Chapter- III

A Confessional Ecofeminist

… I am an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one…

The quotation given above from the poem, “An Introduction”
(Only The Soul Know How to Sing 96-97) clearly underline the fact that
Kamala Das is an inheritor of many traditions. The regional cultural
traditions of Kerala and the pan–Indian traditions are the two
significant influences on the author. She belongs to the rich tradition of
Dravidian culture and Malayalam language is an offspring of this
culture. The matrilineal tradition of Nair community and the rich
heritage of Malabar, a peculiar province of the erstwhile Madras
presidency, are two other factors of her formation. She is the heir to
two poetic traditions, the tradition of Malayalam literature and the
tradition of colonial, and post colonial Indian English literature. She
also belongs to the long tradition of women poets in India, starting from
Sanskrit and Tamil poets like Andal and Auvaiyar, Mira Bai, Ratna Bai,
and Janabai, the devotional poets or the Pali Songs of Buddhist nuns
are other examples. This rich heritage of women’s poetry in India,
remind us that it is not a post colonial phenomenon.
Kamala Das is a bilingual author. The poems written by her in English has attracted immense readership and critical acclaim. Besides her poems, she has written certain prose works in English including the controversial autobiographical work *My Story*. In Malayalam she has written hundreds of short stories, a few novels, autobiographical works and collections of essays. A greater variety in approach, choice of topics, depth of treatment and a greater freedom of expression are noted in her Malayalam works and this might be a good reason for suspecting that this is the language in which she “dreams”.

The poetic career of Kamala Das stretched through several decades and the poetic output mirrors the outlook of the poet during the various stages of her life. Very often it is a fact that the critical appreciation and categorization of the contributions of an author fail to do full justice to the author or to the works. Certain aspects may be conveniently highlighted and certain others may be ignored or unnoticed. It is also another fact that a writer may move ahead of his times as an innovator and the critics will have to follow his footprints after several years. New tools of critical analysis will have to be devised in such cases. Ecoriticism and ecofeminist criticism are entirely new tools in literary criticism. There is not a single critical appreciation published on Kamala Das considering her as an
ecofeminist in English poetry. It may be a fact that by the time ecofeminism got established in literary criticism, Kamala Das had stopped writing poems in English. The intention in writing this thesis is to establish that several of the works of Kamala Das do exhibit ecofeminist features and she was an ecofeminist pioneer in Kerala. Among the few authors who wrote about ecofeminism in Kerala, nobody could recognize the ecofeminist features of Kamala Das. Several of her poems, short stories, autobiographical works and a few novels remain as unexplored regions of ecofeminism. The intellectual and emotional heights achieved by the author remained rather in-accessible to the critical community in Kerala and she was very often tied with meaningless controversies. The bilingual nature of the author has a reciprocal benefit for the author and for the readers. Kamala Das creates a peculiar ecosystem in her works and the various elements of that system and the mutuality of these elements will be highlighted in this thesis.

Kamala Das had been gauged with various critical yardsticks and a brief consideration of the important approaches will be helpful for continuing the arguments. She is mainly considered as a confessional poet. She is also quite often categorized as a feminist poet. Eroticism, love, lust, Bhakti; etc are certain other features pointed out by critics. She is also accepted as a critic of patriarchy.
Confessional literature has a Christian background and it begins with St. Augustine’s Confessions. Psalms, Songs of Songs and many books of the Apocrypha are confessional in tone. Subjectivity is the most striking feature of confessional poetry. The life of the poet itself becomes the topic of poems. Northrop Frye considers confession as a form of autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography (365). Poetry assumes the traditional functions and tones of fiction. Fact and fiction blend together in confessional poetry. Together with the events from the life of the author, the thoughts aspirations, longings, dreams, frustrations etc., the things from the mind are also utilized for confessional poetry. So this form of poetry also has a psychological level. Again, this poetry has a cathartic effect, both for the writer and the reader. The Eliotic reticence about the poet’s biography is totally dispensed with in this category of poetry. Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman etc are the prominent authors of the group and Kamala Das is a prominent Indo-Anglian contributor to this group.

