/Culture binary. The aesthetically beautiful body (Nature) is appropriated by the whites, and the “debased” (Nature) body is shifted to “the African Americans and others”(124). Stacy applies this interpretation to her reading of Fielding Burke’s 1932 novel Call Home the Heart. In the Indian context, the focus is shifted to Man/Woman dichotomy, where Man dictates the inscripts of the female body. The female body contested in Das’ works is understood through the subject/object binary where the subject is always Man (male-ego). Nature (Female body)/ Culture (Patriarchy) binary in Das’ work can be understood as wholesome Nature (female body)= wholesome Culture (Prakriti-Purusha or Radha-Krishna) and debased Nature (Female body)= debased culture (Patriarchy). What she
denounced is the ‘debased’ (Alaimo 124) status of the female body. The abject condition of the female body, which is the transgressed site of patriarchal ventures, is bemoaned by her:

. . . . You were pleased
with my body’s response, it’s weather, its usual shallow convulsions. . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . Cowering
beneath your monster ego I ate the magic loaf and
became a dwarf (“The Old Playhouse”, Only the Soul knows How to Sing 30).

But it is a degraded status that man can never comprehend. The female figure herself is presented in an image of a conflagarated wood, burning with passion, as in the poem “The Conflagaration”:

We came together like two suns, meeting, and each
Raging to burn the other out. He said you are
A forest-conflagaration and I, poor forest
Must burn, . . . (The Descendants 20).

The various passions of the female body is addressed by Das in her poems. The female body doesn’t know to ‘ask’ for anything else but ‘love’. The emotional sterility of man in his relationship with the female body as wife and mother is well conveyed in the following poems. In “Finale” she
presents the crisis of her heritage, as she has inherited a pattern of subordination to the husband from her mother, in her own incompatable marriage and her helplessness to undo the marital knot becomes her theme:

I sit amidst the clutter.

Dead animal.

Bowels loosened all around.

Night is heavy on my back

And I, towering

On my mother’s stilts

The new act

On the painted bill (*The Descendants* 45).

The age-old emotional sterility of a wife in the patriarchal system is echoed in “The Maggots”. On their last meeting Krishna asks Radha (debased female) if his kisses disturb her and she replies in a dejected mood: “No, not at all, but thought/ What is it to the corpse if maggots nip?” (*The Descendants*, 13). A woman seeks solace in all her gender roles, and in the poem “The Middle Age” the teenaged son assumes a patriarchal tone. The rejected mother wails her tragedy: “Sons are no longer friends/ but critics, stern of face and severe with tongue” (*Symphony* 10).

Again in the “Dance of the Eunuchs”, the biologically imperfect body, becomes yet another instance of ‘debased’ bodies both figuratively and epistemologically.

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
they
Were thin in limbs and dry, like half burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and rottenness
Were in each of them (Summer in Calcutta, 7).

The experience of love as a woman sees it, is truthfully penned in “The Gulmohar” : “My love is an empty gift, a gilded/Empty container, good for show, nothing else”(Tonight this Savage Rite 24). To fit into the social norm, where the very name becomes an extended metaphor for womanhood is the crisis in “An Introduction”: “Be Amy or be Kamala./ Or better still be Madhavikkutty” (96). Her concept of womanhood doesn’t toe the socially accepted inscript handed down for generations. She registers her rightful protest demanding equal dignity by violently flouting the existing code of conduct: “. . . I wore a shirt and my/Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored/My womanliness”(96s). She is reminded to “fit in . . . Belong”. The dictates of the patriarchal codes seemingly presume to effect a false notion of man/woman compatibility which is not often so. “The Suicide” succinctly brings to the fore the female body’s predicament:

But,

I must pose.

I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.

The frustrated woman seeks consolation in the pristine lap of Nature, the “sea’s inner chambers. . . a sun slumbering/At the vortex of the sea”; again she sees in the sea an approximation of the One who can help her forget all her woes: “In him I swim/All broken with longing/In his robust blood I float/
Drying of my tears”. The imperfection of such an alliance abruptly dawn on her when she says:

. . . to hold him for half a day

Was a difficult task.

It required drinks

To hold him down.

To make him love.

But, when he did love,

Believe me,

All I could do was sob like a fool (“The Suicide”, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, 37). But in “The Seashore”, sea itself becomes an image of lustful man: “I see you go away from me/And feel the loss of love I never once received” (Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 42). Contrary to her ideal man woman relationship, “Gino” reflects the monotony of family life and the husband and wife living as opposite poles:

. . . I know, our bloods’
Tributaries never once merging. It is
A dream-river ................

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

This body that I wear without joy, this body
Burdened with lenience, slender toy, owned
By man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with
My darling’s impersonal lust (The Old Playhouse and Other Poems 13).

“Luminol” depicts quite honestly the empty ecstasy of a woman who never finds true love. The denial of the ideal Radha-Krishna consummation of love brings in the apathy and sterility of the modern day waste land which is the root cause for all evil in society and family. Woman as mother is the custodian of harmony in family and the environ where she is placed. But “Luminol” speaks aloud the sense of emotional sterility and rejection of her rightful dignity in the following words:

Love-lorn
It is only
Wise at times, to let sleep
Make holes in the memory, even
If it
Be the cold and
Luminous sleep banked in
The heart of pills, for he shall not
Enter,
Your ruthless one,

Being human, clumsy

With noise and movement, the soul’s mute

Arena,

That silent sleep inside your sleep (The Old Playhouse and Other Poems 66).

The ‘fond husband’, who is also the coloniser of both the mind and the female body, who turns her passionate body into a ‘granite dove’ or ‘a bird of stone’ is pleaded to ‘be kind’, and the woman saturated by the experience of heartless love asks: “Ask me why life is short and love is/ shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price . . .” (“The Stone Age” The Old Playhouse and Other Poem 51).

Ecofeminism is not all about a male indictment. There are ‘bodily experiences that can be read as ‘body- parables’ (Spretnak qtd in Field 41) where the Ecofeminists themselves assert their deep intimacy with Nature as a life giving entity. ‘Body -parable’ suggests “non-dual ways of knowing and being”. Das too sings a body- parable in her nativity poem “Jaisurya”. She explores the “soft boundaries” of mothering against an earth replenished by “a slanting rain . . . for a while I too was Earth./ In me the seed was silent, waiting as the baby does, for the womb’s quiet/ Expulsion”. A ‘feminine metaphysic’ is created by a portrayal of “movements that draw us [the women] back to the Earth”(Bigwood qtd in Field 41).

Love is not important, that makes the blood
Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his caress
Lust...........................................

. . Only that matters which forms as
Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft
Stir in womb, the foetus growing, for
Only the treasures matter that were washed
Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them
In. When rain stopped and the light was gay on our
Casuarina leaves it was, early
Afternoon. And, then, wailing into light
He came, so fair, a streak of light thrust
Into the faded light. They raised him
To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son
Separated from darkness that was mine
And in me. The darkness I have known,
Lived with (Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 56-57).

A retreat into the serenity of landscape, in which the female body
enjoyed esteem and reverence, is recaptured in the pages of her auto fiction.
The memoirs, though written somewhat in the middle of her literary
career, offer themselves as the beginning point of the nature/culture
dichotomy perceived in her works. The rural ambience at Punnayurkulam
had a resurging spell on her spirit spoiled by the choking city life and her
disciplinarian father, where “there was a cloud of tension/ between Him and
me” as she confesses in “My Father’s Death” (*Only the Soul knows How to Sing* 116). She inks the contrasting effects of landscape and cityscape set parallel to Nature pristine and Nature debased. She is nostalgic about her native place, the positive inscripts of its culture at stake with the Calcutta environ where she had ‘a cultural death’ (*My Story* 18) and writes:

> I loved having oil baths, swimming in the pond, sleeping in the Vadakkini upstairs all afternoon while I was at Nalapat. Calcutta faded from my mind like an old dream. I used to feel that Calcutta was not real, that it was Nalapat that was real. That the absolute realities of life were the thudding of the drums at the para festivals, roar of the vellichappadu (oracle) as he became possessed, the songs of the parayankali dancers. The Kamala who lived in Calcutta, the one who spoke English and Bengali turned into a girl who was a dream, the mute princess of the fairy tale (*A Childhood in Malabar* 77).

In her poem titled “The Anamalai Hills” (*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, 47, 108-110) the same feeling is evoked; a pristine landscape removed from a hectic world, often picturised by the masculine notions like “clocks”, “cold mosques” against the cool mountains veiled by mist, where the woman, “wrapped in the shrouds of betrayal”, rejects the comfort in “human speech”. A wholesome female figure needs no language to communicate with her alter ego, the pristine Nature. The unpolluted Nature seems an ambience suitable for her to feel the experience of the ‘body parable’, “there
was none to see me or recognise/ but the bird hidden in the silver oaks”, (108); the woman speaker in the poem reveals how she used to pay heed to her “own voice call me out/ of dreams, gifting such rude awakening”(II,108), the poet herself feels how she used to “hide behind her dreams/as the mountain does”(V,109), and now how she feels that “only the blood’s moorings have any relevance” (VI,109).

