

THE PROMISE OF LANGUAGE

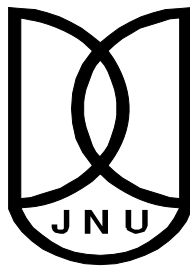
A Reading of Kamala Das's Poetry

Dissertation submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

by

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Certificate

This dissertation titled "The Promise of Language: A Reading of Kamala Das's Poetry" submitted by Shamlá Mustaffa Mohamed, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.

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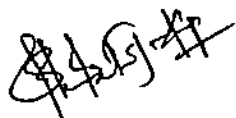
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Declaration by the Candidate

This thesis titled "The Promise of Language: A Reading of Kamala Das's Poetry" submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.



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*To my 'pinch of salt', for the zest
and
my 'grain of sugar', for the balance.*

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Introduction

Introduction

Poetry as a genre of literature encompasses a multitude of meanings as to what it stands for. Technically a collection of poems, poetry has always signified the expression of feelings and ideas in an intensive manner. Such intensity has been rendered possible by means of various rhythmic patterns and idiosyncratic styles of writing that further contributes to the birth of categorization and classification in the field of poetry as a whole. The patterns and styles draw their influences from different strands like indigenous cultures, historical memory, social customs, political need and most importantly, the artistic value. It cannot be denied that poetry, as a form of literary work and as a practice of art, is a creative venture in its own right.

Kamala Das (1934- 2009) was one of the most important contributors of her generation to this vast genre of literary work. She was known to many by different names - Kamala Das, Madhavikutty, Amy, and finally Kamala Suraiyya. Celebrated as a ‘poet who loomed large over the poetic horizon of present-day India’¹, Das’s poetry was loved and hated, hailed and shamed, rewarded and penalized all at once. A literary career that spanned for about half a century, Das broke into the literary circles and out of the social boundaries through the power of expression in her poetry. Kamala Das wrote her poems in free verse, which was not a closed form of poetry with strict metrical or rhythmic patterns. This open form of writing poetry contains the pulse of free or natural speech. This use of free verse also played part in Kamala Das being controversial as a poet in the public sphere just as she was contentious in her personal life. Her poems depicted scenes from her personal experiences of life and the confident expression of these experiences earned her respect for breaking free from the conventional domains of what belonged to women’s writing until Indian Independence. She became the valiant fighter, the enigmatic trendsetter and a ‘pioneer of Post-Independence Indian English Poetry’² in her era.

¹ As paraphrased from A.N. Dwivedi’s biographical sketch of Kamala Das in *Kamala Das and her Poetry*. Pg.1.

² As mentioned by Bijoy Kumar Das in “Paradigm Shift in the Reading of Kamala Das’s Poetry”, *Indian Literature.*, pg. 240.

Existing Scholarship

Kamala Das is one author whose works have been materials for study innumerable times in different parts of the world. It is argued that almost all questions on her poetry have been raised and today, in the academic world, research on Kamala Das is believed to be practically ‘out-dated’ or exhausted. Bulk of this existing research has been analyzing her poetry within the feminist framework or the ‘confessional mode’ of poetry, often comparing her to American poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Academic courses have also been designed based on such study. Laila Jayachandran, in her unpublished thesis on Kamala Das’s poetry titled *Kamala Das’s Poetry- A Transcendental Vision*, throwing light on the confessional aspect, states that Das’s poetry is a “record of her frustration, failure and humiliation” (Jayachandran, 21). This has been in relation to the themes in her poetry and the socio-political narratives that she weaved. As already mentioned, far-reaching study has been achieved to trace her identity not just as a poet, but as a break-through ‘Indian English’ poet. Given that she was a trilingual who spoke three languages, wrote in two and dreamt in one, Kamala Das always provoked research on the language in which she wrote. Her identity as a literary person was either carved as “bold” due to her confessional mode or “simple yet powerful” due to the effortlessness in her free verse. The field of Translation Studies too has been enriched with translations of the works of Kamala Das and Madhavikutty into various languages as well as path-breaking queries regarding the language, politics and poetics of the act of translation. Kamala Das, as an Indian English poet is host to a whole set of interesting problematics for study; but her appropriation and ownership of a language she calls her “own” has also to offer a whole new world of quests. The existing research thus thrived on providing cloaks to adorn the poet.

Bijoy Kumar Das, in his essay titled “Paradigm Shift in the Reading of Kamala Das’s Poetry” promotes the need for changing the way we read the poems of the phenomenal poet. To advocate for a ‘paradigm shift’ is to ask for a movement away from the norm. The conventional mode of looking at Das’s works made her a ‘confessional poet’ and a ‘brave’ woman poet. At the core of this approach to Das’s poetry is the valorisation of the figure of the poet who portrays her personal experiences through the body of her writing. While setting out to deviate from the ideas and arguments that read

Kamala Das in the traditional light and contending that her “poetry defies exact classification” (Bijoy Kumar Das, 247), Bijoy Kumar Das insidiously propagates the same in the following statements:

She is the feminist poet, confessional poet, a poet of body and soul - at once, all these and much more. ... To my mind, Kamala Das’s significance as a postcolonial poet lies in her ability to bring feminism and postcolonialism closer for exploring new themes and images. Both women and the colonized were oppressed by men and colonialists respectively. She brings them together speaking for them and showing them the way. The key word of her poetry is resistance - but it is resistance leading to reconciliation, not confrontation. (Ibid.)

An enormous group of scholars and thinkers were toeing this line of inquiry, hence greatly increasing the subscribers to this thought rather than expanding the view on her poetry. Some examples include K. Satchidanandan, Anisur Rahman and Eunice de Souza. Upholding the themes of love and sensuality recurring in her poems, it seemed easy for the critics to maintain the poet’s work within the framework of postcolonial feminist writing. Though this research does not outrightly reject such a vast scholarship, what it intends to do is to urge for a proper ‘paradigm shift’ in the reading of Das’s poetry.

Aim, Methodology and Key Concepts

The aim of this research, as has been indicated, is to move away from the traditional scholarship on Kamala Das’s poems and to read her in a new light. The hypothesis upon which such a proposal will take shape is: Kamala Das’s poems offer a platform for philosophical investigation, especially when confronted with the question of the idea of language.

The trajectory of this research takes off exactly from where the existing research has landed. Departing from reading Kamala Das’s poetry from a postcolonial lens placing her in the league of Indian English writers, this research proposes to take route in a distinct direction by closely studying her tussle with the issue of language. The question

then arises, “If the departure is from her identity as an Indian English poet, what language are we speaking about here?” Though it is nearly impossible to remove her from that identity, this research is distinct in its manner of approach predominantly. Since most of Das’s poetry are autobiographical in nature- though one may contest as to the autobiography of which of her ‘selves’, the everyday woman that Kamala Das was or the writer who she was- and have been dealt with by critics with the precision of a cleric who listens to the confessions of a believer who has sinned, the attribution of a “bold” character to her “explicit” poetry also comes mainly from this line of enquiry. The earlier attempts at understanding her poetry stand incomplete. Those projects cannot be said to have failed and therefore, brought the end of the history of the writer that Kamala Das was, but incomplete, because the spirit or the specter of the ghost of the writer was emerging time and again from her writings to look for more meaning. What I am trying to argue here is that, Kamala Das, while grappling to “own” the language she wrote in, was hinting at the need to realize the arrival of the language of the ‘other’ that haunts one’s ‘self’.

By doing away with all identities attached to her and her writings, namely – ‘Indian English’, ‘woman’, ‘bold’, ‘postcolonial’, etc. – this research attempts to study the language of her expression and “poetic experience” in its crudest form without any preconceptions so as to take a shift from subjectivities to language. This research would go in the exact opposite direction of all the existing research with respect to the method. The accepted dent in literary history that Kamala Das succeeded to make is not only because she was a woman poet during her time amongst the men, or a woman poet who wrote “boldly” unlike other woman poets of her time. But it was quite arguably because she sought for a revolutionary break in the linear progression of the literary history that she had to be a part by tangling herself in the question of language. By placing her *on the shores* of the language she claims to appropriate herself, which according to Marc Crepon is an “impossible appropriation”³, this research would then locate the idea of the messianic from a ‘promise to come’. Jacques Derrida, in *Monolingualism of the Other and the Prosthesis of Origin* argues that each time a word is spoken or written, a *promise* is made. It is a performative, which promises of *a language to come*. And hence, an

³ Crepon, Marc. “What we demand from Languages”, *Poststructuralism and Cultural Theory*. pg 148 - 159

ipseity or identity to come is always deferred. This research would make use of the prospect of the language becoming a seat of inquiry where subjectivities disseminate as deconstruction is at work when it is poetry. The identity of the poet then becomes a non-subjective entity relying on the range of ‘poetic experience’.

The primary source materials proposed to be used are all the available works of poetry by Kamala Das from her published collections, namely – *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and other poems*, *Collected Poems Volume I*, *Only the Soul knows how to Sing*, *Tonight this Savage Rite* (with Pritish Nandy), *Closure: Some Poems and a conversation* (with Suresh Kohli), *The Best of Kamala Das* (a part of series publication by Bodhi Publishers, Kozhikode) and also an edited volume by Suresh Kohli titled, *Wages of Love: The Uncollected Writings of Kamala Das*. Apart from these, her works in Malayalam as Madhavikutty shall also be sifted through for the need of consultation to garner a better understanding of her “poetic experience” which she claims is one and the same irrespective of the form (prose or poetry) or language (Indian English or Malayalam) she expressed in. For a coherent and comprehensive research to progress, the theoretical texts largely used would be Walter Benjamin’s *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, Martin Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language and Poetry*, *Language, Thought*, Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other* and Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* along with a host of other texts by eminent scholars on language and meaning.

The methodology with which this humble venture makes use of to take flight is Derrida’s tool of ‘Deconstruction’. A semiotic analysis will be laid out for a holistic approach to Kamala Das’s works that has the potential to contribute to the philosophy of language. A close reading of Kamala Das’s poetry in tandem with a detailed take on Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida accompanied by a modest approach of Maurice Blanchot, shall be made use of for this research. As mentioned above, I shall rely on the published works of Kamala Das’s poetry, but shall also gloss through Madhavikutty’s prose in Malayalam as well as Kamala Das’s prose in English for want of a better understanding of meaning from her language. Interviews given by Kamala Das and biographies written on her would also be used in order to be able to delve in to the question of language through her poetry.

Hence, understanding of the language, by semiotic analysis of the themes, the motifs, the metaphors, the imagery and symbolism in Das's poetry, contributes in an expounding manner into the study of poetic experience. Language opens up a promise which in turn opens up a vast wide world. Hence, the linguistic opening up of the world by taking up the question of promise provides for the possibility of deconstructing the figure of the poet, in this case Kamala Das. Maurice Blanchot offers for an enhanced understanding of the opening up of such a world. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot argues that the act of writing or literature as such liberates one from "the first to the third person", and from a "throttled world" to a "world of freedom". And this is where he brings in the concept of 'solitude' too. In such a space then, there is no scope for regressive subjectivities for the figure of the poet. There is a promise, which is always and already there of something 'yet to come' delineates a revolutionary outlook for the field of poetry itself.