As a confessional author, Kamala Das performed anatomy on her own self, on her own female psyche. She confessed with her strong feminine sensibilities, powerful proclivities and antipathies, caprices and whimsical ideas. She didn’t feel shy of exhibiting her frailties and virtues as a woman, her superior self as a mother and her
inevitable exploitation as a wife. Her painful experiences in love and in
sex are candidly and forthrightly confessed together with her criticism
about the hypocrisy in society.

Confession had a therapeutic value in Kamala Das' life. The gap
between fact and fiction fades away and she finds fiction an alternative
to reality and story an equivalent to life. In one of her ‘Anamalai
Poems’ (Only the Soul Knows How To Sing) she recognizes the
benefit of this self therapy.

If I had not learnt to write how would
I have written away my loneliness
Or grief? Garnering them within my heart
Would have grown heavy as a vault, one that
Only death might open a release then
I would not be able to feel or sense. (108)

Robert Philip’s remark on the nature and motif of confessional
art is quite applicable to Kamala ‘Das:

All confessional art, whether poetry or not is a means of
killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful
dragons of dreams and experiences that must be haunted
down, cornered and exposed in order to be
destroyed (47).
Kamala Das is considered as a pioneer feminist poet among the group of Indo-Anglian authors including Imtiaz Dharkar, Charmayne D’Souza, Menka Shivdasni, and Adarsh Mishra. She has the image of a conventional Hindu turned feminist. In an interview Das reveals the startling purposes of her *My Story*:

I needed to disturb society out of its complacence. I found the complacence a very ugly state. I wanted to make women of my generation feel that if men could do something wrong; they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realize that they were equal. I wanted to remove gender difference. I wanted to see that something happened to society, which had strong inhibitions and which only told lies in the public. (Kaur 5)

The society that she wanted to oppose or change is seen reflected in several of her poems.

In India woman was regarded as the preserver of the family and the protector of culture. But the modern Indian attitude to woman has become ambivalent; it varies between awe and contempt, respect and scorn. The family, the domestic life, the institutions of love and marriage are all over powered by patriarchy. Male cruelty and female victimization are the direct outcome of patriarchy. Motherhood is the only redeeming phase of womanhood. Das portrays the miserable
predicament of woman who struggles to reconcile herself between society’s expectations of womanhood and her expectations of feminine fulfillment.

Marriage is a social institution intended to facilitate the male exploitation and domination over women. Woman is only given inferior and insignificant social roles. A man can sustain a woman only by genuine love and marital happiness. Sex cannot be the only joining factor in their relationship. The disproportionate share of domestic drudge thrust upon women is also becoming topic for her poems, as this extract from “Gino”

I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus queue
The one from whose shopping-bag the mean potato must.
Roll across the street. (Only the Soul knows How to Sing 93)

The physical and psychological aspects of domestic violence is also seen in her poems. The feminine anguish and the feminine fury at the face of the domestic violence is expressed forcefully by her. Two extracts from “The Old Play House” exemplify the domestication and domination of woman:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
in the long summer of your love so that she would forget.
not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind,
but also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
... You called me wife,
I was told to break saccharine into your tea and
to offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
beneath your monstrous ego, I ate the magic leaf and
became a dwarf… (30)

The age old maternal mystique is another great impediment in
the woman’s battle for equality and dignity in life. Rational women are
to purge themselves of the enslaving bondage of motherhood. Thus
Kamala Das from various aspects of feminist issue, declare that she is
a revolutionary bent on establishing the dignity and honour of woman
in equal terms with that of man. K. Sachithananthan in the preface to
the collection, Only the soul Knows How to Sing mentions that:

She (Kamala Das) rejects the patriarchal value system that
is based on egoism, greed for power, expansionism, hero-
cult, violence, war, mindless exploitation of men and nature,
the misuse of intelligence and the supremacy of reason and
theory over sensitiveness and experience. (16)

Sachithananthan could identify the variety and scope of Kamala Das’
poems from a deeper perspective as is clear from these words:
Kamala's poetry shows a gradual widening of concerns over the years as she liberates herself from her initial obsession with gender identity and extends her sympathies to entire sections of suffering humanity— the marginalized, the poor, the minorities, the fighters for justice, women, children, abandoned youth, victims of war and oppression … (13) However he couldn't come to the ecofeminist aspects of Kamala Das. He failed to notice the comforting presence of nature in her poems.