In *Balyakalasmaranakal*, it is her childhood and her brief calls to Punnayurkulum on family errands or summer vacations that function as the story line, in *Varshangalkku Munpu* the locale shifts between Punnayurkulum and the boarding house of St Sicily’s School at Thrissur and Calcutta, where she grows into maturity and learns to define new relations, whereas in *Neermathalam Poothakalam*, it is her own metamorphosis and youthful escapades that are dealt with. The girl narrator who is merely an inquisitive observer of the people and events in the first two books recalls, “it was someone’s birthday at Ambazhathel the day there was a cyclone” (4), “the first time the bangleseller who came to be known as Cherappan appeared in the eastern yard of Nalapat was after the feast of my seventh birthday”, (57), “I came to Nalapat soon after my eleventh birthday “’ [when it] “is just an eye or ear that is devoid of self -centredness” (Ramakrishnan 34).

The seemingly innocent narration in the first book casts light on the rigorous caste system and untouchability that existed in Kerala, and also about the clash among castes during the pre-independence era. The memoirs
say much about the advantages of matriarchy which her community enjoyed. Das progressively develops a feminine sensibility in the pages of Neermathalam Poothakalam, the third book in the series. Her thoughts about her own growing up are more precise in this book. The opening chapter of this book traces the linealogy of her ancestors and is remarkable for the delineation of the prototype of all her discontented heroines - the ‘muthassi,’ her grandmother’s mother who decided to retreat to the quietness of Nalapat, “rejecting her philandorous husband, the Raja of Chirayalam Kovilakom for her own reasons, which she later explained to Das as something ‘she couldn’t forgive at all’” (610). She was well received back at home- “no eyebrows were raised at Nalapat”, writes Das (Balyakalasmaranakal 610) about her homecoming, as Nair women enjoyed great marital autonomy in those days. Her return to Nalapat without ransoming her female dignity and self respect is an outright reaffirmation of the Ecofeminist project of redeeming the female body.

But set parallel to the ecological utopia that emerges in the pages of her autofiction, Das also delineates the life of the girls belonging to the lower rungs of the society, who were hunted by the feudal lords:

There was no cinema in our village then, the only entertainment our males had was to hunt on the poor girls. Many girls committed suicide for being pregnant. They floated on the water with their blown up abdomen, like water lilies. There was no legal action against these men, these girls were pretty good and humble as
the social norm insisted, still no one dared to raise voice against these patriarchs (Balyakalasmaranakal 614).

The racially superior body in Stacy’s views is translated here in terms of caste and class in a feudal hierarchy. She also vehemently comments that “male lust defiled our village”(614). Despite her eulogising matriarchy, she does condemn the vicious caste and class discrimination of the society of the times for the violence perpetrated on the female body. “Nani” is one of her important poems where she describes the hanging of a pregnant house maid. As a child she does not understand the gravity of the spectacle but she recalls in detail the heart-rending spectacle:

Nani, the pregnant maid hanged herself

In the privy one day. For three long hours

Until the police came, she was hanging there

A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew

Turning her gently on the rope (Best of Kamala Das 19).

The image of the ‘clumsy puppet’ seemingly performing a comic dance is noted for its suggestiveness. Nani has been a mere puppet in the hands of some lustful patriarch which is a pointer to the real culprit, namely, the society and its moral codes.

The jottings in her memoir also recaptures the rituals that are founded on the concept of a goddess dwelling in a pure landscape, and the little girl experiencing and enjoying that unpolluted landscape in its fullness in the
company of the matriarch, her grandmother, who acts as a continuum in the cultural arc that links the past with the present:

There were many different weeds and wild plants on either side of the canal. Medicinal herbs like *keezhar nelli, thumpa, mukkutti, poovankurunthala, nilampana* and many other weeds like *parichaka, kadalavanakku*, and wild onion were there. I used to roam around with my grandmother in the month of *karkkidaka* to pick these medicinal plants. From the first date of the month of *karkkidakam* itself, we would have an idol of the goddess of *Sree* kept adorned by the *dasapushpa*, and a mirror, and a traditional pot full of water. I used to make a bindi for my forehead soon after the bath, using the *mukkutti* (*Balyakalasmaranalakal* 673).

This is an instance of the Nature-Culture symbiosis that Das so fervently hankers after. *Varshangalkku Munpu* (1989) begins with a narration of an entrepreneurial soap making headed by Ammamma at the Nalapat courtyard, to which the little Kamala is a mere witness. The book also gives a detailed description about her dreamy encounter with Lord Krishna, (711), who later becomes a key motif in her works as in: “Your body is my prison, Krishna / I cannot see beyond it, Your darkness blinds me,/ Your wise words shut out the wise word’s din” (“Krishna”, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 66).

Again as in,

Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting

Nothing remains but
You (“Radha”, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, 63)

The debased female in the male dominated society is replaced by the Radha-Krishna construct for her idea of a perfect consummation of love. There are many of her poems on this ancient pair which can be seen as sites where she glorifies the ‘the female principle’ and man, *Prakriti-Purusha* embracing each other, which is also what Ecofeminism proposes, the harmonious blending of Wo(man) and Earth.

The fond details of the vast and verdant landscape around Nalapat find place in the entries on her early life, “. . . the trees around were like living family members”, but shrink to the bloomed Neermathalam tree in the snake-shrine in the third book. The book opens with a detailed description of the Nalapat environment, its history and also about the privileged position the women of Nalapat and Ambazhathel houses, her husband Madhava Das’ families enjoyed during the heydays of Nair matriarchy. A precocious Kamala emerges between the lines of the book. The later day Das, who is to proclaim an endless literary war against the patriarchal domination of woman and her eternal essence, ‘the female principle’ takes birth in her auto fiction. Her vision of woman owes much to the background that moulded her person and craft, it is derived from the ancient Indian culture that counts woman and nature as of the same
A glimpse of this vision is available in chapter 16 of Neermathalam Pootha Kalam, where she notes down her epiphany:

Neermathalam blooms just for one week. When the summer showers bring forth the scent of fresh soil, one can be sure of its blooming.

When I turned twelve, I reached Nalapat for my summer vacation. But unusual with my early experiences, I felt an unknown inhibition to swim and lie abreast in the pond. I couldn’t comprehend the various changes my body had undergone. . . . I was like the tempted Eve (1002).

In the context of ‘body-parable’ application Das’ ruminations on her puberty takes one to the nature/culture divide where Nature is seen in its spring. It was the season of her literary blooming too. Throughout her literary career Das highlighted the Neermathalam tree as her alter ego and as an icon of her literary creativity. Her attempts to hail the Nalapat environs as a fountain of her genius strikes a chord with her male counterparts in Malayalam literature like Vaikom Muhammed Basheer and Zakharia. But she seems to be more poignant and successful at recapturing the essence of this spirit. Amy (Das was fondly called so) could not have carved out her literary perceptions otherwise because she is the heir to a tradition that hailed an ecofriendly lifestyle and granted women marital autonomy. She rejoiced as a “tempted Eve”(1002) in the enchanting environment of bloomed trees where she turns insightful about her essence. The family’s deep ecological lifestyle could be the reason for youthful Kamala to find an
alter ego in the flowered tree. Her turning to the Neermathalam tree as her second self is a reaffirmation of the key Ecofeminist ideal of the ‘female self’, better known as ‘Prakriti’ (Shiva Staying Alive 38) in the cultural and theoretical parlance of Indian Ecofeminism. It counts both women and nature as birds of the same feather for the distinctiveness of their life nurturing abilities. It should be borne in mind that, in spite of the deep spell the Punnayurkulam ambience showered on Das, she limited her wide literary canvas to the Neermathalam. But this is no nostalgic reconstruction of childhood, because the versatile genius seems to be engaged in reinventing the lost glory women had in the ancient past.

Unfortunately she is misread as ‘merely nostalgic’ (Renuka 88) taking cues from her stories of homecoming like “Chuvanna Malika” (“Red Bungalow”, 1954) and “Neermathalathinte Pookkal” (“The Flowers of Pomegranate”, 1957). With the major chunk of her ‘good works’ (Saradakkutty 10) published prior to the birth of Ecofeminist philosophy, between 1953-71, Das’ stories offer virgin fields for interpretation from the perspective of Ecofeminism. The philosophy has a heterogeneous nature, as it opposes the social and scientific and cultural oppression of women and garners support from various native traditions of the world.

Glorification of Nature has always been a distinguishing feature of the Indian literary tradition, in continuity with the pantheism highlighted in the earliest religious scriptures and the ecofriendly lifestyle that the
subcontinent practised in the past. Nature and women as objects of beauty have found their place in the literature prior to Das. But she breaks away from this kind of romanticism in her precursors in English like Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1950) and from the ‘passive spiritual overtones’ (Das5) of her own mother Balamaniamma in her own way, with the emphasis falling upon the ‘female principle’. Vandana Shiva explains the concept of the ‘female principle’ “as the life force in everything and in every human being... It is the energy that enables women to love and to celebrate life” (Ecofeminism17).