Taking recourse to such a trajectory, this research would aim to raise the following fundamental questions –

- How can language, that deciphers the world to us in myriad ways, be the most lucrative of a problematic in our basic understanding? How does language unfold itself with respect to time? What 'promise' does it hold?
- How can poetic experience be understood in terms of language? What possibilities or impossibilities do such a deferral of time by poetry yield to?
- Does poetic experience of language open up to something outside the world as we know it? What happens to the poet in such a space? Can the poetic experience make a literary work exist on its own by alienating the poet?

By raising these questions and many more along these lines, and endeavouring to find answers to them, this research aims at look beyond those horizons in the study of poetry, which probably are, 'yet to be'.

Some of the key concepts that will be studied during the course of this research are 'language as such' and 'language of man' as derived by Walter Benjamin in his seminal piece of work, "On Language as such and on Language of Man". These two key concepts will be delved into in detail with the intention of arriving at a minimum understanding of the basic nature of language. During the course, the notions of *gift* of

language, ‘poetic experience’, ‘space of literature’ and ‘essential solitude’ shall be explored.

Chapters

This dissertation, titled *The Promise of Language: A Reading of Kamala Das’s Poetry* consists of three main chapters apart from the “Introduction” and “Conclusion”. The main chapters are designated as follows -

1. “The Promise of Language”
2. “Kamala Das: Poetry of Promise”
3. “Poetic Experience as Linguistic Experience”

While the “Introduction” gives an overview of the entire dissertation stating the aim and scope of the research with a mentioning of the key concepts that the research unearths on its way, the first chapter is intended to form the theoretical paradigm upon which the reading of Kamala Das’s poetry will be predominantly based. The primary objective of this chapter would be to raise the fundamental question that this research is concerned with – about language. The driving force for the chapter is the inherent ‘linguistic anxiety’ that man usually possesses. Taking this term from Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory*, the chapter would make an attempt at comprehending the nature of language as it comes to man. The ‘anxiety’ with regard to language is seen along the interface of word and meaning. This chapter would attempt a close reading of Derrida’s various texts in order to be able to outline the ever increasing compass of the question of language. As such, questions regarding the place of language, its functionality, the question of messianism and thereby, the idea of the ‘promise’ in language will be taken up.

The second chapter that aims to meticulously read the poems of Kamala Das in order to deconstruct the unity that is most often associated with her poetry. With this objective, much examination and study will go into unearthing the disunity and uncertainties that come up in literary works while viewing through the lens of language. For this, the themes, the motifs, the metaphors, imagery and symbolism in Kamala Das’s poetry would be studied with precision, and hence, strive to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the ‘poetic experience’ that Das reveals in.

The third chapter is an attempt at going a step further from studying the 'poetic experience' extracted from Kamala Das's poetry. Using Maurice Blanchot's proposition of the experience that comes from writing and the vast 'space'/ world that literature opens up, the possibility of comprehending the 'poetic experience' of Kamala Das as linguistic experience would be endeavored. The question of the identity of the poet in such a scenario would also be taken up.

The conclusion will be a coherent presentation of the insights drawn from the three main chapters in order to be able to come out with possible answers to the questions raised in each of them. This chapter would also be a rundown of the entire project that primarily aims to study the disintegration of the figure of the poet when upholding the 'poetic experience'.

Chapter 1

The Promise of Language

“We are two abysses – a well staring at a sky”

- Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

Peter Barry, in his most sought after introductory books on literary and cultural theory, namely *Beginning Theory*, quite felicitously stated that when we begin, we always begin with a “linguistic anxiety” - the anxiety of how to speak/write, what to speak/write or when to do the same (Barry, 60). This has always been a question of difficulty- difficulty in the positive and the negative; a difficulty that has urged limitless creativity as well as an impenetrability that has kept one away because expression became impossible - , for the need to express properly in all occasions has been colossal. Though spaces, times and events have been passing by catering to this ‘need’ that was just mentioned above, what still remains- and will always remain- is the “linguistic anxiety”. Can we ever think of a moment in history when a linguistic expression deems fit to a particular event? A linguistic expression that so corresponds to the event so as to provide us of a moment with zero or diminished linguistic anxiety? Would then we be able to conclude that language does, indeed decipher perfectly into an expression? That would be, as a matter of fact (if ‘fact’ remains unquestioned here), an indirect take on Nietzsche’s famous declaration, “There are no facts, only interpretations”.⁴ And if deciphered perfectly, can the language of that expression be one’s own? Or in other words, can one be identified with or identified in that particular language.

1.1. The Nature of Language

What is language? What is its nature and what is at the core of it? What precedes and/or succeeds language? Whose language is it anyway? Who owns it? Or who is owned by it? These are the basic questions that would loom over any discussion regarding the core idea that is language. In what is understood in today’s everyday knowledge, language is a ‘means’ for communication or expression. One expresses one’s thoughts or

⁴ As retrieved from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s notebooks from 1880’s. Source: plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/

feelings in a language that one is aware of. This simplified explanation and knowledge and the idea of language as such as a means for communication might as well be complicated. The process of getting the idea of language as a ‘means’ to communicate, if delved into further, will be nothing less than an entangled mesh. Walter Benjamin, in one of his early essays written in 1916 *On Language as such and on the Language of Man* inquires into the intricacies of the idea that is language and the awareness (‘knowledge’ in Benjamin’s terms⁵) that comes *from* or *with* language. The essay opens with the general presumption that “every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language,” and as the German philosopher rightly proposes, this particular “understanding... raises new questions” (Benjamin, 314). If every expression of human mental life was a “kind of language”, would it then disseminate a linear progression in the occurrence of language as such and language of the “mental being” (Benjamin’s articulation) of humans and things? The answer to this question is what Benjamin’s 1916 essay communicates without even directly asking the question. The greatness of a thinker perhaps lies in providing the dais for the questions to which s/he already knows the answer. Before entering into an engagement with the postulations in Benjamin’s essay, it is important that we set the premise at which we are to encounter it. Firstly, as expressive beings, the anxiety over language as such and its ability to be the ‘means’ for expression is what drives this probing quest. Secondly, how do we associate or dissociate ourselves from the language that we express in? Or as Marc Crépon, while reading Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, titled his article as “What We Demand From Languages”⁶, what is it that we demand from languages? Is it the “double possibility of recognizing oneself in it and recognizing it for oneself” (Crépon, 148), thus making language an object of desire to fulfil one’s selfhood or the objective of a political struggle?

In *On Language as such and on the Language of Man*, Walter Benjamin, while terming every expression of human mental life as a “kind of language” and thus summing up “all communication of mental meanings” as “language” after a brief positing of

⁵ ‘Knowledge’ as explicated by Walter Benjamin in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” is the entity that is in relation to divinity and naming: “God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge”. (Benjamin, 323)

⁶ From the edited volume, *Poststructuralism and Cultural Theory: The Linguistic Turn and beyond*.

certain “contexts” that draw up the summation, he also generates the possibility of further inquiry into what is language when language is considered as a “tendency ... toward communication of mental meanings” (Benjamin, 314). The idea that can be drawn from such a postulation is that language as such may or may not communicate the mental being corresponding to it. It is a “tendency”, which in fact is an idea inclined to the idea of “motion” and “movement”. Language, thus, is a movement towards communicating a meaning. If that is so, is there a direction to it? Is it linear in progression? Can language then be pinned down corresponding to its mental meaning at some point in space and time? Or does it invariably open up a whole new gamut of understanding at every moment of expression? This could be complicated further with Benjamin’s distinction between the linguistic entity and the mental entity of a being. Providing the example of the German language, the mental entity, according to him, “is the direct expression of that which communicates *itself* in it (language)” (Benjamin, 315). The *itself* is stressed so as to succinctly put forth the idea that the mental entity of a being is not the language itself, but precisely something that is different from it. Hence, according to Benjamin, the distinction between the mental entity and linguistic entity of an expression is what is of prime importance in learning about languages. Even while the distinction is made, we are reminded of the “identity” or similarity or sameness between the two entities as Benjamin speaks of the “abyss”, which is the hypothesis that the “mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language”, which, according to Benjamin, is threatening in nature for linguistic theory.

To say that the mental entity is something to be distinguished from the linguistic entity would be in the first place to refute the earlier summation that “all communication of mental meanings is language”. And here lies the “paradox” that Benjamin conforms to; a paradox that has the place of a “solution” at the core of linguistic theory.⁷ Then what is it to say that a “mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language”?⁸ In line with the humble attempt of this research and the reading of Benjamin leading up to it, one could surmise that the above statement requires us to understand the need for dissociating language from a speaker or a medium. It provides for a theory

⁷ *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, pg. 315.

⁸ *Ibid.*316.

emulating language as such by divorcing itself the possibility of placing it within another framework that could in itself be restricting and most often, misleading. In other words, the mental essence of a being is *within* the language in which it communicates itself or, more revoltingly, the language *is* the speaker. This dissociation of language from an outside medium and making it the medium itself, as Benjamin points out, leads us to the “infiniteness” of language which stems from the “magic” within language – of the immediacy of mediation. And this “magic” is itself the “problem” of understanding language as such.⁹

“For just because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal meanings, defines its frontier.” (Benjamin, 317)

This is endowed with a clearer insight into the understanding of the “paradox” of the similarity and dissimilarity between the mental and the linguistic entities. The evidence of the expression of such an “incomprehensible paradox” (quoting Benjamin) “is found in the ambiguity of the word logos” (Benjamin, 315). So is language about the “incomprehensible”, about “paradox(es)”, and about “ambiguity”? Can there be no trace for this incomprehensibility? Should one then forever be “suspended ... over” this abyss of paradox or come out of the way to “constitute an abyss” altogether for more interrogation¹⁰?

The origin of language, if one goes with the Genesis, could be accounted to have been from ‘God’, the source of all knowledge as it is narrated. This brings us to the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, in *On Language as such and on the Language of Man*, uses the phrases “suspended...over” and “constitute an abyss” (Benjamin, footnote, 315) with regard to the contrasting approaches in the field of linguistic theory. Benjamin urges for an intervention into and possible contradiction of the conventional view “that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in a language” which, he compares to “the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threaten to fall,” and the “task” of which, he accounts is “to survive suspended... over this abyss”. The contrasting hypothesis that Benjamin offers to prod on is the constitution of an abyss “at the outset ... for all philosophizing” (Benjamin, footnote, 315). This constant engagement with the existence of paradox even in the “incomprehensibility” of the paradox, i.e., the paradox of a paradox is one of the questions that loom large over this research.

question of the link between language and knowledge. Are the two entities entangled in one another in isolation or are the two one and the same; because if God is all source of knowledge and God is also the origin of language, can the two be understood as an expression of similar meaning? But this mapping out for the origin of language as such finds itself in a contradictory scaffold as the narratives of Creation run at odds with each other in the first two chapters of the Genesis. The first version of the story has God creating man after having created all the other creations while the second version has man as the first creation. How do we place the idea of the language in this narrative of Creation? Or rather deduce a narrative of language(s) within Language, if the latter is the Word of God? Benjamin, while adhering to this narrative of Creation to understand the nature of Language as such and the language of man, clearly vouches for a “special relationship between man and language resulting from the act of creation” (Benjamin, 322). Be it the first story or the second version we deem fit to be taken for deliberation, the act of creation and its relation to language is inevitable.