Thematic or methodological analysis won't entirely help to understand a poet. The ideological standpoints of an author are also to be considered seriously. Such an ideological understanding of Kamala Das will bring out unexplored avenues. Confession is only the means to her end. Kamala Das was a feminist poet with a deep rooted environmental awareness. The environment created by her is an environment not only for the cohabitation of man and woman, but for the entire animate and inanimate forms on the earth. She adored and accepted nature with the age old Indian reverence for nature. The utilitarian approach of the westerners towards nature is not seen in her writings.

Kamala Das could very well absorb the changing patterns of sensibility from a global perspective. In the long span of her literary
career of over five decades she could imbibe the features of modernism, post modernism, feminism and environmentalism. Also, there are no mistakes in approaching her as a post colonial author.

The five main streams of ecofeminism; radical or cultural ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, ecofeminist theology, social ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism, are utilized by Kamala Das. This western classification of ecofeminism may not be entirely suitable for the oriental situations in Kamala Das’ writings. An Indianized understanding and approach will be required. Environmental Economics, Green Politics and Deep Ecology provide the background for the radical ecofeminists and Spiritual Ecology and Deep Ecology form the base for spiritual ecofeminists. Ecofeminist theology has its roots mainly in spiritual ecology and Environmental Justice. Social ecofeminists borrow their ideology from Murray Bookchin’s ideas of Social Ecology and the patterns of Environmental Justice. Socialist ecofeminism has a Marxian
background and the ideas of James O’Connor are utilized here. All these five branches adhere to the basic ideas of feminism. It will be an interesting and fruitful search when we try to trace the various facets of ecofeminism in the writings of Kamala Das. The effort may also be seen as an attempt to analyse the realities of feminine existence and treatment towards nature in the works of Kamala Das using the western yardsticks.

Kamala Das does not approach nature like a romantic or a pantheist. Nature is an organic presence in her poems, interacting with people and interfering in their lives. The poem “For Cleo Pascal” is a striking example:

Only the trees seem glad to see me
As if I were their kith and kin
I take on their characteristics
As the days one after another pass by
While I wear this land as an over coat
Warming my breasts and belly
I begin to look like its trees
My skin dries like the bark of a birch
My hair smells of spruce. (126)
The opinion of Judith Plant is applicable for this poem,

The shift from the western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being to an earth based spirituality begins the healing of the split between spirit and matter. For ecofeminist spirituality, like the traditions of native Americans and other tribal peoples, sees the spiritual as alive in us, where spirit and matter, mind and body, are all part of the same living organism. No one aspect is any better than another, each has its own ability to grow, develop and-in its unique way-it can enhance the whole. There is no differing until the after life, nor is there any supreme authority figure. Goddess, Gods, Creators are part of each person, plant and animal. Immanence takes the place of transcendence. (113)

People need not be segregated for being a Canadian or an Indian, and there should be an all embracing ideology for mankind.

The cultural alienation and segregation that prevail among people vanish in the lap of nature and a fresh realization,

Of one thing I am certain
the forest and I,
We have something in common
We do not speak French. (126)
Speaking French or Malayalam may create separation among people but not between nature and men. The variation in the content of melanin causes ‘trauma’ for the darker race, in the land dominated by the people of the “White God”.

“Composition” is a fine poem that can be interpreted from the point of view spiritual ecofeminism. This poem is very deep and symbolic and affords us the vision of the poet from an-elevated perspective. The remarks that poet makes about life, its goals, its struggles, about man-woman relationship, about the ultimate merger of man with nature are quite unique among her poems. She discovers that “both love and hate are/involvements” (21) and that, “The tragedy of life/ is not death but growth”. (21) The growth is the progress towards worldly desires and worldly love. The quest for love drives her only to desperation. There she realizes that,

The only secrets I always

withhold

are that I am so alone

and that I miss my grand mother (23)

The grand mother is an oft repeated presence in several of her poems. The grand mother and her love is both a reality and a symbol in the poem. The grandmother reminds her about the lost charms and innocence of childhood, the warmth of the ancestral home, the purity
of maternal love and also the congenial environment of her childhood at Nalapatt. The longing to go back to the lap of the grand mother and to the lap of nature remained as an obsession in the personal life of the author and it became the topic for several poems and stories.