Nature and Women were perceived to be passive and the 'masculine' trait to be a 'valid one' in the basic philosophical framework of Western culture (Merchant 61). In the Indian context Nature is Mother Earth, thanks to the goddess tradition prevalent in the subcontinent. But the biased interpretation of religious scriptures upon which was founded the nation’s social hierarchy, degraded both women and nature as inferior and slavish. Das’ Nair background, built on the bedrock of matriarchy would have helped her to retrieve in her imagination the root concept of the goddess cult.

As a writer who chose to remain her ‘own raw material’ (Satchidanandan xvii), she decided to present a woman’s identity crisis in family as she herself was a victim of patriarchal domination, as daughter and wife. There can be two obvious reasons for her deviated stand. At the primary level Indian society, irrespective of its multiculturalism, upholds family as the nucleus of the social structure to which Das had sufficient
exposure both at Calcutta and at Nalapat. Besides the culture of the nation is much in favour of an ideology that always insists upon the domestication of the woman and indoctrinates her to submit to patriarchal dominance in all stages of her life. Das’ works both prose and verse unearth this emotional crisis of a woman in her custom-sanctioned role as she complaints: “... You called me wife/ I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and/ to offer at the right moment the vitamins (“The Old Playhouse” Only the Soul Knows How to Sing, 30). The terrain of sterility becomes the ‘site’ for her expression of violence committed by the patriarchal domain:

They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, . . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . and they said, each of

Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you (“The Sunshine Cat”, Only the Soul Knows How to Sing, 54).

Family seems to be her favourite canvas because she herself was a woman perturbed by her own marital discord. The theme is more predominant in her prose fiction. While her poetry launched her into the
international orbit and shortlisted her for the Nobel Prize in literature in 1984, her amateur genre experimentations in Malayalam with which she embarked on her literary career are often “despised as mere nostalgic compositions of Nalapat, Punnayrookulam and Neermathalam” (Thomas 73).

After her debut as a short story writer in 1941, under the pen name Nalapat Kamala, she reappeared on the scene again in 1947, with the story titled “Sthree” (Woman) which is also the first lesbian story in her mother tongue. Probably, Ismat Chughtai’s shocking narration in the lesbian work, “Lihaf” could have prompted her to experiment with “Sthree”. Both these works seem to anticipate a later theory introduced by Judith Butler and quoted by Debora Slicer, an Ecofeminist critic. Judith Butler’s theory of ‘gender performativity’ states that “gender is always a doing” again a ‘performance that relies on certain practice of repetition that retroactively produces the effect of identity and the illusion that there is an inner core” (Butler qtd in Genz and Brabon, 125). ‘Gender trouble’ occurs according to Butler when the natural continuity of set pattern of performativity is jeopardized and in its place a “drag”/ “out law body” takes over. It is in this light that Das’ “Sthree” becomes a pronounced protest against the reigning patriarchal norm of the female body. Her other lesbian stories like “Chandanamarangal” (“Sandalwood Trees”) also can be interpreted on these lines.
The marriage in 1949 did make a dent on the budding author, as she did not appear on the scene for a long period and then from 1953 onwards she becomes a vibrant presence in the genre. Marital disharmony could be the impulse for this sudden literary gush for the same theme is recurrent in the stories of this period. The 1950s were a period of infancy for the Malayalam short story too. M. Achuthan in his critical review of the genre includes Madhavikkutty among the third generation of writers along with M. T. Vasudevan Nair and P. Padmanabhan (315). When her first collection of stories came out in 1955 under the title *Mathilukal* (*Walls*) at the age of twenty three, she had a few women contemporaries like K. Saraswathi Amma and Lalithambika Antharjanam, who had become much famous before Das’ debut. Das decided to inaugurate her career with a very familiar theme, a woman trapped in marriage:

Women, gaining a new and modern selfhood could be very well stated to be the characteristic of her first collection titled *Mathilukal* (*Walls* 1955). The woman’s sense of self awareness and her longing for freedom made these stories special and unique. An unhappy female mind emerges in the canvas of these stories. They expose the institutionalized concepts like family, marriage and love and challenge the hypocrisy of the ideology inscribed in them. They explore the dark sides of family life. The writer exposes the false myths associated with marriage. In fact ‘modernity’ commenced in Malayalam literature in the 1960s, but Madhavikkutty’s maiden
collection announced the features of modernism as early as the 1950s. In fact many were forced to perceive the extra-marital relations as a woman’s longing for love and freedom in Das’ works (Hiranyan 182-85).

The post-independence period also witnessed the disintegration of the Nair matriarchy and the joint family system. Hence like her revolting muthassi she couldn’t find refuge back at home. The 1960s also witnessed the emergence of the working middle class Indian, who is to restructure the joint family system. The insecure unemployed women, who have a prominent place in Das’ fictional world, were to tolerate the uncertainties of their marriage. But the social machinery that viewed family as the axis of its structure hesitated to address the domestic enslavement of women. But for a writer like Das, her life had to be rewritten into the pages of her works.

In the 1960s she turned to English poetry followed by the 1970s which were a turbulent period of controversies as both Ente Katha (1973) and its English translation, My Story (1974) came out then. In fact most of her early stories are neglected because of her sharp indictment of her own married life as confessed in My Story. K.R. Ramachandran Nair refers to this fallacy:

Since My Story is not a totally factual autobiography, I believe that the critic has to make a judicious use of the information given in it. He should not in blind [sic] enthusiasm, pounce upon each juicy
bit, as if catching the criminal red-handed and pretend to know everything (1).

Her (English and Malayalam) poetry is a reiteration of most of the themes she handled in her stories. (Certain stories in Malayalam like “Ghansyam” (1969) are given literal verse rendering in English with the same title (Only the Soul Knows How to Sing, 94-95). So an attempt is made here to study a number of her stories which appeared in collections like Mathilukal (Walls, 1955), Pathukathakal, (Ten Stories 1958), Naricheerukal Parakkumbol (As Moths Fly, 1960), Chuvannapavada (Red Skirt, 1964), Pakshiyude Manam (Bird’s Scent, 1964), Thanuppu (Cold, 1967) and Rajavinte Premabhajanam (The King’s Beloved, 1969) which were published before her autobiography.

A house, usually one in the upper class rung of the society and more personally, ‘a replica of her Calcutta home’ (Madhavikkutty’s Complete Works, 1.86) functions as the most important background of her stories. It is the abode of a very unhappy woman, for she fails miserably in her attempts to find her niche in it. She struggles hard in her lonely wars to overcome her mean position and tries to break the boundary walls imposed on her by society by means of marriage. At once conformist and rebellious, these women cannot but yield only to certain momentary emotional upsurging to console themselves.

In “Puzha Veendum Ozhuki” (“The River Flowed Again” 1953), “with which she embarked on the modern phase of her career”, (Hiranyan 183) the
female protagonist ’14 years younger than her husband’ eagerly awaits for him every evening with a pleasant smile on her lips. She is sure that he will turn deaf ears to her sincere efforts for compatibility and as usual feels neglected. So she decides to try her love elsewhere and gains an extra-marital relationship with a college student who lives nearby, thus taking sweet revenge on her callous husband. For Sumathi, the heroine in “Rathriyil” (“At Night”, 1953) her extra-marital indulgence is to avenge her husband, who counts her just ‘another pillar in the house’ and she learns that “married life and love are different” (1.51).

The unnamed protagonist in “Mahimile Veedu” (“The House in Mahim”, 1956), purposefully tricks the man who dwells in the neighbouring slum to be her ‘king’ for a short while, “knowing that she will have to go to her husband’s place after one month” (106). She felt that her life had been and would be insipid and stale and monotonous. Of course, she too was well-married. But her husband remained just a memory in “the blue envelopes and the dry letters they contained and the small framed wedding photo in her room” (106). She had always felt that marriage was not “just a wedding card that the parents print or a procession around the lamp or the memory of a kiss. It is a very special mindset” (107-108).

So she too is all set to experiment love on her own terms though “the king was lazy, poor, illiterate, and dirty”, adjectives that would never befit her status. She said to him: “when I see you I remember my old puppy, which is dead now” (108).
In “Gyanchand” (1956) once again, a similar crisis is focused upon. The affluent heroine, who is on a tour along with her husband, meets her favourite poet Gyanchand quite unexpectedly and ‘on the eighth day’ of their meeting she realizes that he is in love with her. Her busy husband rejects love as a ‘futile feeling’ and for the wife, ‘true love is as deep as she is’. She finds Gyanchand more acceptable since they think on similar lines.