Benjamin quotes from the Genesis: “Let there be – He made (created) – He named”, to provide substantial evidence to this “special relationship”. With the act of creation in between the words “Let there be” and “He named”, the argument to find the origin of language in the act of creation only fortifies. To quote Benjamin again,

With the creative omnipotence of language it begins, and at the end as it were assimilates the created, names it. Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation, it is word and name. In God name is creative because it is word, and God’s word is cognizant because it is name. “And he saw that it was good”; that is: He had cognized it through name. The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God, only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. That means: God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge. (Benjamin, 323)

Through the above quoted lines, while establishing a clear distinction between Language as such (the omnipotent creative word that entails the existence of pure knowledge

within) and the language of man (which is more appropriately a ‘gift’ from God who spoke to man and “elevated (him) above nature”¹¹), what is more importantly to be hollowed out is the idea of ‘cognizance’/ ‘knowledge’/‘awareness’ that comes with the question of language. The origin of language as such that was intended to be traced seems to be of ‘omnipotence’: that with the potential that is unmatched and unlimited. Here then comes the question of finitude. The origin, being ‘omnipotent’, one laden with great power is also, infinite; Language as such thus being the endless end in itself; this, not to be misunderstood and misappropriated as the ultimate reality or the end in itself. For, ‘endless end’ is nothing close to meaning the end in itself. The attribution of the endless end is what makes the function of language as that which creates and assimilates all meaning and expression more viable. But then again, one cannot overlook the possibility of the state of having limits and boundaries when one talks about the possibility of not having them. For, the paradox of the being of Language as such is that the ‘knowledge’ or ‘cognizance’ or ‘awareness’ of meaning comes from that which it is not. The naming so occurs according to what is communicated, and for that matter, what is communicated is that which it is not.

What is more noteworthy is the underlying fleeting nature of language that Benjamin, perhaps involuntarily, tries to convey. As was hypothesized in the beginning of this chapter, the word “tendency” is an attribution that could describe more than accurately what language is. Taking cue from the quotation above, the language “begins” or it has its origin in the act of creation and also the “end”. In the process, there is “assimilation” of the created which leads to language being “both creative and the finished creation”, the “word and name”. The trait of language being a “tendency toward” communicating the meaning heralds the ever-processing nature of language. It is in the process of giving expression to the mental meaning just communicated. This mobile nature of language as such is imperative in understanding its relation to subjectivities and identities in general. In the warp of Time in particular, therefore, we can infer that Language as such cannot be placed at any point to account for its originary position. Language being a tendency, thus, is always fleeing in its existence. It is in constant

¹¹ Benjamin refers to the second version of the narrative of creation, according to which Man was created first amongst all other creations and “was invested with the *gift* of language and is elevated above nature” (Benjamin, 322). The idea of language as ‘gift’ opens up myriad questions on its nature.

motion: a steady movement dissociating itself from any meaning that is tried to be communicated while at the same time assimilating what is being detached. What then is communicated? It is of course the meaning of the thing that needs to be communicated but this meaning is also that which it is not, precisely because language divorces itself from the act of being pinned down; in fact, language renders a mental meaning incomplete by its very nature of providing the mental meaning. This perhaps is the “paradox” that Language wraps the linguistic theories in, by not giving itself away for expression. Does language being a tendency then point to change? If that is so, everything is changing; every creation is dynamic and subject to change. The idea of the constant could itself be accounted for the steadiness in change. No, that is not what is being argued here: for change is only a qualification of the characteristic feature of language that is mobility. Language tends to convey; it is in the process of giving meaning, yet it doesn't. With the urge to open up for further discussion and with the complete understanding of a probable retaliation from language itself as it is in continuous rebuttal of any sort of denomination, this research advocates for the fugitive attitude of language. Yes, fugitive in the most possible essence of it: that which is in hiding.

Language when attempted to be comprehended within the idea of the ‘fugitive’: the idea of that which is in the constant act of running away from custody or possession, warrants for a two-fold understanding of the nature of language, both of Language as such and the language of man. With the prospect of mobility or the fleeting manner or the act of running away from keeping accounts for the nature of language as an entity that is ‘not there’ to behold arrives, as an offshoot of this very same possibility of language as opposed to being fixed, the demand for the conception of language as ‘dispossession’, as opposed to the abode of dwelling. That is, in other words, language as the entity made use of for communicating meaning and which in turn would contribute to the identities of entities that communicate themselves *in* (italics is the usage of Walter Benjamin) the language cannot be considered a place of belonging or habitat or dwelling for one's ‘self’. This inference is, as a matter of fact, both enduring and threatening at the same time. If the language of expression cannot be the habitat for a ‘self’, the mental meaning of which is communicated in the language, from what shall one construct one's ipseity or

individual selfhood, given that language forms one of the most important parameters for the same?

As much as this quest grapples to come to an understanding of the origin of Language as such and the nature of language by looking at it along the lines of “movement” or “motion” or “fleeting” in existence so much so as to not let the human mental being inhabit itself in this “tendency” that is language, there is a need for us to look at the very nature of language from the point of view of the opposition with respect to “motion”, which is “rest” or “stillness”. Martin Heidegger, in his interestingly provocative and almost interactive piece on language titled “Language” from the collection *Poetry, Language, Thought*, makes a remarkable statement right at the beginning of the essay: that, “Language is language”. Resisting the possible accusation from the schools of logic, that the answer to ‘what is language’ as “language is language” is “empty tautology”. Heidegger in fact, campaigns for the need to understand language without the baggage of “calculation” (Heidegger, 188). And he explains why the statement is the perfect way to get to the core of what is language:

“... “Language is language”. This statement does not lead us to something else in which language is grounded. Nor does it say anything about whether language itself may be a ground for something else. The sentence, “Language is language”, leaves us to hover over an abyss as long as we endure what it says.” (Heidegger, 189)

What is required to be drawn from the above mentioned statement and the apposite reasoning provided is that language needs to be understood without any external influences. For, if language were a sound, what is to be cleared is the noise. A mechanical understanding of language would just suffice as much. Taking cue from Heidegger, ‘language’ (which is ‘Language as such’ in Benjamin’s terms) must not be studied or approached with respect to any ‘ground’. The theory of language being derived from ‘elsewhere’ (can be understood as the abode or origin of language) is argued as redundant, if not false. And to promote that further, the need to let language be and not overbear the entity as the habitual dwelling for ‘something else’ (in this case, ‘identity’, ‘ipseity’ and/or ‘selfhood’) is fore grounded. The idea of the ‘abyss’, Heidegger clearly

seems to have drawn from the quotation of the eighteenth century German philosopher, Johann George Hamann, who was respected for his contribution to the study of the philosophy of language during what is considered as the late German Enlightenment.¹² Heidegger, with an attempt to reflect upon language by “enter(ing) into the speaking of language”¹³ quotes what Hamann wrote to Johann Gottfried von Herder¹⁴ in 1784. The quotation is as follows:

“If I were as eloquent as Demosthenes I would yet have to do nothing more than repeat a single word three times: reason is language, *logos*. I gnaw at this marrow-bone and will gnaw myself to death over it. There still remains a darkness, always, over this depth for me; I am still waiting for an apocalyptic angel with a key to this abyss.”¹⁵

Apart from drawing Heidegger’s inspiration to the ‘abyss’ with regard to the understanding of language, Hamann’s statement also opens up a messianic realm for the idea that is language. ‘...waiting for an apocalyptic angel...’ would testify to that very argument, towards the tendency of which Jacques Derrida is providing a timely direction in *The Monolingualism of the Other*.

The adherence to the idea of the ‘abyss’ when speaking about language is what has probably given colour to the 20th century philosophical thought that has been consumed by the question of language. An ‘abyss’, etymologically derived from the Greek for ‘bottomless’, when regarded with the idea of language and the probable nature of it, maintains for an understanding of the attempt at tracing the nature of language as a journey into a dark bottomless pit. This accounts for the incommensurable infinite nature of language to which Walter Benjamin quite sticks on to. It also accounts for an endless journey which this metaphor quite remarkably points towards. Language as such then is not an abyss in itself. It is the tracing of the nature of language that yields this darkness of

¹² It is to be noted that while Hamann wrote during the age of Enlightenment, he wrote against the German Enlightenment.

¹³ From “Language”, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Pg.188.

¹⁴ Johann Gottfried von Herder was a German philosopher, theologian, poet, and literary critic. He is associated with the periods of Enlightenment, Sturm und Drang, and Weimar Classicism. Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Gottfried_Herder

¹⁵ As quoted by Martin Heidegger in “Language” from *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Pg189.

the bottomless pit. But considering that the abyss is a dark journey in itself, Heidegger is suggestive of a methodology for this incredible journey. The only way to get to at least make an attempt to the nature of language is to “enter” into it and “submit” to it totally. This, according to Heidegger offers for an “experience” with language, which according to him is “to attain something by going on a way”.¹⁶ This justifies the title of the compilation of his lectures on the nature of language to be *On the way to Language*. We are always ‘on the way’ to language, and yet not arriving at it. The arrival, as can be postulated from Heidegger quoting Hamann, is realized in its full potential only when the “apocalyptic angel” offers the key to be away from hovering over the ‘abyss’.

But what is this “stillness” that Heidegger seems to have uttered and which is to be negotiated if we want to arrive, if not at the true nature of language, but at least at an attempt to venture about within the narrative that is language? Though “stillness” or “rest” seems to be antagonistically in opposition to the idea of “movement” or “motion” which has been the pathway to the course of this dissertation’s inference of the nature of language, we are accustomed to turn from the customary route and look at it in a different way: to the revelation of a possibility of “stillness” which necessarily may not mean ‘at rest’, at least in the domain of language. For thinking has always been advocated by Heidegger thus: to look anew into the old. Or in his words, “to fetch, to gather in, to bring together what is concealed within the old.”¹⁷

By speaking of language, Heidegger considers the greatest challenge is to be able to speak of it. Because, in so far as we hold on to “language is language” (according to Heidegger) or “Language as such” (according to Benjamin) excluding the external influences and also exalting language above human nature, we are entering into what Heidegger calls, “the speaking of language”. To take up the challenge of being able to speak of language as mere mortals, is in a way to get into the speaking of language; i.e.,

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger claims for an “experience” with language in one of his series of lectures on the nature of language, later published in *On the Way to Language*. According to Heidegger, “experience” means to “obtain” or “attain” something along the way; experience as a journey in itself. This, Heidegger elucidates as he tries to point out how a poet experiences language. Why the idea of experience is important here is because Heidegger’s methodology to “submit” oneself to language by “entering” to it calls for a denunciation of adhering language to something external to it. This is provocative enough to call for methodology of studying what nature language truly holds by giving utmost power to language itself.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, “A Dialogue on Language”, *On the Way to Language*. Pg. 36.