We shall talk, she said,
Darling,
we shall talk all night

…………………………
My grandmother’s lamp burned
All night
On the window-sill.(24)

The grandmother goes on waiting for her and Kamala Das is unable to reach back to her.

The sea is another powerful symbol used in the poem. The sea was very close to her when she was with her grandmother, in her childhood. The sea got distanced from her as she grew up. At the fag end of life she again longs for the sea.

All I want now
is to take a long walk
into the sea
and lie there, resting,
completely uninvolved. (26)
The sea symbolizes nature and she accepts that ultimately we are,

To crumble

to dissolve

and to retain in other things

the potent fragments

of oneself. (27)

The world view of a spiritual ecofeminist can be noted at this point. All the life forms are to merge with the nature and the continuity of nature is made clear. The concept of Panchabhootha, the five basic components of nature and life is suggested by the author. The humility of man in nature is another notable aspect in the poem and them she reminds us,

We are all alike

we women,

in our wrappings of hairless skin. (24)

“No Noon at My Village Home” (134) is a poem that is generally categorized as a poem on nostalgia. But the ecosystem portrayed in this poem has biological precision and the poet is reminding us about the loss of the natural habitat. The poet here shares the spirit of an environmental activist and she prefers to be an optimist when she says that “I must stay”. This “stay” is the stay with the nature, experiencing and enjoying together with the nature. The trees, the owl, the pond, the
wind and the moon are all participants in the drama of nature and man should not disturb their harmony.

N. Prasanthakumar says that, “the grandmother is a magic cure for the neurotic disturbance of Das’ personae”. (46) “My Grandmother’s House” (119) is a poem that justifies this statement. The speaker in the poem desires to,

…pick an armful of

Darkness to bring it here to lie

Behind my bedroom door like a brooding

Dog…(119)

It will be useful to quote Prasanthakumar’s comment on the poem:

Darkness is a symbol of nostalgic passion which convinces her that the past is preferable to the present. The speaker’s present condition of emotional insecurity forces her to find comfort by an imaginative sojourn to her grandmother’s house which binds her to an enviable past. Das is conscious that an amiable past exists only in memories. The poem stresses the sad awareness that the shared emotional comfort and togetherness are over. The poem begins with this awareness, leads us through childhood experiences and takes us back to the same
awareness in a realistic portrayal of the grandmother’s house. The speaker’s fascination for the house provides her with a feeling of vicarious comfort and a sense of belonging. (46)

Prasanthakumar could have approached this poem from an ecocritical perspective and then the grandmother’s house would become the symbol for the perfect environment where people live in rapport with the nature.

“Evening at the Old Nalappat House” (142) is another such poem where the lost virtues of rustic existence is described and also the warmth of the love of grandmother. The Nalpatt house repeatedly becomes the symbol of an ecosystem in her poems. The house is only a part of nature, with its animate and inanimate forms. The civets, bats and the insane rats and the human beings try to coexist in the house.

“Blood” (72) is also a ‘grandmother poem’ which is also located in the grandmother’s house where the snobbery about lineage is ridiculed by the poet. Kamala Das fails to keep her word to repair the grandmother’s house and the house is abandoned by her,

From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death,

The noise of rafters creaking
And the window’s whine.
I have let you down

Old house, I seek forgiveness. (74)

The decay of the house is a natural process and at the same time the decay of the bond of man with the nature is to be seen as unnatural. The memory of the organic bond with the old house and the nature is held warmly by the author and she seeks forgiveness for her neglect.

The village is not the only ‘ecosystem’ for existence. The urban life is the present reality and the urban world also should be made a suitable environment for existence. Two poems, ‘Farewell to Bombay’ (38) and “After July” (75) portray how life can be made livable or unlivable. “Farewell to Bombay” is a consideration of the harmony of the life in the city, how various elements of the city life peacefully co-exist. People freely move about and,

…to the crowd

Near the sea, walking or sitting

But always talking, talking,

Talking (38)

But life in Colombo has become frightening due to ethnic cleansing. In Bombay people of various categories live together, while in Colombo Tamilians are massacred. Freedom of existence and expression are vital requirements for the preservation of a human ecosystem. The
poet is keenly aware of these facts. These two poems can be approached from the perspective of social ecofeminism.