In another story “Lokam Oru Kavayithriye Nirmmikkunnu” (“The World Makes a Poet”, 1957) which is in Ambikasuthan Mangadu’s words My Story in Nutshell” (54) the poet-heroine imagines herself to be ‘a spider entangled in its own cobweb’ (183). The poet and her husband form a well-matched couple in the society’s eyes. Seeing them together, the world said “Oh! good match” but it was a match of mere physical traits like height and colour (184). To the husband, it was not his first love, so when she brought ‘love to their bedroom like fragrance’, he was confused and commented: “I just want a woman to be woman” (187).

There is no need to illustrate further from the other works.

stories attempt to disrupt their conditioned roles as passive women in the household. They all suffer from an identity crisis in the male dominated realms where they are merely commodified. In “Radhayude Kathu” (“Radha’s Letter”), Radha describes her situation ambiguously because she feels herself “a prostitute . . . [who] yields to her husband for clothes and food” (553) and she expresses her crisis to her lover in these terms:

I was pure within your embracing hands, I came to you never for a sexual fulfilment, it comes to me that there is ‘something’ there beneath my skin and flesh, longing for your touch. I always believed that one day ‘it’ would be touched and that would impart meaning to my very existence (553).

Unfortunately love of this kind, in Das is often misinterpreted for sex. Achala, the protagonist in “Chathurangam” (“Chess”) longs for a union with her lover, not at all to satisfy the carnal pleasures, but for “a love that grows in her like cancer” (364). The unnamed heroine in “Swathanthra Jeevikal” (“Independent Creatures”) reiterates that “for a woman to be a woman, she needs someone in whom she can reflect herself as in a mirror” (364). The parted lovers in “Tharisunilam” (“Barren Land”, 1960) meet again after a long span only to sympathise with each other. The well-off woman here feels that “only he could penetrate through her feelings and pretensions, that was never visible to the world around” (285). Her lover, typically like all other heroines of Kamala Das categorises her into an extraordinary class: “I sympathise with you. You couldn’t even be born
as an ordinary woman” (285). Her emotional rift has hardened her heart, into ‘a barren piece of land’ (286). The story sheds some light on the author’s own emotional conflicts with her husband: “You can blame me a mad woman . . . , that’s why I comb my hair back and speak English”(285).

In another 1968 short story “Pathivrathyamenna Samasya” (“The Myth Known as Chastity”), she makes her married heroine justify her extra-marital courtships in just one sentence: “Don’t all women need love?”(551). The perturbed heroines count themselves just a “Koothupava” (“Puppet” 1970) in the hands of her impassionate husbands, in “Radha . . . Anuradha”(1971) the latter day Radha, who is every woman seeking love, is envious of her mythical archetype Radha, who was blessed to know Krishna. To the modern Radha, no such alternatives are there, but they feel ‘a Krishna coming to them through ‘other bodies’ (602). Still they crave for the eternal bliss that only the amorphous Krishna can give them.

Das’ heroines were never of a superior construct, the harsh realities of life that make or mar a woman’s life like poverty, infertility, unemployment, caste discrimination and the like seldom become their concerns. But she makes them tell the world that gender justice must begin at home.

The double colonization of women is a stark reality as they have to put up with the ineluctable system of patriarchy. . . . The
house is a breeding ground of such oppression -- home also signifies a role for women -- that of a custodian of religious practices, myths, tradition and honour. It is through the confines of a home that her sexuality is sanctioned. . . . She finds her house to be a cage where she functions as little more than a housekeeper and a sex object (Rao 252-53).

The male dominant family reiterates the inscripts inscribed on the body for asserting gender performativity. Though they are at war with the enslaving patriarchal forces, none of her heroines long for a male free world. They all are incomplete entities bereft of man’s presence in their lives. In fact this insistence on male-female equilibrium, has been the departing point of Das’ version of feminism from that of its western form.

Sakheena, the plain blind heroine in “Atharinte Manam” (“The Fragrance of Perfume”, 1957) who spends an isolated life in the darkly-lit room of her sister’s house pretends before the world that it is her lover’s memories, whom no one has ever seen, that keep her going on. In “Sundariyaya Makal” (“Beautiful Daughter”, 1958) the virgin daughter is quite tolerant to the accusations of her bed-ridden mother. But when she decides to abandon her convalescent mother for a married life, the crone is happy because she knew that a woman’s life would be incomplete without a man’s company. The duty bound lady doctor in “Chathi” (“Betrayal”, 1959) who is compelled to stay late in the hospital on an errand on her birthday rushes to her husband’s warmth; but is shocked to find him sharing
their bed with another woman; the heroine in “Tharisunilam” (“Barren Land”, 1960) is another scapegoat at the altar of a well-arranged marriage and nurtures a ‘loneliness’ in her heart suggesting the vacuum of her existence.

In her stories of this class she reaffirms the great Indian concept of *Prakriti-Purusha* as independent and interdependent entities, each sustaining the other. Like the heroine in “Kamabhranthu” (“Lust”, 1964), these women “didn’t trust in love at all, yet cannot, but believe in the reality of man” (446).

In her widely read and variously interpreted story “Pakshiyude Manam” (“The Bird’s Scent”, 1961), one gets the nub of her literary vision built on the concept of the ‘female principle’ and the ‘body’. The story is about a young woman’s unexpected encounter with Death (Patriarchy) as she mistakes ‘dying’ for dyeing in the strange city atmosphere. She goes in person for the interview, as demanded in the advertisement and reached there around 11.30 am in the morning in a pale yellow silk sari and white hand bag. It was a huge seven-storeyed building that had more than two hundred rooms. A crowd waited at each lift. “Amidst this male crowd of merchants and labourers she couldn’t notice even a single woman” (312). After a wearisome search along its umpteen floors she reaches the office of ‘-----’ textile industries, which was vacant. While waiting for someone to come to her, and making mental calculations on her salary, she falls asleep, to be awakened by the sound of a cork being
removed from a whisky bottle. It was a man with ‘thick hairy arms’. In the conversation that ensues, she realizes the grim atmosphere prevailing at the place; she is there not for ‘dyeing’ but for ‘dying’. The man is Death incarnate, who asks her to recollect her own past encounters with him. She could only offer a very feeble resistance to him this time:

You shall surrender me one by one all that you have. Only I can offer you perfect love. Your glossy lips, bright eyes and your beautiful body. . . . Everything . . . even your hair . . . you shall shed down whatever you have . . . everything shall be drawn out of you. . . . But you shall become everything in turn. . . . The roaring sea and its waves, the sprouts on the leprous tree barks, the painful groan in the germinating seeds, the wind, the showers of the rain, the sands of the soil, you alone become the beauteous earth and its very soul (316).

The unnamed heroine is every woman who wills an expedition into the forbidden inroads of patriarchy; what she desires is to ‘dye’ it with the hues of her femininity as a girl, companion, sister, wife and then as a mother. But she has to be the scapegoat, for death is her due, to be reborn as the very sustenance of life on earth. Nowhere in its literary history does the tenets of Ecofeminism get a stronger articulation than this. In all these stories, one after another the heroines, crave for a world that works on equal terms with men. Das addresses the basic difference between the male and female inclinations, for man is to enjoy and woman
is to feel love. If someone thinks this is a grave crisis in a woman’s life, the women in Das’ literary universe would not have a different answer, because they are all mere women.

Das’ concept of the ‘feminine principle’ is a less spiritual one, but of course enjoys a home-grown religious base, and it celebrates the essence of woman. It has a little more to do with the feminist notion that “anatomy is destiny”, which is also the nub of Ecofeminist standpoint, which views “the body” as contributing to women’s exclusion from the cultural sphere. Although contemporary feminist discourse has moved beyond a simple dichotomous choice of either embracing or rejecting this association between women and the body, there has been a continuing suspicion in some feminist circles of any inquiries into what is referred to as bodily specificity. . . . It seems . . . that Ecofeminists are in an ideal position to accept the challenge of demonstrating how our, that is, women’s embodiment (normally associated with nature) and theorizing (considered to be a cultural activity) might be integrated in new and insightful ways (Field 39-40).

Within the theoretical parlance of Ecofeminism, “it is the body [that] shares a devalued position with women, [and] recovering the body is part of the Ecofeminist project”(Field 40). Das’ literary revolt was to regain the lost prestige of the female body, which had deteriorated into a commodity that satisfies the carnal pleasures of the patriarch. In the
poem “A Feminist’s Lament” the social inscript imposed by the patriarchal society is encapsulated in these lines:

An ideal woman, they said, was but
Massochist.
.
. . . Trained from infancy
To wear the flannels of cowardice
Next to her skin, trained to lie inert
under a male, committed by vows
to feed her, clothe her and buy for her
the 1000sq. ft flat with a loft
for storing the debris of passing years.
I was never that ideal dream (Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 127)

There is some ambivalence in her stand. In Ente Katha, Das’ own autobiography in Malayalam, she makes a just claim about her open confessions in the book. In the chapter titled “Morality, Rebirth”, she writes that “the society builds up its morality norms, paying great thrust to the (female) body, which itself is subjected to decay. I have decided to challenge it”(86). But at the same time she makes the female body the central focus in her stories and poems and in the process she is ‘texting woes and scripting bodies’.