*Language speaks*¹⁸. That is the only way “language occurs as language”¹⁹. Language lets itself be spoken. Heidegger consider language as the ‘house of being’ (which becomes a site of criticism for Derrida) which is the Open of being on the basis of which we (mortals) speak. This is in coherence to what was earlier deduced from Benjamin’s idea of how the mental essence of a being is *within* language, thus making language as the *speaker* with no outside influences involved. Here, what is being endeavoured is not a comparative study of the methodologies employed by the two great German philosophers Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger in studying the nature of language, but an attempt at pointing to the very nature of language that language itself is unfolding to us. That it flees and hides like a fugitive the more it is sought to be contained in a plausible warp of Time and Space to provide for meaning and expression is also suggestive of a possibility of a “stillness” that Heidegger speaks of. Or are we to encounter how a fugitive in motion speaks, as we hazard to be au fait with Language as such?

While exploring the nature of language to possibly arrive at the austere yet demanding inquest as to how a word stands for a thing in this world, Heidegger delves deep into the “stillness” that is involved in the process that is Language. He asks, “What is stillness?”²⁰ Before even “stillness” can come about, Heidegger enlightens us as to what happens when an expression is attempted to be given to a thing or entity. When Language speaks, there is naming that occurs. And this naming, according to him, is no mere act of providing any “titles” or “terms”, but “...it calls into the word. The naming calls. Calling brings closer to what it calls. ... The calling here calls into a nearness.” This “nearness” that Heidegger seems to account for can be deciphered as the nearness of understanding and/familiarity. It is the coming close of a word to a thing in the world. Hence, in that sense of a ‘coming close’, it is always arriving towards or always coming, yet a word never arrives to a thing or vice-versa. This means, the word-thing correspondence is always arriving, which underscores that Language as such is ever processing, it is always in motion. Then how do we ascribe to the notion of “stillness” within language if it is always and already in the course of action, a kind of progression, the direction of which is towards meaning?

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Language”, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Pg. 188.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

What is stillness? It is in no way merely the soundless. In soundlessness there persists merely a lack of the motion of entoning, sounding. But the motionless is neither limited to sounding by being its suspension, nor is it itself already something genuinely tranquil. The motionless always remains, as it were, merely the other side of that which rests. The motionless itself still rests on rest. But rest has its being in the fact that it stills. As the stilling of stillness, rest, conceived strictly, is always more in motion than all motion and always more restlessly active than any agitation. (Heidegger, 204)

The above quotes lines simply testify that “stillness” or “rest” is not that which is in stark contrast to “motion”; rather, it is “more in motion”. It is the course of stilling. It is very much in action: in the action of being in the state of stilling. The “stillness” occurs when there is a call to name the thing. When there is “bidding” (in Heidegger’s words) or invitation for a “dif-ference” to come” that would cultivate an intimacy of the thing and the world in the word. This is the moment when the Language speaks. Or rather, it is at the moment of the Language’s speech that the “dif-ference” is called upon. What is the role of the mere mortal in this processing then? Man, Heidegger states, “live in the speaking of language” (207). It is a relation of “cor-respondence”. That is to say, the language of man, that is the speaking of man, is related to the speaking of Language in such a way that the former “responds” to the latter. And since Language²¹ speaks, the language of man or the mortal speech “responds” by hearing. In other words, man is employed upon to be the messenger of the speaker that is Language, since it is man who responds to the call for naming the thing insofar as he only speaks “in that he responds to language” (Heidegger, 207).

1.2. The Gift and Non-belongingness

Evolving from the idea of language as a ‘fugitive’, that which is in motion, even while at rest and that which does not give itself away for possession, hence opening up

²¹ The capital letter ‘L’ has been used for ‘Language’ in some places throughout the text as an equivalent of ‘language as such’. Language with a capital ‘L’ and ‘language as such’ are used interchangeably.

the possibility of the impossibility of attributing one's selfhood in language, we arrive at another impossibility (in terms of that without a finite solution) attribute of language - not Language as such, but language of man in particular-: language as *gift*. Working his way with 'omnipotence' as the derivation of language as such to be able to craft a narrative of language, Benjamin remarks, "God spoke – and there was – but this man, who is not created from the word, is now invested with the *gift* of language and is elevated above nature" (Benjamin, 322). From this statement, we are also able to deduce the source of language of man consisting of the acts of 'denomination' or 'naming'. This attribute of the '*gift* of language' that man was 'invested with' offers us the space to ruminate about the nature of language that has come to us, namely, the language of man and in what ways can we or can we not associate ourselves with or dissociate from this tendency that is language. Highlighting Benjamin's reasoning of denomination as being the source of human language, Alexander García Düttmann, in his book *The Gift of Language*, elaborates on this idea by focussing on the relationship between "denomination" and "translation" that comes as the derivative and/or often the requirement of the "special relationship between man and language resulting from the act of creation".

"What about denomination if it is a translation in a loose sense of the term, if it only makes clear what is already obvious 'in a certain way', even if the thing cannot yet appear? What about translation if it is a kind of denomination where there is not yet a language, a word or name to translate?" (Düttmann, 35)

The above quoted lines contribute to laying down a foundation to Düttmann's tryst with the idea of language as *gift*. Citing Benjamin's pressing need to "found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory"²²; Düttmann goes on to argue how between translation and denomination, one is incomplete without the other. "There would be no language and no origin without translation", he states, adding, "To think translation, we must think translation as denomination and denomination as translation" (Düttmann, 36). These are profound statements made on the basis of reading Benjamin. Because this reading claims the origin of human language to be in the process of

²² As quoted by Alexander García Düttmann in "Translating the thing", the second chapter of his book, *The Gift of Language*.

translation, thereby making translation and denomination transposable or identical in nature when posed against each other. But then, are translation and denomination really identical to each other? Can they really be transposed over one another?

The nature of language as a “gift” that is “invested with” man by God places us in a position that is contradictory to the “fugitive”. If fugitive was always in motion and running away from possession, a “gift” is one that demands for possession. One could then argue that the fugitive nature is the attribution of Language as such, in all its omnipotence and infiniteness. But then, if the *gift* arrives to man from this very fugitive, can one completely deny or undo the possibility of the trace of its fleeting existence in this very *gift*? What do we make of language then? Can language be possessed and dispossessed at the same time? What is this paradox of a “gift” that, by virtue of its existence as language, is always fleeing from the possessor? Or is this paradoxical nature of language directing to a universal question: can we really possess a gift?

Düttmann’s regard for the “gift” is in the form of a task that God assigns to man, which is in fact Benjamin’s postulation too: the task of naming. Here’s where translation and denomination work in conjunction with each other. And it is precisely through this “task” that man “communicates his spiritual essence” (Düttmann, 36). That is to say, to be able to communicate one’s spiritual essence, one has to be able to listen to what is being communicated to her/him, since man is ‘invested’ with that *gift* of naming the thing. So what exactly is this ‘task’ of translation? What is it that man translates, and how? What is the nature of this act? Does language then come to man only in the form of this act? Or is it all-encompassing for the mere mortal?

The gift of giving names has been given to man: however, man cannot give names, he has no gift if nothing communicates, if he does not receive the gift of understanding the language of things. The ‘gift of language’ is the gift of understanding this ‘other’ language. Since the gift of language is the gift of denomination, since the gift is a task, since what is given to man is not a given, and since the task of giving a name is inseparable from things letting-themselves-be-understood, or giving-themselves-to-be-

understood, the man who names it is always the man who responds. As such he is a responsible man. (Düttmann, 36)

The *gift* hence, comes wrapped to man as a ‘task’: a task that is at once layered in more than one way. The task of ‘naming’, which, postulated by Benjamin and further asserted by Düttmann, is a *gift* that requires unpacking at various levels. Let us consider this particular *gift* of language that arrives to man from God vis-à-vis the conventional understanding of a material gift. This is in no way to undermine or trivialize the idea of the *gift* of language to man and thereby the power of Language as such, but rather to make things seem clearer as to how a *gift* is a ‘responsibility’ that one needs to cater to. An ordinary material gift is a demand of an occasion or an event – a birthday perhaps, an anniversary, an achievement and so on. It could also be something that is a demand of a particular feeling, without any particular event. Nevertheless, the gift is a demand of a moment, irrespective of the causal event. So what precedes a gift is the demand. Or more elaborately, a casual event such as a birthday or an anniversary demands for a gesture of gifting someone something. The causal event, which lies in the future is already communicating the possibility of the arrival of a gift that so corresponds to it. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of the one to whom such an event is communicated to be able to translate this language of communication. For example, if it is the birthday of X person’s little son, y, after a couple of weeks from now, X is thus invested with the ‘task’ or ‘responsibility’ of translating this communication from the event and acting accordingly. Though this is a very limiting way of endeavouring a study of the nature of the language of man as a *gift*, this rather simplistic example delivers in favour of the same. A gift, thus, in the ordinary sense of the term, is a material realisation (read translation) of the communication rendered to the one responsible for the task. Hence, the *gift* of language when undergoing the process of unwrapping reveals these various layers: firstly, of acknowledging the language that is communicated by the thing or as Heidegger would put it – listening to what the language is speaking. The second layer would be understanding what is communicated, which definitely is in its negative capability, that is to say, the thing would communicate itself that which it is not; and thirdly, of denomination or ‘naming’ the thing, based on the communication rendered possible. These layers of the *gift* or task of the translator though, is pregnant with possibility of

communicating meaning, one cannot turn a blind eye to the loss that accompanies such a task. Thus, the fleeting Language as such, when gifted as the language of man, is that which is still lacking, so that the linguistic anxiety which escorts communication prevails, and how.

Drawing from this and the quotation mentioned earlier about the *gift* of language, we can reinstate what Düttmann rightly points about the ‘responsibility’ that comes with a ‘gift’: a ‘gift’ that is always fleeting, re-establishing the origin as well as the source of the language of man as also always in motion, fleeting, and thus dwelling in it being out of question, because an entity that flees cannot be pinned down by the idea of a structured habitat that holds ground for a well-outlined ipseity. And Düttmann is also quick to point out the conditionality in this assignment lest the reader gets carried away assuming that man was effectively “elevated above” the rest in nature by virtue of this very “task”.