Unfair distribution of resources, wealth and opportunities can harm the harmony of the system and the socialist ecofeminist system go unattained in Colombo. Cordiality and understanding enliven the situation in Bombay. Hierarchy and domination are to be removed from society and the resources and energy of the bioregion are to be fruitfully utilized.

“The Suicide” is an ecofeminist poem written in a highly confessional mode on the lost simplicity of life and the deprivity of love in life. The sea is the symbol of the natural rhythm of life to which every individual longs to retract.

O sea, you play a child’s game

But,

I must pose,

I must pretend,

I must act the role

Of happy woman

Happy wife.

I must keep the right distance

Between me and the low.

And I must keep the right distance,
Between me and the high.

O sea, I am fed up

I want to be simple

I want to be loved. (86-87)

The life of the woman is made miserable by her man. “Yet I never can
forget / The only man who hurts”. (88) The feminist seeks refuge in the
lap of nature and the eternal and primeval patterns of existence.

The pattern of ecofeminist theology can be noted in this poem.

Happiness in life can be had only if we move in unison with nature;

O, Sea, I am happy swimming

Happy, happy, happy…

The only movement I know well

Is certainly the swim. (87)

It is obvious that swimming is the symbol of life in harmony with nature,
without exploiting or overpowering nature. As Judith plant says,

The essence of feminism, that the personal is the political,
is the driving force behind all ecofeminist political action.
For we know that when we resist the rape of the earth, we
are fighting the same mentality that allows the rape of
women. We know, too, that insisting on healthy
relationships with each other lays the foundation for
healthy relations with the natural world. The existence of
the humanity and without doubt, other species as well, is literally at stake. In our desire to save the earth, we as ecofeminists, believe that it is folly to overlook the interconnectedness of the war on nature and the daily, often hidden war on “others” - whole cultures, women children and animals. (49)

Though the poem “A Holiday for Me” (61) can be read as a poem on death, it is also a poem on life. The mountains invite the author for the holiday trip which may be death. But the charm of the mountains is irresistible and the luggage that is left behind is definitely the worldly luggage. The author knows that the travel would be delightful if she travels light, without much worldly worries and possessions. The eternal charm of nature is the powerful undercurrent of the poem.

Very obvious ecofeminist suggestions are noted in “The Anamalai Hills” (47), where the lofty Anamalai hills are contrasted with the puny behaviour of man:

Wrapped in the shrouds of betrayals, the woman walks along.
No longer seeking comfort in human speech. The mountain Seems deaf-mute, but the flesh of her spirit is but its flesh,
and her silence, despite the tumult in her blood, its
destined hush. (47)

The woman is comforted not by the man, but by the mountain. The
mountain is the representation of the ecosystem which should protect
the woman. The words of the mountain, “I was alone, I am alone, I will
be alone” (47) reveal the continuity of nature. The mountain is also an
internal mountain; the presence of the gentle warmth of nature in the
mind of the woman: “Within my heart, the mist ascends, the
mountains/awake…” (47).

Nature is not merely a background in the poems of Kamala Das,
but nature is an active participant in her poems. Also it cannot
be said that she had consciously inculcated her environmental awareness and she was not following the patterns of environmentalism from the West. The awareness about the inseparable bond between man and nature came naturally to her from the rich tradition in her family, the habits of life of people in her village who had an organic relation with nature, the rituals and customs of village life, and also there was the great influence of her grandmother. The literary works of Kamala Das demand ecofeminist reading of them and in the coming chapter’s there will be indepth search into the above mentioned circumstances of her for being an ecofeminist.

Though it is rather difficult to find out a poem with radical ecofeminist views among the poems of Kamala Das, all other four branches of ecofeminism are used by her in the writing of her poems. Poetry becomes not a mere tool for confessional self expression, but it attempts to present the totality of existence in nature. A new definition for the identity and existence of man in nature and a new perspective in man-woman relationship is noted in several of her poems.