As mentioned earlier, Ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak’s construct of “body parables” (Qtd in Field 41) seems to be employed in Das’ works. Her
revolutionary literary strides to revive the lost grandeur of the female body began as early as the 1950s itself, after a brief period of silence following her marriage in 1949. Attempts of this kind reached its peak with the her highly controversial *My Story* (1971) about whose content and craft the writer herself has made various confessions, including it was from “a forged pen” (“Kalocha”, 502-04). This work does not propose to test the veracity of the content of the book, but attempts to see the work as a lofty instance of writing the ‘body-parable’ to restore the subject position that the female body loses in marriage. Madhavikkuty herself has acknowledged the role of the American dancer Isadora Duncan’s autobiography *My Life* in crafting her own *My Story* (*Saradakkutty* 10). The dancer writer’s acute physical awareness might have been very prominent in her reader too, who wanted to adorn her body in silk robes, against her disciplinarian father’s wish. Das concedes that her own cultural codes, “Beauty was a full-time job for upper class feudal Malayali woman”(*qtd in Weisbord 195*) played a decisive role in configuring the female body on those lines in her works. But when she started writing about the pangs and passions of the female body, it caused much embarrassment, as a woman was never supposed to speak about her body as her own. When she made the female figure the linchpin of her narrative, it was misread as sex.

“Nobody seems to realize that there is so much more to my work than just this sex business. This is a part of it, because I grew up reading Gita-
Govinda, about Radha and Krishna” (Das in an interview, 13). In the same 1990 interview given to the Savvy, she goes on to declare her credo; “If you have nothing, but a body, worship it . . . because a woman’s body is like a world in itself” (15,17).

All her women are acutely conscious of their body, it doesn’t symbolize the civilized object conditioned by ‘the dominant aesthetic standards’ (Morgan qtd in Twine 44), dictated to them. While it is the mothering/ nurturing skill of the female body that is greatly hailed as the base of the Ecofeminist concept of ‘embodiment’ or sensations which is counted under “body parables”, Das goes a step further to idealise the female body itself as the core of her literary form. Debora Slicer, the noted Ecofeminist writes in her article “Towards an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds” (1998) that the body is a contested area in both ordinary life and in recent feminist literary discourse, the body as a social “text”, the body in the “grip”, the performative body, the “outlaw” body. The most recent feminist critiques attempt to de-essentialize and de-naturalize woman’s body and the meaning of the ‘body’ have come down emphatically in favour of the social body, in favour of a body that is always mediated by social constructs . . . (57).

“Madhavikkutty tried to visualize the female body in her writings much before technology could do it” (Oleena54) and she “also deployed the female figure rather freely within the space of fiction” (Chandramathi 40).
The female protagonists in one after another of her stories think aloud the passionate hungers of their body, saturated in the monotony of marriage and they listen to its calls: “She examined herself in front of the mirror in her room, a sleek figure, that is wrapped in a green blouse, spread hair, red lips”; but she does not understand why her husband has little time for her ("Puzha Veendum Ozhuki”42); for Sumathi, who felt “her husband had changed totally after three years of marriage. He would satisfy all her wants, but he does not know how to caress her, and to him she was just another cot or pillar in the house, to be preyed upon at night”(Rathriyil”,51).

Similarly in the poem “Substitute” she paints the stark reality of the female condition in a conjugal relationship: “Yes I was thinking, lying beside him/ That I was loved, and was much loved./It is a physical thing, he said suddenly/end it, I cried,end it, and let us be free (53). The heroine in the story “Lokam Oru Kavayithriye Nirmikkunnu” opts for extra-marital indulgences, because she was never loved beyond skin deep:

It was a fast changing phase, gradually she too spoiled herself just like a cat that walks with shut eyes, she too jumped into certain trifles of love, just to be fondled, for a few hours, knowing that it was a cheap love, still she needed it. She was sure that no one would gratify her craving for eternal love (188).

“That evening, soon reaching the house, Amminikutty took the mirror, kept on the top of the lintel of the door and closely examined her own face in the mirror. She felt that she was seeing herself for the first time. No
one had told her before that she was beautiful (“Snehikkappetta Sthree”/ “The Woman Who was Loved” 206). In a 1961 story, it is the strange mindset of a woman that is analysed in detail: the protagonist says that she didn’t protest at all when raped by her own husband’s friend, because “she asked herself, is the purity of body, that is to decay or burn on a funeral pyre, a great thing”?; “when my own husband stroked me with his lean hands, I was suffering with pain and guilt. I thought that I am removed away from that body of mine, in my husband’s embrace, my body never enjoyed his presence” (“Sooryan”/ “Sun” 319).

Iqbal Kaur opines that, since the literary tradition was patriarchal,

> ‘the proper woman’ in the male authored texts was the selfless, self effacing, submissive one who was prepared to internalize the idea of her own inferiority. . . . The majority of the readers being male, it was difficult to read literary works which portrayed women as self-actualizing beings who rejected ‘the Angel in the House’ image and refused to be female stereotypes (27).

Actually all these women seem to declare a war against the patriarchal sexual colonisation of the woman’s body, that counts her as an object for exploitation. Das’ assertion of the independence of the woman’s body as a distinct thing that craves for freedom is a concept she has acquired from the freedom that the Nair Matriarchs enjoyed in the past. The matriarchy vested them with marital autonomy and freedom to choose
or reject husbands, which was also the woman’s trump card to ensure her safety by all means. Elsewhere in an interview she speaks in favour of the lost tradition of polyandry as a solution to the present day victimization of women:

I plead for the return of a social order that allowed a woman to have more than one husband if she so desired. Things change or end. But the blood is an eternal river, and in my veins flow the robust blood of my ancestresses who married two or more men and were happy (Savvy35).

What much is to be narrated about this ordinariness of a woman’s life, to replace the existing canons, may raise certain questions. In his foreword to Das’ 1996 collection Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das, Satchidanandan reviews the prominence of feminine subjectivity in Das thus:

This is not to say that Kamala’s poetry transcends gendered subjectivity altogether by resorting to some grand, Tagorean, universal discourse. She does refuse to be “the invisible woman in the asylum corridor” or “the silent woman” robbed of all expression; she too is a female Prometheus, one of the voleuses de langue (thieves of language) with a manifesto of desire that seeks to escape the paradox of being a prisoner of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse that she despises (13).
Ecofeminist philosophy draws largely on the indigenous myths of various cultures to assert its standpoint because the crises of women vary according to cultural contexts. Philosophers point out the Radha–Krishna myth of Indian culture as such a concept that can be designated a place in the so-called ‘wisdom traditions’ (Spretnak 192) in the theoretical framework of Ecofeminism.

Familiar with the concept of ‘Radha-Krishna’ from her early childhood itself as vouched in her words, “I grew up listening to stories . . . from the Ekadashi Mahatmyam, Bharatam, Bhagavatham and Ramayanam” (Das 216), Das builds upon the myth to present her idea of a better social order, that pays respect to women as a whole. The concept was instilled into her mind on a spiritual level by her mother and grandmothers, but she separates the spiritual aspect of the Bhakthi tradition, the most prevalent mode of Krishna worship in the 15th century India to conceptualize her own idea of man-woman relationship: “I can never forget Krishna; Krishna is not a god to me. I count him as my playmate. He has a vital role in transforming me” (“I Earned God with this Life”, 1236).

It appears that this polyandrous Nayar matron is also responsible for the curious twist to Krishna myth in her writing, for she looked for beauteous Krishna in every man. This paradigm shift in her work is evident in stories like “Ghanasyam” (1969), ‘Radhayude Kathu’ (Radha’s Letter 1968), “Radha . . . Anuradha. . .” (1971) and in poems like “Radha
Das’ fancied encounters with Lord Krishna (*Varshangalkku Munpu* 711,732) grows into a mature image for an ideal man–woman relation in the second decade of her career, to be precise in the 1960s. The author might have been undecided over such a twist in her works because the concept remains obscure in the stories of the 1950s. She reworks on the mythical *Vrindavan*, abode of Lord Krishna to create the concept of a parallel ecology:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind,

And the flute, luring her

From home and her husband,

Who later asked her of the long scratch on the brown

Areola of her breast, and she shyly replies,

Hiding flushed cheeks,

It was so dark outside,

I tripped and fell over the brambles in the wood.

(“Vrindaban” *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 56)

P Mallikarjuna Rao comments that “in Das the element of Bhakthi is absent. Her relation with Krishna is purely human. She confesses: “I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his lover”(59). These poems demonstrate the evolution of her physical love into a spiritual
asset. In “Ghanshyam” her love assumes a devotional character; an unknown territory for feminist enthusiasts:

Ghanshyam,

You have like a koel built your

nest in the arbour of my

heart

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

Shyam O Ghanashyam

You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows

Of my mind

And towards you my thoughts today

Must race like enchanted fish (94).