But then, a gift is also a possession, it is a property to be owned and identified with. This *gift* of language that man seems to have been ‘invested’ with, as we have already seen, is a process, which is in motion. It is a shift of one language to another; it is the task of translation. How do we then account for possessing this *gift*? Or can we at all? Can a fugitive be owned? Marc Crépon, in the article “What We Demand From Languages”²³, staying within the milieu of discussing the discourse(s) surrounding the ‘mother tongue’, warns of an “impossible appropriation” of a language. This “impossible appropriation” is treated as a threat by Crépon, since such a discourse comes with a nationalist agenda as it rests upon three suppositions:

- 1) “... that such an appropriation is possible and necessary at the same time...”, by not just an individual, but a community at large, hence making language a “good” that can be owned (the nature of language as property) and identified with (the nature of language as the abode of identity).
- 2) Since the appropriation of a language provides for an identity that is “‘one’ and ‘common’, identical in itself and identical for all”, here arises the presupposition of a ‘uni-identity’. (Crépon, 150)

²³ This article is part of the collection of essays edited and compiled by Franson Manjali in the book *Poststructuralism and Cultural Theory*.

- 3) When language then becomes “the double object of both an appropriation and an identification”, what then arises according to Crépon is the advocating of “homogeneity”.

Citing these presumptions and the impending dangers associated with them, Crépon is guiding us -to the risk of seeming like a promoter- to the irreducible fact which propounds for a radical stream of thought: the impossibility in the appropriation of language. Drawing from Derrida’s famous statement of “I only have one language; it is not mine” from his work, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Crépon lays bare the possibility of an openness that language has to offer in order to be able to avoid jeopardizing the idea of ipseity or selfhood within the constraints of homogeneity. This ‘impossibility of appropriation’ can be ascribed to the fugitive nature of Language as such which comes to man in the form of a *gift* which is a responsibility that is always arriving, as it is always incomplete due to the loss that is accounted for in translation. Hence it is this fleeting nature of the origin of human language that makes it a non-belonging one too. It totally undoes the “property” nature that is usually accredited to language. One also has to look at this idea of ‘gift’ which is separated from the idea of ‘property’ with respect to its nature of that which is always in dispossession, through the lens of not just ‘responsibility’, but also, ‘promise’.

The position at which language places us, of being able to communicate in a particular language but not possess it, is a very intimidating position by and large. But as this research has traversed within the paradigm of understanding the nature of language, which by now is evidently proving itself to be that of a ‘tendency’ more than anything else, this intimidating nature of the ‘impossibility of appropriation’ also holds the propensity for provocation. More tersely, language provokes towards the communication of meaning, yet never arrival at the same, thus putting itself in deferral. This deferral is in the future with respect to Time and hence, the present is always the wait for the future. Jacques Derrida, in an interview²⁴, when asked about the nature of language that does not allow itself to be owned, had this to say:

²⁴ In an interview with Evelyne Grossman, published in *Sovereignties in Question*.

...language is never owned. Even when one has only a single mother tongue, when one is rooted in the place of one's birth and in one's language, even then language is not owned. It is of the essence of language that language does not let itself be possessed but, for this very reason, provokes all kinds of movements of appropriation. Because language can be desired but not appropriated, it sets into motion all sorts of gestures of ownership and appropriation. (Derrida, 101)

The above statement by Derrida is precisely what this section of the research is trying to arrive at, with a question posed at the very beginning of this modest study: what is at the core of language? With the methodology of tracing the nature of language and now by taking cue from the aforementioned quotation, we can infer that at the very core of language is its inherent property of not letting itself be possessed. But so long as language leaves no room for appropriation, as already seen, it leaves enough room for provocation. This provocation is that tendency towards appropriation. That is to say, it seems as though language plays a game of hiding to avoid been pinned down upon as surmised in the beginning. The openness that language lays bare at its core and that which it denies from being owned is the true essence of language; that which is proper to language and which could also account for Heidegger's opening statement, "language is language". Because there is no outside to it, no external. And the 'core' must not be associated with the location of a centre, as that is what is being refuted along this entire process of mapping the nature of language. Language 'proper' then is what is essential to it. As such, we can only attempt to go near it, a meagre proximity. So what is this which is 'proper' to language? According to Derrida and as quoted by Crépon, what is "proper" to language is the "idiom", which is always untranslatable, hence bringing us back to our postulation of the occurrence of a 'loss' when man exercises her/his *gift* of language or the task of translation. The pure meaning that properly corresponds to an event is always arriving and 'not yet'. And this "idiom" which resists translation, is one that "seems attached to the singularity of the signifying body of language...but which, because of such singularity, eludes all possession."²⁵ This "idiom" then, is one that needs to be 'invented'

²⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

to able to put into question the law of hegemony. This “idiom” is a promised language, the one ‘yet to come’.

This untranslatable translation, this new idiom *makes things happen* [*fait arrive*], this signature brought forth [*fait arrivée*], produces events in the given language, the given language to which things must still be given, sometimes *unverifiable* events: illegible events. Events that are always promised rather than given. Messianic events...each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write, *I promise*...and this promise heralds the uniqueness of a language to come. It is the “there must be language” (which necessarily implies “for it does not exist”, or “since it is lacking”), “I promise a language”, “a language is promised”, which at once precedes all language, summons all speech and already belongs to each language as it does to all speech.²⁶

What are we then to make of the language that we always believed to be our own - the one inherited from around us – if we have encountered that it rejects possession and appropriation and it was never there yet being always there and that it is yet to come when it must’ve arrived already?

1.3. From Non-belonging to Promise

The phrases ‘to come’ and ‘not yet’ that have been tossed in throughout this chapter regarding the discourse of language heralds, as we have already mentioned earlier – but only mentioned, and not deliberated deeply upon - , for a ‘promise’, along with the ‘responsibility’ that comes with language. If the *gift* of language was a ‘responsibility’ of man, this very *gift* which disallows possession and is always in hiding as a fugitive is one that offers a ‘promise’ on the other hand. To be able to understand and work with what kind of ‘promise’ language has to offer or in accordance with the title of this chapter, what the ‘promise of language’ is, it is imperative that we have a basic discernment, if not extensive, of the idea of ‘promise’.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida from *Monolingualism of the Other* as quoted by Marc Crépon in *What We Demand From Languages.*, p.159.

Saitya Brata Das, in his book, *The Promise of Time: Towards a Phenomenology of Promise* makes way for this venture in a substantial way. His attempt via the book, he discloses, is “to elaborate upon the notion of *coming time*, the *coming into existence*, not what has come as ‘this’ or ‘that’ but the *coming* itself, the messianic promise of the redemptive arrival” (Das, 5). Now, apart from the idea of a ‘promise’ we are endowed with a ‘messianic promise’ that talks of redemption. But then, are we entering into the theological realm? ‘No’ is the answer provided by Das. Drawing from Jacques Derrida’s idea of ‘messianity without messianism’, we are urged to think (and which this research is keen to follow) in the direction of an ‘unconditional’ arrival, like the event of the arrival of the messiah, which is unknown, which is unpredictable and also, most importantly, without any condition. This ‘redemptive arrival’ is not in the theological terms of washing away one’s sin, but rather, a kind of liberation of the truest essence of an event. It opens up for something ‘unique’ but not homogenous, one that is ‘singular’ but not uni-identical and one that is always and already there but also ‘yet to come’. The ‘promise’, hence, is an opening up of an unconditional possibility which otherwise is impossible, due to the desire for appropriation. In other words, it is non-belonging that promises us such a ‘promise’; and this ‘promise’ is threatening as much as it is reassuring, for it presages the denial of any kind of identification that can be related to language, so much to the point of alienating one’s ‘self’ from that language.

“I only have one language; it is not mine”²⁷, Derrida makes this paradoxical claim about language in one of his seminal pieces of work, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. This book is partly autobiographical, as the entire crux of the text is propelled by the particular political situation that is of Derrida – a Maghrebian who is a French citizen –, who is affected by the French history of authoritative exclusion and inclusion of the Maghrebians as citizens. Prior to such a paradoxical claim, Derrida paints for us, the readers, a picture in the very beginning. A picture of “someone who would cultivate the French language. Someone whom the French language would cultivate. And who, as a French citizen, would be, moreover, a subject of French culture” (Derrida, 1).

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*. Pg. 1.

This is the paradox with which Derrida begins his autobiographical account of his relationship with the French language. This can be called a paradox because, as a reader who tries to confront this statement or rather a declaration, is presented with an argument that seems to belie its very intention. The first part of the declaration – “I only have one language” – gives an idea of “having” or possessing in one sense of the word, only one language. And the second part – it is not mine”- is contradicting or in fact negating the first part. In other words, it offers an idea of dispossession. By trying to study the relationship between an individual and his/her “own” language, and hence, the formation of a cultural identity, Derrida raises a number of pertinent questions. In his own words, “What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multiculturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging?”(14). He also evokes the idea of possession of language, “But who exactly possesses it? And to whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession?” (17). In these two important questions, there’s an underlying worry – can one’s identity or selfhood be simplified?

The book, that can be considered a philosophical inquiry as well as a memoir at the same time, poking at the hegemonic status enjoyed by the French language in Algeria where Derrida comes from, also has Derrida confessing that he’s monolingual and that his monolingualism is his dwelling. The sheer paradoxical nature of Derrida’s thesis in the book, which may or may not be satisfactory towards the end of it, is evident when he claims the only language he has to be his habitat. Derrida says,

“It is impassable, *indisputable*....it would have always preceded me. It is me....It constitutes me, it dictates even the ipseity of all things to me, and also prescribes a monastic solitude for me; as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some vows. This inexhaustible solipsism is myself before me....Yet it will never be mine, this language, the only one I am thus destined to speak, as long as speech is possible for me in life and in death; never will this language be mine. And, truth to tell, it never was.”(Derrida, 1-2)

This linguistic condition, as Rey Chow puts in the article, *Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual*, is responded to by Derrida in the form of a lack. Chow argues that Derrida depicts his own response to this condition in form of a specific “lack of proprietary identity or oneness with the language”. Terming the Derrida’s paradoxical statement of “I only have one language; it is not mine” as a “lyrical refrain”, Chow is of the opinion that such a refrain comes with the “performative contradiction” of articulating in a language that one cannot claim as one’s own that Derrida is wary about.

There is an interesting phrase that can be leafed out from this text by Derrida as the point of reference in trying to understand his concerns over one’s belonging to and ownership of one’s language. He uses the phrase *on the shores*, indicating that one’s ipseity dwells on the shores of a language. He offers a liminal position to one’s selfhood. He says that it is on the unplaceable line of a language’s coast (French language in his case), neither inside nor outside of it that one dwells. (2). What we can infer here is that Derrida is referring to a space, a threshold probably, a space which is constantly opening up to new possibilities where one never gets to create one’s own language, or where one’s selfhood is not created by the language one is “destined to speak”, but rather, a space where one identifies oneself by staying outside the language one speaks. This contradicts or questions the general understanding that we all adhere to – one’s language is what makes one’s word and/world. Derrida attacks the comfort zone we enjoy in a language, particularly in the mother tongue, by stating that “the language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable... There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and nostalgia.”(58). Derrida, hence calls on for a departure from the tongue that we call our “own” and advocates a state of exile. But this state, what Derrida proposes, can also be viewed in the light of an internal exile. You are within it, yet you are away. Alienation, is what Derrida is proposing.