The Radha–Krishna myth modified in this manner is her tribute to the great ancient Indian concept of Prakriti-Purusha, which envisages Man and Nature to be independent and interdependent entities. The concept has been interpreted by many Ecofeminists to mean an ethic of sustainable development, but Das uses this on a more humane level to preach gender justice. Vandana Shiva clarifies this cardinal Indian precept thus:

In Indian cosmology, by contrast, person and nature (Purusha-
Prakriti) are a duality in unity. They are inseparable components of one another in Nature, in woman, in man. Every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical unity, of diversity within a
unifying principle, and this dialectical harmony between the male and female principles. . . becomes the basis of ecological thought in India (Staying Alive 40).

While many of her contemporaries opted for a veiled delineation of this unity between male and female principles, Das chose to bring them to the open and also from a very familiar province of family where the male used to subjugate the female. Her outspoken mode of narration gains strength from her matriliny: “I came from another kind of community: we were matrilineal, matriarchs. So when I seek my roots, I find women used to run households, women owned property, the matriarch ruled” (qtd in Mishra 8).

A brief examination of the recalcitrant author’s religious conversion allows her readers to comprehend what her search was about, because as a writer she herself was the product of a handful of her own intimate cultural and religious elements. Das’ conversion to Islam in 1999 raised many an eyebrow. This work does not intend to analyse the alleged (emotional/religious) reasons behind the author’s uncanny act or the ripples it caused in various quarters. She had been contemplating a conversion to Islam as early as 1972. But the decision was rather a hasty one as she made it in 1999 at the age of sixty seven. One sees an author degenerated in spirit and depressed over the loss of her blood relations in the last book of her autofiction Vishadam Pookkunna Marangal (The Trees on which Despair Blooms, 2007). The forthright author who had
come from a very traditional Hindu family and built a literary universe upon her inheritance at once denounced the (religious) beliefs that had gone deep into her making. She then started praising Islam enormously for the compassion that religion bestowed on widows:

Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is Purdah. Second is the security that Islam provides to women. In fact both these reasons are complimentary. Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women a sense of security. . . . All nights I used to sleep embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is my company (Das 41).

Her gimmicks to make the world believe that she has had a total transformation-- she adorns her post-conversion writings with plenty of images drawn from the premises of her new religion-- does not seem to pay off. Das remained true to her ideal of liberated female self even in her new attire. She brought out a lot of poems during this phase, all of them having a mystic undertone where one can see the poet deriving an equation with the newly found religion.

She makes a justification about her stand claiming that “whether a Hindu or a Muslim, it was love, her religion (‘Koolippattalam’/‘Hired Army’), but she mourns the way her dream castle is being shattered. As “every man is yet another Judas, who betrays the woman to the world”(Nature and Man”, Madhavikkuttyude Kruthikal Sampoornam,
1.1013-4) and love and its betrayal function as the frequent theme of her post-conversion literature, most of these are poems giving way to disillusionment. By 2006 we see a regretting author. Old age, loneliness, ailments, demise of kith and kin and so on seem to upset her mind and the topics of the final phase of her post-conversion literature, indicate her emotional and spiritual disappointment. But she was in no mood to revoke her converted status.

What must interest a reader/critic here is, how she could break away forever from the ties of her tradition, both religious and cultural, in her renaissance as Kamala Suraiya. Because the perceptions of her cultural ecology were hinged on various aspects that included her Hindu Nair background, the matriarchal family set up, the very Punnayurkulam ambience, that had gone too deep into her making, her fascination for the Nair cult and the privileged position that the Nair woman enjoyed, her own deep knowledge about the mythology and so on. Hence was she justified in her hasty rejection of her roots and the attempts that followed to pretend to the world that she was a new born.

The declining years of her life and the corresponding writings tell the world that Madhavikkutty @ Kamala Das vs Kamala Suraiya was a crisis that haunted her throughout her ‘final masquerade’. (i)In one of her recollections in the memoirs she reveals to the readers her passion for acting and also about her stage performance as a girl in purdah, which was against her father’s wish: Neermathalam Pootha Kalam,1056, and (ii)
again in a later composition *Colombo Poems*, where she had to witness the ethnic hatred against the South Indians, she shares an ironic incident when she had to go out in a burqua. But she had cherished a retreat to the soothing ambience of Nalapat. In her *Scribblings* she has noted down, “Just like a motherless child craves for breast milk, I too long for Nalapat”(1302).

Fragmentation of self was a crisis Das confronted throughout her life. She was ‘a split personality’ (Radhakrishnan 10); she herself confesses, another lives in me, I fear, a twin left unborn,

unnamed, unacknowledged, bitter with defeat,

and, she with her new-moon eyes stabs my face

and turns me so often, half human,

half feline (“Feline”, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 35)

“My body is borrowed from someone else”(*Neermathaam PoothaKalam* 1160), is a statement that sounds true from the very beginning of her life and literary career. The author preferred two pen names simultaneously, which would always make a reference to the fragmentation of her identity.

The author unlocks her heart in her rather simply fabricated story compilation titled *Januamma Paranja Katha* (“The Story that Januamma Told,” 1966-2003). Januamma, the focal character in this collection has been identified to be Chirutheyiamma, (*Malayalam Varika* June 12, 2009) a maid servant in Kamala Das’ service for fifteen years. Janu appears in
Madhavikkutty’s fictional world as early as in 1966, in the story titled *Janu Paranja Katha* 1966. Janu is illiterate but full of worldly wisdom and no one can beat her down in her verbal combats. From 1966 onwards Janu travels parallel to Das’ fictional world.

She too, like her author is a Nair lady, who is much proud of her charm, feudal family background and matriarchy. She claims to be brought up in ‘strict discipline’ under her uncle’s supervision, as the Nair household paid great respect to the maternal uncle, ‘the karanavar’ of whom she is much afraid of. In *Janu Paranja Katha*, the reader finds no serious plot and what one gets is an episode of her visit to the Guruvayoor Temple along with some of her acquaintances where she was robbed of her gold chain by Sankunni Nair, the man who rowed the country boat to Guruvayoor. Even when Janu knows that she was robbed by Sankunni Nair, she would not dare to doubt him as she revels in his company.

Her monologues in *Valluvanadan* style, the colloquial style in Northern Malabar seems to interest the reader very much. She seems to maintain an intimate tie with the author whom she fondly calls ‘Kamaloottyamma’ (Kamalakkutty amma). In fact there’s some hidden hints about the upcoming *My Story* (1973) in the title “Janu Paranja Katha” because Janu suggests Kamaloottyamma should write her story which is ‘full of grief’ (490). She had never been to school and hence out of
craft, so she urges ‘Kamaloottyamma’ to do it for her. She is sure it would be ‘a best seller’.

In another episode titled “Januammaumayi Oru Abhimukha Sambhashanam” (“An Interview with Janu”, 1975) Janu narrates Das’ revisit to Nalapat and her sentimental attachment to the Nalapat environs. Janu seems to answer some journalist who had come to interview Das in the afternoon when she is having a nap. The occasion is Das’ return to Kerala from Mumbai in the early 1970s. Janu rejects him permission as she does not want to disturb her mistress’s routine. She goes on with her commentary about their recent visit to Nalapat: “No one else in her family has this much attachment to Nalapat, except Kamaloottyamma. She went directly to the snake shrine and was heart-broken to see its dilapidated condition. She wept her heart out. I too cried. And soon she arranged to renovate the whole place” (615-616).

Janu’s fictitious journey begins here and she cements her rapport with the readers with her oft-repeated maxim, “only love, nothing else matters” (495), which in turn seems to be a justification from the author for the recurrent theme in her stories.

When she reappears on the scene in 1986 after twenty years for a second time, with her assumed repartee to “Kamaloottyamma’s Australian visit -- a pilgrimage to the temples of that foreign land” (684) which is recollected against her own visit to Guruvayoor along with the Das couple and is emphatic on Das’ passion for religious rites, she showers
lavish praises on her mistress’s generosity. By now, Janu had grown into
‘Januamma’ along with her aging creator: ‘My hair has gone gray and I am
rheumatic now”(898) she informs the readers.

This time Januamma Paranja Katha series has 22 untitled
episodes and in the coming chapters she narrates her ‘regular yearly
visits’(924) to her mistress and occasionally stays with her, because now
she owns her own house with the necessary amenities like TV, fridge. In
one of the chapters Januamma goes on to remark on
Madhavikkuttyamma’s conversion to Islam of which she is ‘quite
disapproving’, “She didn’t look left or right and went to Ponnani to wear
the purdah; changed her name too, Suraiya”(924).

While she is all praise for the Nalapat family and
‘Madhavikkuttyamma’s generosity’, Janu reassures herself and the
readers that she ‘will not commit such a folly, at any cost and swears that
she was born a Nair and will die so” (927) and she invokes Krishna’s
blessings to be on the right path.

Das’ turncoat decision to become Suraiya did invite a battery of
questions and debates. Does she reject the matrilineal security that she
extolled in the past? Has she thrown to the winds her traditions and
customs - ridden beliefs of the past? Here is a woman writer who would
dare to remind the world that women have grown of age and social and
cultural ‘inscripts’ of a patriarchal society can no longer dictate social
and cultural ‘performativity’ for women. All the same the emotionally
alienated Das whose almost impulsive fancy to swing to Islam had very personal reasons for the same does not seem to forefeit completely her bedrock of ancient ‘wisdom traditions’. No other work in her fiction can be read out as an in situ site for the masked author’s revelations. Unlike the other polyphonic auto-fictional books, the Januamma Paranja Katha series is a monologue in lay out. “In Januamma, Das created a second self”, (Jyothika 69), at once involved and alien to the emotionally tormented author. She was rather affected by the crucial decision she had taken in the autumn of her life. She wanted a safe retreat into the restful ambience of Nalapat and to anchor her tired self along its shores, at least emotionally for which Januamma becomes her literary ploy (69). Through her literary output belonging to the post-conversion period, she tried hard to tell the world that she was contented on being reconstituted. But she could never be a contented soul because that deep was the spell of ecology and matriarchy on her perceptions both as a woman and a writer. Elsewhere she recollects: “Just like a motherless baby craving for the taste of breastmilk, I too remember so fondly of Nalapat” (“Kurippukal” 1303).

Januamma retreats from Das’ fictional world in 2003 commenting harshly on a remark about the author’s re-marriage. She pleads to the world not to spoil her mistress’s peace with such ‘cooked up’ stories. She sympathises with the author who is perturbed by illness. Januamma’s verbatim concludes with a comment on the newly implemented widow pension scheme and the author thrusts her words into Januamma’s mouth.
that “she had never been and will not be a member of any political party” (973).

While commenting on the dearth of women writers belonging to the Muslim community, on the occasion of Kamala Suraiya’s death, the prominent Muslim socialist Thaha Madai too makes a reference to her environment’s impact on Das:

When Madhavikkutty speaks out her experiences, trees and flowers fill its canvas. Trees and flowers are not in the exterior, there is the benign shade of a tree even in the avenues of her mind. She names each and every tree and flowers. . . . Whatever has been captured by her mind, she rewrote in words, not letting them to be scattered by any wind. . . . How was this possible? One need not await for a Freud or Jung to explain its secret. . . . She was basically a Nair woman (46).

Feroza Jussawalla also holds the same view while investigating the nature of her feminine sensibility:

The ‘feminine sensibility’ can be described as her personal self: her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution as a woman from teenage bride to adultress and mother figure. . . . despite [her] forceful attempts to break away and find her place as a writer, a woman and a rebel against traditions in a rigid society and the rituals of folk belief such as carrying milk to the snake shrine and adorning the picture of the goddess Kali were a strong
part of her make-up . . . at Nalapat [for] Kamala Das had no
problems of identity. She was one with the landscape and the
traditions(56-57)

The digressions of Januamma (in her monologues) throw light on
the various incidents around her and she speaks with tongue in her
cheek akin to the artistry of an Elizabethan clown. Januamma echoes
Das’ own confession that “there is a dense forest dwelling inside her
inner heart” (Diarykkurippukal 831) inhabited by her dear ancestors and a
fond ecology they gifted to her. Even when she deserted Kerala to go to
Pune in the descending years of her eventful life in 2007, she had desired
for a homecoming, an attempt to retrieve whatever she had rejected for
some emotional vibrations.

Das also deserves to be mentioned as the inventor of a very
primitive form of cyber fiction, which might have been her apocalyptic
response to the technological advancements of the new era. In one of her
stories, she attempts an amateurish version of the now popular cyber fiction.
Not a typical sci-fi, “Ennennum Thara” (“Always Thara” Madavikkuttiyude
Kruthikal Sampoornam, II. 1994,796-811) is a fancied account of a lover
meeting his old love. The story is narrated by two characters Usha and
Hari, who work together. Even when Hari tries to woo Usha into marriage,
(and all others believe they are in love), Hari bemoans his lost
love Thara, who is now away with her husband, the scientist Ramankutty in
America. Hari blames Thara’s stepmother for that alliance.
The American couple reaches India on a brief call and the prudent Usha finds the scientist more reasonable than the aggressive and emotionally unstable Hari. Soon they all are on an outing and the scientist leaves his wife Thara with her former lover while he spends time with Usha. He even pays a visit to Usha’s mother. A few hours later a panic-stricken Hari runs to Usha, bewailing that Thara was no more a human being. “There’s a zip between her breasts, hiding in it the machinery like that of a clock. I could see a button shining on her ear rings which gave out a beep sound, when I touched her”(811).

The story might not share all the salient features of the genre, which is a further and recent development with the feminist academics. Yet it can be read out as a crude version of how a woman’s body is imparted a hybrid identity to be her husband’s experimental model, more or less like a modern cyborg. The story foregrounds a very early prediction of the impact of the present technological transgressions on woman’s body.

Donna Haraway writes:

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense . . . from another perspective, a cyborg’s world might be about lived social and bodily practices in which people
are not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints (qtd in Sandilands 18).

Das had been able to foresee this crisis of a mutated identity that a woman could confront, as early as the 1990s when the world was yet to think of artificial intelligence and robotics. She goes for an apocalyptic portrayal of womanhood within the limits of ‘(phallo)technology’ (Haraway 6), where a woman is to suffer her mechanized bodily transformation without complaint. A cyborg re-writes the associated notions of femininity, which provides an instance for patriarchy adopting technology to reign the female body. In this story the mutated heroine, Thara is quite tolerant and uncomplaining, typical of cyborgs, who are “hybrid entities that are neither wholly technological nor completely organic” (qtd in Genz and Brabon 147). A further probe into the story reveals how male intelligence, often counted as an equivalent to (male) mind in Ecofeminist discourse restructures the female identity, which in turn becomes “a terrifying cultural icon because it hints at the radical potential of fusion of feminity and intelligence . . .” where gender performativity is re-written. Thara, the mutated heroine “as a metonym embodies the impossibility of distinguishing between gender and its representation” (Bultler qtd in Genz and Brabon 149).

It is often pointed out that since Das had “a life roaming between one village and many cities, she could foretell the consequences of globalization” (Rajeev Kumar 44) and of technological advancement on
women. Das may not figure predominantly in the layout of the work like Donna Haraway, the expert in the genre, but the conception of the story can be seen as a scathing comment on man, the eternal patriarch manipulating technology to the extent of belittling the woman’s being as a cog in the wheel.

The nature of Das’ Ecofeminism is a question in point. Das pursued the concept of cultural Ecofeminism, which celebrates the essence of woman in her stories and in her poems of personal recollections. But coming to her poems inspired by social situations, she preaches for a better world order.

Her “Colombo Poems”, *(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* 1996, 75) provides an instance for this. Das lived with her husband in Sri Lanka sometime in the 1980s, where she also had a chance to witness the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Being a South Indian, her life was in threat and she had to go out in burqua. The poet who had a firsthand experience of racial hostility goes on to encode them in her poems, as she believes that a poet is also “a chronicler of events” (qtd in Raveendran 152). In “Fear” (58), “Smoke in Colombo”(58) “The Sea at Galle Face Green”(58), “After July”(75), “A Certain Defect in the Blood”,(88) “Shopper at the Cornells”(88s) she recaptures the hostility of ethnic hatred. The ‘chronicler poet’ writes,

*Shopping at the Cornells in red slacks and shirt, my hair
Tied up in a bandana, my Indianness*
Concealed, I merge well with the expatriates,
Pushing their food laden carts in silence,
Despite my nut brown skin, but when at last
I reach the cashier’s counter, the salesgirls
See through my guise, and their cruel mouths bleed
When they make attempts to stab me with a smile (“Shopper at the Cornells”, Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 78).

Ethnic violence, is again another social crisis Ecofeminism addresses as an instance of domination but with regard to Kamala Das, “blinded by the dazzle of erotica, critics may have often overlooked the altruistic concerns of Das whose poetry may also be a virile expression of resistance . . . vocalized through the Colombo poems is her ideational opposition to violence” (Bhattacharya 195).

Das’ “Colombo Poems” are a testimony of her allegiance to Sri Lankan Tamils, with whom she believes she shares a Dravidian identity. In the “Colombo Poems” Das highlights certain political, cultural and linguistic aspects of the post 1983 tragedy in Sri Lanka from a Tamil point of view. . . . Kamala Das hails from the Nair community in Kerala; historically the Nairs belong to the Dravidian race and were once a military body of landholders, serving as soldiers to the ruling Kshatriyas. In fact, Das’ allegiance to the Sri Lankan Tamils is based on ethnicity and language (Kishore 129).
Besides being an effervescent author, Das was a vibrant presence in her social milieu. Inspite of her multifaceted talents and social responsibilities, she was never a hands-on Ecofeminist like the others in the group namely, Sugathakumari, Arundhati Roy, Sara Joseph to name a few. Nevertheless, she is a true Ecofeminist with the core of her arguments leaning on the precepts of Cultural Ecofeminism. It was an offshoot of the second wave of Feminism, and found its theoretical ground in the 1960s and 1970s. The proponents of Cultural Ecofeminism hail the age-old association between nature and women as promoters of life.