“Alienation,” according to Derrida, is one, that “institutes every language as a language of the ‘other’: the impossible property of a language” (63). This statement but again raises the question that has been troubling this research – then if I do not own the language that I speak, whose language is it anyway then? What does it mean to say, the language of the ‘other’? “Language of the ‘other’”, then, garnered from this specific context, is not the language that probably arrives from a particular person who is outside

you to be the “other”, but it points to a situation or a space which is removed from the conventional laws that govern language and thereby identity. As mentioned earlier, it is a point that breaks into the standardized notions of space and time, thereby offering the catastrophic possibility of an (mis)understanding of our dwelling in a language. For some, this “other”, could also be the colonizer’s language, as Derrida himself writes that the monolingualism imposed by the “other” operates by relying on the essence of the colonial which tends to reduce language to a homogenous entity (39-40). Upholding the heterogeneity of language and claiming that there’s no *a* language or the language (65), Derrida asks us to defer by means of alienation or alienating one’s ‘self’ from one’s language as selfhood cannot be simplistically formed even from the heterogeneity of a language. This leads to Derrida’s proposition of the impossibility of mastering a language. For,

...the master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate this appropriation on in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as “his own”(23).

If Derrida then is advocating a transcendence, here exactly lies the reason for doubting such a transcendental philosophy. If language is not a “natural possession” or property for that matter, then why alienate oneself or seek exile from the language that was never one’s own? It could probably be that Derrida doesn’t want us to misunderstand appropriation for ownership. Derrida is warning us against, but very subtly so, about our tendency to master entities- language in this context. Further, Derrida offers an extra-linguistic notion of the ‘self’ and selfhood. This is an idealistic notion, where one has to stay outside one’s language to in order to speak of one’s ‘self’. “This structure of alienation without alienation”, Derrida writes, “this inalienable alienation, is not only the origin of our responsibility, it also structures the peculiarity and property of language. It

institutes the *phenomenon* of hearing-oneself-speak in order to mean-to-say. But here, we must say the phenomenon as *phantasm*.” Apart from referring to the *phantasm* as the *phenomenon*, Derrida states, “*Phantasma* is also the phantom, the double, or the ghost.”(25).

From all the paradoxical stands that Derrida takes, one should understand them as being both immanent and transcendental. Derrida, while saying that no ‘self’ precedes language (25) and that “it is not independent of language in general” (29), allots the ‘self’ an extra-linguistic position although being linguistic through and through. We do not inhabit it, but seek exile from it. So the ‘self’ is inside and outside the language. We are always already dispossessed by language. Or as Marc Crépon pointed out how there is a desire to appropriate when no ownership can take place. Thus Derrida’s core idea or concept in *Monolingualism of the Other*, is the paradox of alienating that which cannot be alienated to try to communicate the incommunicable. But an interesting development in his first declaration, “I have only one language; it is not mine” is the addition of the word “yet” in the very next page of the book since the first declaration. This sentence breaks out to the possibility of the ‘other’ when Derrida states, “Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine.” (2). Hence, language is always conversational, in the sense, it is to be heard. “Language is for the ‘other’, coming from the ‘other’, *the* coming of the ‘other’.”(68). Derrida, therefore offers a messianic turn of events, to reason his whole paradox in the text. One’s language cannot be one’s own, because it is not yet. And that moment is always deferred. This deferral of language, according to Crépon “implies a denial of speech”²⁸ and endorses the invention of language ‘proper’ or the ‘idiom’. This untranslatable idiom that is ‘yet to come’ is without being one’s property. This, Crépon reckons, “is why it (language) is promised each time we speak or write.”²⁹ The promise that Derrida talks about is the promise that promises the “impossible but also the possibility of all speech” (67-68). This messianic notion of the promise of a language yet to come inspires us to look beyond the horizons that are always and already fleeting in nature.

²⁸ Marc Crépon, *What We Demand From Languages*, p.158.

²⁹ *Ibid.* The bracketing is mine.

From Language as such being a fugitive that which is in hiding was derived the language of man which came wrapped in layers of glittery paper as a *gift*; a *gift* that should give name to the unnamed. But it did not come without its conditions. While the *gift* had to listen to what was being communicated to it to be able enough to be spiritually heard, the unnamed was not that which did not have a name, but the one that was not called a name. Interlocked in the process of translation and transformation, language is more about the lack or loss of that which is not communicated than about that which is communicated. Because, nothing ever gets communicated *through* a language. The language is *the* speaker. And the speaker cannot be seized as it is always and already in motion, in movement. All that we can hope for as mere mortals is the arrival of this tendency at an apocalyptic break in the progression of history. But what if the arrival passes us and we remain unaware? To be able to evade that, one's desire for the complete discernment of meaning and expression at its messianic moment of arrival has to be kept alive in order to witness the death of all that binds language. The promise, hence, lies in the intersection of this life and death. Language then, in longing: "anticipation in reserve"³⁰.

At the edge of this cliff

Facing the abyss of promise

I await, anxious,

To be struck by lightning.

³⁰ The phrase is borrowed from Martin Heidegger's essay "Language", *Poetry, Language, Thought*. P.207.

Chapter 2

Kamala Das: Poetry of Promise

My vocabulary

Is limited.

My thoughts limitless.

How shall I pass them on

To you and you and you

Waiting in the wings?

- “In the Wings”, *Kamala Das*

2.1. The Life and her Work

Kamala Das belongs to the group of post 1947 Indian English poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A.K Ramanujan and Pritish Nandy, all of whom expressed their agitations and tiredness in a language that very much betrayed their inner selves. She was born on 31 March, 1934 in Punnayurkulam of Thrissur district, in the southern part of Malabar, Kerala. Her parents were V.M Nair and Nalapat Balamani Amma, the former working as a senior employee with the Walford Transport Company during the British Rule - the distributors of Bently and Rolls Royce in India- and later the managing editor of a leading Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi*, and the latter, her mother, a Malayali poet. Kamala Das’s childhood was a shuttle between Calcutta and south Malabar, which greatly influenced the poet that Kamala was to become. At the age of fifteen, she was married to Madhava Das, a bank officer. Though Kamala had a rich literary lineage to draw from with the likes of her mother and her maternal grand-uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon - an established poet and scholar in his own right - , the tumultuous relationship with her husband Madhava Das seemed to have been the reason why a young lady of

eighteen catapulted into an obsession for writing poetry and steer ahead towards a literary career that was to be turbulent yet heart-wrenching at the same time.

The childhood of Kamala Das coincided with the fag end of the colonial rule in India. In most of her interviews, she recounts how it was a time when the distance between the ruler and the ruled or the colonizer and the colonized were getting narrower though never completely diminished. She obviously belonged to the family of the 'babu' class - her father being a senior employee with a British automobile company in Calcutta, who were considered the friends of the British officials and/ investors in pre-independence India then. Having said that, with her powerful wit and use of ironic language Das was always able to portray the farcical loyalty that her family as the 'ruled' always showed to the 'rulers'. This farcical attitude she noted, was not something that came from the 'lower' end of the 'inferiors' alone; the English 'superiors' had enough condescension when addressing her father as 'my good friend Nair'. While this was the colonizer-colonized tension that she had to put up with at home, schooling was not that very different: in fact, school seemed forthrightly derogatory and racist. Das, in her autobiography, *My Story*, recounts how she and her brother underwent "tortures...at school for wearing, under the school uniform of white-twill, a nut-brown skin" (*My Story*, 2). As children, Das considered they were neglected since her parents seemed to have been "busy" and "indifferent" all the time: if her father sold automobiles to the Indian Princes and their relatives, her mother "spent her time lying on her belly on a large four-poster bed, composing poems in Malayalam". This brought Kamala and her brother closer to each other and the two of them shared a cordial relationship with their rather unaffectionate cook who considered the children as "savages" because of the way they ate.

Kamala's household in Park Street, Calcutta was a confluence of cultural attributes. With the perks that come with being the rare Indians that get to mix with the English gentry, Kamala and her brother grew up with learning English, Malayalam and Hindi. Malayalam was basically taught in order to be able to converse with their grandmother every time they were home during the vacations. The European School they went to provided them the advantage (or disadvantage) of growing up with an identity that seemed to be a flowing together of two different worlds. Even in their homes, two

different kinds of foods were prepared by the cook- who was specially trained by the wife of one of V.M Nair's English friends, Mr. Ross- ~~the~~ European soups, cutlet and stew as well as the Indian rice and lentils. Not just the dishes, but the mix of cultures influenced their etiquettes of eating too: while Kamala's mother ate the rice and the curry like any regular Indian would, her father ate with a fork and knife. "The children", Kamala recalls, "ate Western meals with our little brown fingers, licking our hands, enjoying all that was served on our plates while the cook stood by, frowning" (*My Story*, 1)

Kamala's childhood and later on her adolescence came about and elapsed while the family frequently transported themselves between Calcutta and Malabar. Kamala puts it as bluntly as ever: "But gradually I grew. One or two places sprouted hair. The smell of my perspiration changed. My father sent away the dancing-master, saying that I was too old to dance" (*Ibid.*, 59). Though she is reported to have felt more at home in Malabar where her brown skin and the way she ate did not matter to the people at home or her classmates at school as she didn't seem like a misfit from a different race, Calcutta contributed greatly to her poetic maturity. The return to Calcutta after a small stint in Malabar during her pre-adolescent years helped her understand different shades of Indianness, courtesy of her Gandhian father admitting her to a school that supported nationalist movement. With Calcutta setting a strong foundation for emboldening her vision as a person and the bonds she shared with her paralysed great-grandmother's sister who was also a poet and an unmarried aunt who instilled notions of romance in her, little did she realise as a child that she was to feel the most out of place and a certified 'misfit' in her own skin amongst others with the way her thoughts came to her.

A younger teenager who revelled in her matriarchal and royal roots, Kamala was married to Madhav Das at the tender and inexperienced age of fifteen. Her romantic notions of a perfect and fulfilling love seemed to have come to a standstill if we're to adhere to her autobiography, which incidentally after years of its publication, she claimed to be exaggerated and fictitious to a great degree. The arranged marriage to the bank official made her repulsive towards him as she felt he lacked the qualities that would let her surrender herself to him. To Kamala, the liberation that one always sought out of loving and being loved came in the form of resigning oneself in the other. Though she found him looking like an intellectual who could quote the likes of Aldous Huxley, she

remained doubtful and this scepticism continued throughout their rather chaotic union. She accounts for her suicidal tendencies that resulted from her depreciating wedlock and also the various love affairs she had. K. Satchidanandan warns us to not consider these as mere “amorous adventures of a promiscuous wife”. Those, he states,

...are like the screams of a wounded and solitary soul thirsty for love and understanding that she seldom found even in the hands of her lovers, to most of whom she was a passing episode in a masculine narrative of heroic romance.³¹

Kamala’s disorderly relationship with her husband could indeed be credited for being the incentive for her to break into the Indian English Literary clique as one of the greatest women poets of all time. With deep tints of confession, Kamala compiled her contributions to the genre by tearing away leaves from her own life and synchronizing them with smidgens of her exaggeration. Though often viewed with sympathy at the soreness that life impinged upon her and with awe at the boldness with which she kept her attempts alive to fight them predominantly with the help of her creative instincts, Kamala Das, flaunted a pride that came to her aficionados cloaked in what they called “innocence”. Her life, apart from her writings and her conversion to Islam at the age of 65, was eventful in all its ups and downs with respect to both herself and her relationships - of being a wife, mother, lover, friend and more- and how that continued to mould her as a person until her demise on May 31, 2009 and probably, even after.

Poetry, for Kamala Das, is a pursuit. It is a constant search for that which is not there, or for that which is not yet. In a conversation with close friend and author-filmmaker Suresh Kohli, Das shared what poetry essentially meant to her:

...I suppose I started writing because I had certain weaknesses in my system. I thought I was weak and vulnerable. That’s why we attempt poetry. Poets are like snails without the shells, terribly vulnerable, so easy to crush. Of course, it has given me a lot of pain, each poem. Each poem is really born out of pain which I would like to share. ...It is the looking that

³¹ K. Satchidanandan, “Relocating My Story”, *My Story.*, p.xvi.

makes the poet go on writing, the search. If you find someone, the search is over, poetry is over.³²

Calling herself a “late bloomer” in poetry and an “accidental poet”, Das started off with writing and publishing stories at the age of seventeen in the Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* under the pen-name ‘Madhavikutty’. The pseudonym was a combination of ‘Madhavi’ as from ‘Madhav’s wife’ and ‘kutty’ meaning ‘child’ in Malayalam indicating that she was still a child. This pen-name, she claimed was also because she didn’t want to hurt the feelings of her grandmother by acquainting her to the ‘audacious’ and ‘sexually explicit’ writings of her grandchild that were tabooed in the society she was a part of. The employment of such a pen-name had evoked comparisons to literary stalwarts like Danish author Karen Blixen and Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa. It is widely regarded that being a prolific writer both in English as Kamala Das and as Madhavikutty in Malayalam, she carved a niche for herself that was unchallenged. Madhavikutty conveyed her contemplations in Malayalam under the confidence of a veil (her pen name) and Kamala Das celebrated her guilelessness in English. The Indian English writer Kamala Das is largely considered to have achieved everything in the open that Madhavikutty desired for behind the veil in Malayalam.

Kamala Das has written a number of poems in the English language which have been published as various volumes, mainly *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendents* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996) and *Closure* (published posthumously in 2009), in addition to the selectively collected and published volumes of her poetry under the titles of *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1979), *Collected Poems Volume I* (1984) and *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991). The poems written and published in each of these volumes are considered intensely passionate and daringly uninhibited. To write and express at a time when India was at her infancy of her midnight independence, Das celebrated the “warm shock of menstrual blood and endless female hungers” in broad daylight. Her accolades and awards ranged from the PEN Poetry Prize to the Sahitya Akademi Award for her contribution to Indian literature.

³² Suresh Kohli, “A Conversation”, *Closure Some Poems and a Conversation.*, pg.71-72.

She was also conferred the honour of a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984.

Summer in Calcutta was the first book of poetry that came out in 1965 when Kamala had already been around the Indian English poetry circuit for some time. Her individual poems had appeared in *An Anthology of Commonwealth Verse*, which was edited by Margaret O'Donnell and published by Blackie and Son in 1963. Her work also featured in various Indian periodicals and she was the recipient of the Poetry Prize of the *Asian Anthology* (Vol.1) published by the Philippine Branch of P.E.N. The book consists of fifty poems. With a fearless attitude and uninhibited candour, Kamala, through her very first book of poems disrupted the normative constructions for the feminine gender in the Indian society. With complete disregard for any kind of niceness that the typical Indian woman was supposed to project, Kamala's poems blatantly lay bare the hungers of any human soul. The book takes its title from one of the poems in the anthology. *Summer in Calcutta* though seemed like a propaganda to deconstruct the norms set out for an average Indian middle-class woman, what one finds while sifting through the fifty poems that is almost like a tirade, is an honest response to the vivid images that Kamala experienced from her environment. Calcutta, as she mentions in her autobiography, was the city where different stages of her life shaped up. She had spent her childhood, adolescence and adulthood in the city and the first volume of her poems gives the impression of an amalgamation of all that the city offered her or more accurately, all that she volunteered to seek and find. One must be wary of equating this amalgamation with the notion of unity: because *Summer in Calcutta* is anything but an illustration of a unified text with respect to both the literary experience of the poet as well as the reader. Beginning with the depiction of the gaudy "dance of the eunuchs", her "grand, flamboyant lust" for a man with "sun-stained" cheeks and how "words are a nuisance" that grow on her like leaves on a tree, the volume scales through a multitude of visions that the poet takes us through. This volume also houses one of her most iconic poems "An Introduction" which is the poet's powerful response to the politics of language and gender that hold captive one's self in the name of social order.

The second volume of poems, *The Descendants*, was published by the Writers' Workshop in 1967. A span of two years between the two publications did not deter the

frenzies of the soul of the poet that occupied her first set of poems. The kind of madness that the poet in Kamala Das soaked up from what was outside her to give an inclination to what came from within her prevailed even in the second volume. This is the book of poems that makes use of the image of the sea. Vrinda Nabar, in her analysis of the volume in her book *The Endless Female Hungers A Study of Kamala Das*, quotes the literary critic Devendra Kohli to substantiate her argument as to how from *Summer in Calcutta* to *The Descendants* there is a “shift from the sun-image to the sea-image” (Nabar, 40). If Calcutta was the setting for the first volume of poetry, Bombay and its sea-side befitted the backdrop for the second. The image of the sea, in this volume offers to the readers and interpreters an expanse of discernment even from the simple vocabulary that Das tends to use. In the first poem in the volume, “Suicide”, the poet searches in vain for a time and love long lost. The sea offers her the landscape for such an enquiry. Apart from the obvious imagery that has always been quoted and referred to from these poems, this research would also investigate how the sea is more than a metaphor in relaying the fissures that Kamala Das is trying to disclose, through the standard simplistic understanding of her poetry that we’ve been familiarized till date. By treading along the contours of poetry and its experience with the metaphor of the sea, Das is opening up fresh wounds in the body of literature. If the first volume was a platform for the outburst of her enthusiasm and zeal for life and to break out of shackles that held her captive, the second, though not in stark contrast in terms of the unreserved tone of her poetry, meandered about in the fields of suicide and death, illness and aging.

Her third volume of poems called *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, published in 1973 by Orient-Longman, comprises of a total of thirty-three poems of which only thirteen were composed for the new volume. The remaining twenty have been borrowed from the earlier volumes. The verses in this volume, as if faithfully succeeding the earlier two volumes, attempts—at verbalizing the progression of the maturing of the poet more so as a human being than as a poet. Drawing in on from the abominable routine of the way she had to exist as a social being in order to fit in the vicious cycle of the collective conscience, the free verses howl out in protest, but this time with a cold moderation resembling the dying flames of a habituated perpetual burn. *Only the Soul Knows how to Sing* is a selection of poems of Kamala Das published by D.C books in

1996 with a very dense introduction provided by one of our contemporary Indian English literary stalwarts, K.Satchidanandan. Through this introduction, titled “Transcending the body”, Satchidanandan reinstates the adjectives of “bold”, “confessional” and the “essential poet” that transcends the normative feminine writing, already bestowed upon the litterateur that Kamala Das was. As a customary, a large part of the study on the works of the Kamala Das, has concentrated on exalting the figure of the “woman poet”, deduced as a result of a close reading of her poetry in conjunction with her autobiography. But the oeuvre of poems of Kamala Das cannot necessarily be contained within the structured selves of the “woman”, “confessional”, and “bold” alone: for the recollection of events of her life is not a mere act of ‘titillation’ and ‘controversy’ that comes with disclosure as many critics argue, but rather an opening up to the “negotiation” between the word and the self, between language and identity that often hinges upon the strands of philosophy with much precision.

2.2. Poetry of Promise

Today let this paper receive my dripping blood. Let me write like one not in the least burdened by the thoughts about the future, turning each word into a negotiation with my life lived so far. I like to call this poetry. I like to call this poetry even if my words lose their music when, after raising in my innards a beautiful liquid turbulence, they came to surface in the relatively solid contours of prose. I had always longed for the strength necessary to write this. But poetry does not grow ripe for us, we have to grow ripe enough for poetry. (*My Story*, viii)

The above citation is an allusion: an allusion to poetry as a site of certain dialectics. The ‘certain’ dialectics is certain only insofar as it is in the adjective form of the word progressing towards conveying the myriad possibilities of the uncertain. Poetry then, from the words of Kamala Das, is an investigative pursuit: a creative enquiry into the contradictions at the crossing point of the physical and the metaphysical. With the use of the phrase ‘let me’, the tone of oath-taking resounds from the allusion. The primary connotation of an ‘oath’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a solemn

promise, often invoking a divine witness, regarding one's future action or behaviour"³³. The insinuation of the cited 'allusion' to such a connotation further problematizes Kamala Das's attempt at the characterization of poetry *as such*³⁴, thus making the act of writing poems a testimonial account. So then, by virtue of 'let me', Das here promises to write: to write the experience of "turning each word into a negotiation" with the life she has lived so far. Such a promise is also demanding in nature by itself: while Das does not directly address the demand, the promise in *itself* covertly insists upon something that which is not there, for something yet to come or yet to be done. The promise of a performative here presents the image of emptiness. But this promise is more a waiting, perhaps to the extent of offering 'emptiness' the characteristic of 'longing': "the promise is not nothing; it is not a non-event"³⁵. Hence, from a promise, then, one can only aim at achieving the realization of the experience. Or in other words, the one who experiences the experience is far removed from the actualization of the experience as it is always yet to come: one is indeed an outsider to the realization of such an experience. In the case of poetry then, Das can only promise to write, and wait in longing for the actualization of the experience. The performative of writing poetry is a search or pursuit of that moment of complete meaning: the apocalyptic moment of incommensurable quality of that which is not yet.

"Each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write, I *promise*"³⁶. This declaration creates an added predicament in our particular situation of Das's "...let me write": the doubling of the promise. In "...let me write", Das promises to write what she intends to call as poetry. If the promise to write precedes the act of writing which is again a promise, what Das does particularly in the allusion above and in endeavouring to define

³³ As obtained from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/oath>. This is a detailed explanation of the meaning provided in the print version of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* wherein, an 'oath' stands for "a formal promise to do something or a formal statement that something is true". This research adheres to such an explication of the 'oath' as it offers the possibility of understanding Kamala Das's philosophical enquiry into poetry as the domain of creative composition.