For cultural Ecofeminists, human nature is grounded in human biology. Humans are biologically sexed and socially gendered. Sex/gender relations give men and women different power bases. Hence the personal is political. The perceived connection between women and biological reproduction, turned topsy turvy, becomes the source of women’s empowerment and ecological activism. This form of Ecofeminism is largely focused on the sphere of consciousness in relation to nature -- spirituality, goddess worship, witchcraft--and the celebration of women’s bodies. . . (Merhart11).

Built upon a very primitive concept which is as old as humanity itself, this theory is also the generating space of the other sub branches of Ecofeminism.

Her images are familiarly feminine, but used with novelty. The unnamed heroine in “Mahimle Veedu” calls her lover ‘king’, inspite of his
slum background, and the husband to her “is a dry letter in the blue envelope”; the thirteen year old daughter in a story of the same title (1956) who is not beautiful as her mother describes her love ‘a mad bee’; to the husband in “Gyanchand”, life is all the superlatives of luxury and love is ‘a meaningless business’; but to the wife ‘love is the only resort in a woman’s life’; the very existence is dull like a spider ‘trapped in its own cobweb’ to the poet-heroine in ‘Lokam Oru Kavayithriye Nirmikkunnu’; life bereft of love is just a barren piece of earth for the heroine in “Tharisunilam”.

One gets plenty of similar images in her fiction, which may not find a place in a man’s rational world. In “Swathanthrajeevikal” both the protagonists know that they are perpetually imprisoned in love and in one another, which seems quite paradoxical, when the title is suggestive of their free status. The heroine in “Pakshiyude Manam” (“The Bird’s Scent”) is just another bird preyed upon by the predator species, Man. In “Kalichantha”, (“Cattle Market”, 1961), the title suggests it is the robustness of the female body, the greatest consideration for the patriarchy even in marriage.

Essentially sensuous women fill the pages of her works. Women who had been otherwise designed fail to stick to it, in the autumn of their fragile existence. Thus life is not just the set of perceived ideals or the white khadi, but ‘as beautiful as a green silk sari’ to the dying Gandhian Meenakshiamma in “Meenakshiammayude Maranam” (“Meenakshiamma’s
Death”, 1993); the vast universe is but a ‘six by two space’ to the lovelorn heroine in “Sooryan” (“Sun”) when she is in her beloved’s company.

The unmarried daughter, who poses herself as a humble presence behind her much revered freedom fighter father during his interviews in the story “Gandhijiyude Prasakthi” (“The Relevance of Gandhiji” 1993) bends down at the end of the story to pick up a handkerchief dropped by the journalist and smells it: “It had a tang of cigarette and for no reasons she blushed” (858). The deceased mother leaves a memory as sweet as the ghee porridge she cooked last in the minds of her orphaned children in the 1963 story “Neypayasam” (“Ghee Porridge”). Native images of this kind fill the pages of her stories and they say more than they suggest. Das herself narrates the conceit of womanhood, presented in one of her stories titled, “The Sea Peacock” (“Kadal Mayooram” 1989).

Das’ heroines seldom cross the boundary walls of type-cast roles nor do they go on to challenge the pretensions of society. Still their momentary emotional rifts present the age old story of emotional apartheid to which women were subjected to in all ages and in all cultures. The recalcitrant author does not hesitate to describe her language strange. It implies the concept of a free woman: “My language is also unfamiliar to all. I know it is neither English nor Malayalam. It resembles the sound of a bird that flies tired because of its hurt wings” (Diarykkurippukal 900).

Das wrote decades before the emergence of Ecofeminism. But her visionary foresight could predict that a woman would remain the eternal
slave in the domains of every day life with the house forming the base structure of male hegemony in the patriarchal system. She was determined to address the issues of a woman’s emotional crisis and her existential angst as an individual in the most primitive and accepted of all social institutions, the family. Her distinct literary efforts in this regard were subject to harsh criticism and she was belittled as the ‘Queen of Erotica’ (Das 13).

Comeuppance of this kind blocked further perusals into the latent objectives of her literary craft. Das still remains misinterpreted for the liberty she took to deploy the female passions in literature. She writes about her own emotional ventures thus:

When you decide to opt for storytelling as the routine of your life, you are to join a special religion. Its rules are hard. First of all, it separates you from your family. You yourself keep a distance with all, and learn to see them as characters. . . . Some will dart questions at you like what’s the meaning and message of your story. Never attempt to answer. Storytelling alone is your work (Scribblings 1315).

Das’ voluminous literary output leaves a lot of unfilled theoretical gaps which can be filled with the support of Ecofeminism. If her memoir sequences are sites of nostalgic retelling of the bygone past and an instance of what Ecofeminist literary practice terms “autoethnographs”, where the reader gets “the concept of ecosystem that functions as a metonym and metaphor for a set of necessary human-land relationships”
(Murphy 27) and where she recounts the saga of her matriarchy, her poems are self-reflections of her own dilemma of growing up as a woman and her Diary Entries and Scribblings are her own ruminations about the clash between person and society. Her drama scripts still remain unread, but her prose works say a great deal about “creating new intellectual ecological paradigms” (Shiva 47) to realize the essence of womanhood which Ecofeminist philosophy seeks to celebrate.

Kamala Das shows remarkable command and ease over the use of English and Malayalam and has cultivated a style that is marked by colloquial simplicity and clarity. Since she is quite familiar with English and Malayalam, she naturally and skilfully makes them her media to express her emotions, feelings, reminiscences, her love and sexual feelings and her innate frustrations and disillusionments. She writes in “An Introduction”:

The language I speak
Becomes mine,

It voices my joys, my longings, my Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and Is aware. . .

(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 96).
A seasoned poetic artist, Das selects words effortlessly from a rich stock of English and the vernacular vocabularies. But she writes in the white heat of emotion as she declares in “Without a Pause”: “Write without/A pause, don’t search for pretty words/Which dilute the truth, but write in haste, of/Everything perceived, and known and loved” (*Summer in Calcutta* 52)

Das uses language deftly to project the insignificance of the house builders and their physical weakness. Here are a few lines to amplify this aspect of her poetry:

Puny, these toy-men of dust, fathers of light
Dust-children, but their hands like the
Withered boughs
Of some mythic hoodo tree cast only
Cool shadows, and with native grace bestow
Even on unbelievers vast settlers (“The House-Builders” *Collected Poems* 70).

Similarly, their inner vacuity and sterility of the dancing eunuchs is expressed through apt selections of words: “Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with/long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and /oh, they danced till they bled” (“The Dance of the Eunuchs, *Summer in Calcutta* 1). But they have no zest for life, no inner ecstacy, no fertility.

The sterile and negative approach of the eunuchs to life is expressed through the themes of their “children left unborn”. The felicity of diction is an outstanding characteristic of Das’ poetic style. Such expressions, words and
phrases abound in her poems—“Fiery gulmohar”, “sun-stained cheeks”,
“puddles of desire”, “Skins lazy hungers”, “an empty cistern”, “coiling snakes
of silence”, “flamboyant lust”, “the hungry haste of rivers”, “the ocean’s
tireless waiting” and so on depict the power of words and its significance is
expressed in full consciousness:

All around me are words, and words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop their slow growing,
From within . . . But I tell myself, words
Are a nuisance, beware of them, they
Can be so many things, a
Chasm where running feet must pause to
Look, a sea with paralysing waves,
A blast of burning air or
A knife most willing to cut your best
Friend’s throat . . . words are a nuisance, but
They grow on me like leaves on a tree
They never seem to stop their coming
From a silence, somewhere deep within (“The Words” Only the Soul
Knows How to Sing 36).

Das uses repetitive vocabulary to emphasise her anguish and intensity
of emotions as in “The Testing of Sirens”: “No more light, no more love, or
peace, only/ The white white sun, burning, burning, burning, burning”
Her imagery and symbols are highly suggestive and functional. They depict her inner agony and anguish, sterility and vacuity, lust and sexual bouts and unfulfilled love. The images of rain, dark night, womb and blood symbolise creativity, hope, regeneration and fulfilment. The deft use of Radha-Krishna and Krishna-Mirabai legends provide a mythical framework and recur as symbols to sanctify the quest of women for emotional fulfilment in man-woman relationship.

This selected in depth study of Das’ literary legacy underscores the fact that she lived her years to unscript the scripted cultural constructs of a male world and offers new inscriptions for the ideal Prakriti-Purusha harmony in this morally decadent world. Das seems to reaffirm the position of woman in the larger scheme of life where an androgynous co-existence possible.