³⁴ *As such* as widely used by Jacques Derrida in his reading of Paul Celan's poetry. In "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" from *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, Derrida states how the attempt at knowing *as such* is a paradox that we experience: for it is impossible to manifest something (in this case, poetry) *as such* and something remains *as such* as long as it is a testimony, a promise. A manifestation of the same, equipped with providing theoretical evidence risks that something from "losing its value, its sense or its status as testimony" because the translation of a testimony is not without the untranslatable testimony.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other.*, p.66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.67.

poetry is to make a promise to promise. This doubling of promise doubly detaches the promisor from the actualization of the promise. The core idea behind this ‘promise’ is the one advocated by Derrida:

The performative of the promise is not one speech act among others. It is implied by any other performative, and this promise heralds the uniqueness of a language to come. It is the “there must be a language” (which necessarily implies: “for it does not exist,” or “since it is lacking”), “I promise a language,” “a language is promised,” which at once precedes all language, summons all speech and already belongs to each language as it does to all speech”.³⁷

One has to be wary of a possible reductionist understanding of “the uniqueness of a language to come” that Derrida mentions and thus, stay away from it. The ‘uniqueness to come’, Marc Crépon elucidates, “...is not synonymous with any homogeneity nor with any process of homogenization...on the contrary, the coming of which, at every possible instant, protects from all hegemony”³⁸. Hence Das’s oath of “...let me write”, which when equated with Derrida’s “appeal to come” is symptomatic of the possibility of the absolute poem or *the* poem: for since poetry is a “search”³⁹, *the* poem is not yet.

How does one account for this? Are we to reckon that all the poems created in and/ for the domain of poetry are not poems because they were promises made each time they were written? Are then Kamala Das’s poems not poems at all? What do we make of *the* poem that we are to encounter? Will we ever get to it? And how do we account for this singularity of *the* poem? The “appeal to come”, Derrida argues, “gathers language together in advance”⁴⁰: the poems - which, according to Kamala Das, are that which are achieved by ‘turning each word into a negotiation with the life lived’- written as part of poetry are attempts at arriving at the absolute poem that would break all hegemonic structures; they are preparations for the one to come. That is to say, all poems created in

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Marc Crépon, “What We Demand from Languages”, p.159.

³⁹ In a conversation with friend, poet and film-maker Suresh Kohli, Kamala Das refers to poetry as a “search, i.e., as long as the poet does not find something or someone, poetry goes on and if the something/someone is found, poetry is over.

⁴⁰ *Monolingualism of the Other*, p.68.

and/or for the domain of poetry are not yet poems; they are promises towards *the* poem. And if one takes the oath to write, as already discussed, there occurs the doubling of promise: the poet before promising (which is writing a poem) towards *the* poem, *promises* to promise towards the poem. Poetry thus forms a process of experience: of poetic experience, where the poet gets detached further away from *the* poem as s/he attempts to write it. To arrive at it would then be the end of poetry: alternatively, there is no end, there is only longing because poetry has to go on.

The detachment of *the* poem from the poet through the poetic experience is a paradox we should live with, a certain kind of necessary evil. This is because, within the “paradoxopoetic matrix”⁴¹, the fleeting nature of the gift of language (the task of translation and denomination) that the poet takes recourse to in order to express the poetic experience only allows the presence of such a performative in the form of a lack: the untranslatability always remains. Hence, the promise makes it possible to account for such an impossibility: the promise is a promise insofar as there must *the* poem, which is not yet, which is, the other. This offers a messianic turn events: that *the* poem of the “absolute idiom”, which is at present indeterminable and untranslatable, is on its way from the other, the magic of untranslatability also being the opening up of the possibility of many translations or that which resists translation in totality.

It is not possible to speak outside this promise that gives *a* language, the uniqueness of the idiom, but only by promising to give it. There can be no question of getting out of this *uniqueness without unity*. It is not to be opposed to the other, nor even distinguished from the other. It is the monolanguage *of* the other. The *of* signifies not so much property as

⁴¹ In reading Paul Celan, Derrida talks about the ‘paradoxopoetic matrix’: the paradoxical state where a poem always remains a testimony so as to retain its value and sense as a testimony, because when a testimony get a theoretical proof, it ceases to be a testimony. Thus, when a poem bears witness to an event, it cannot be accounted for as concrete evidence because then the poem will cease to be the testimony. Poetry is about longing for the arrival of the ‘other’ at the messianic moment when word and meaning will be in complete coherence to produce *the* poem. The ‘paradoxopoetic matrix’ is the state of waiting for that moment when the poems written is always a deferral from the unwritten poem in terms of meaning because it is not yet. Such a paradox is made possible by the alienation instituted by one’s own language as the language of the ‘other’.

provenance: language is for the other, coming from the other, *the* coming of the other.⁴²

Let us return to the allusion cited earlier, to that citation pregnant with a certain dialectics: "...Let me write like one not in the least burdened by the thoughts about the future, turning each word into a negotiation with my life lived so far. I like to call this poetry". There is again a predicament in the statement: of not being worried about the future. Das here brings into question the existence of language with respect to time. The future is that which is not yet: it is the time that has not yet arrived. The future is the time in waiting to arrive: it is thus already there to able to arrive. A promise to write a writing that has not happened yet because the event of the arrival of *the* poem is always deferred and detached from the poet is already made. And such a promise is made, according to the citation, without being "burdened by the thoughts of the future". This invariably accounts for the threatening nature of the arrival of the other: the poet by not being "burdened by the thoughts about the future" also states under the oath the opposite. This is because it is only a promise of not thinking about the future; the promise of the thought of not thinking about the future itself has caused the inevitable: everything falls within the promise, "it is not possible to speak outside" of it. It is not just the future that is being summoned without actually summoning, but also the past: her promise lies in bringing into play the negotiation between words and the "life lived so far"; promise of a writing in recollection, of poetry in memory.

What then is the function of the poems written in waiting for the absolute idiom? Can the existence of those poems be ever justified? Is it necessary for them to be written to be able to provide a promise for the coming of *the other*? Or more fittingly, can these poems not exist on their own? Drawing from the resonance of an oath from the consequential allusion cited above - 'consequential' insofar as it doesn't take the form of being a means to an end that would exude the impossible possibility of the end of poetry *as such* but rather point to the possibility of the momentous arrival - the function of the poems in waiting apart from "gathering (language) together in advance" is that of 'testifying':

⁴² *Monolingualism of the Other*, p.68.

A poem can “bear witness” to a poetics. It can promise it, it can be a response to it, as to a testamentary promise. Indeed it must, it cannot not, do so. But not with the idea of applying a previously existing art of writing, or of referring to one as to a charter written somewhere, or of obeying its laws like a transcendent authority, but rather by itself promising, in the act of its event, the foundation of a poetics.⁴³

Hence, Derrida derives that a poem constitutes its own poetics by bearing witness to it. This further supports the singularity of the event even in its generality. The moment of such a constitution would come about in all its uniqueness which can be repeated in date but not replaced or reduced: “in the reference that carries it beyond itself, toward the other or toward the world, opens the verbal body to things other than itself”.⁴⁴ But such a “bearing witness” is never an authenticated proof: it is only an act of faith that involves a responsibility. Hence, by taking an oath or promise to write poems in waiting for *the* poem to arrive, Das hints at the possibility of not considering the written poems as a set of validated proof of the poetics: for, “when testimony appears guaranteed and then becomes a demonstratable theoretical truth ...a substantiation of evidence or even a piece of evidence, it risks losing its value, its sense or its status as testimony”⁴⁵. Hence, such a testimony or promise while ‘bearing witness’ is again threatening in nature: one that could betray: a promise that would never be fulfilled so as to remain a promise. Hence, the functionality of the poems in waiting, the poems that promise of *the* poem to come by bearing witness to the poetics also makes it possible for the deferral of the coming of the absolute idiom that resists translation. By promising, the poems bear witness because he is addressing the other: it is a responsibility towards the other. The deferred singularity which can be repeated and not replaced opens up a space to the other. Poetry then for Kamala Das, is more about disunity, deferral and breaks: poetry as constant deconstruction.⁴⁶

⁴³ Derrida, “The Poetics and the Politics of Witnessing”, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, p.63-64.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.64.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *A Handbook of Literary Terms* defines ‘deconstruction’ as “...a theory or practice of reading that questions and claims to “subvert” or “undermine” the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings

Resorting to the fact that Kamala Das's poems are autobiographical in nature, extensive research on her work has been major attempts at reading them in order to translate and transcribe the concept of gender as deriving from the texts by placing the 'feminine' sensibilities in the forefront. The predicaments of a fleeting language and hence the longing for *the* poem inherent in her poetry as has been seen have also been coloured by the social constructs of gender even by noted critics like K. Satchidanandan. It is important not to misinterpret the attempt of the present criticism as a denial of her feminine subjectivity, but what this research is proposing after an extraction of the question of language inherent in Das's poetry is the need to shift the gaze from her works as that being "essentially feminine" because her experiences are in relation to the social construct of a woman. By reminding us of Helené Cixous's statement about how "the identity of woman's literary practice must be sought in "the body of her writing and not the writing of her body"" and almost pledging an alternative, Satchidanandan, along with many others are attempting to what they are vowing not to do: to locate the identity of her literary practice in the writing of her body and how she "transcends" it through a language specific to a woman (hence advocating for a singular experience in a way), thus questioning the patriarchal authority. But quite a few problems arise in such a reading of Kamala Das: firstly, her feminine subjectivity is given primary importance when her work is approached. Her identity of being a woman or a woman poet comes even before the poetic experience; or in other words, the poetic experience is understood as an output of the structured self of a person. Her poetry, for this reason ceases to be a quest as the outcome is most often predetermined. Kamala Das's poetry is appealing for something more important and crucial here, which is at stake: the lack in her poetry, the unreadable in her writing and the unheard poem.

2.3. The Testimonials

By bearing witness to the poetic experience, the opus of Kamala Das's poems testify - and not provide bona fide proof, because that would mean the assertion of a unity and a coherent self in her poems which is not the case- to the deconstruction which

of a literary text. Typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text itself serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities." (67) Jacques Derrida pioneered this practice of reading texts while interpreting Rousseau's "Essay on the origin of languages".

tirelessly working through its way. To state that poetry is a constant search for that which is not there and/ that which is not yet is to swear allegiance to the same. Poetry is a process: it is constantly at work with itself, trying to uncover what is veiled within itself. Or in other words, through Kamala Das's poetry, one is acquainted with the potential of poetry to read itself. Perturbed predominantly by the untranslatability of the absolute idiom, the verbal body of the poem or the text is relentlessly at odds with itself to read the unwritten, to listen to the mute and to expose the fissures within. The struggle is unceasing and it is within: therefore, "there's nothing outside of the text"⁴⁷. Derrida, in this statement advocates for a method of critical reading that involves staying as close to the text as possible: a reading that results from an extreme intimacy that causes for producing or unearthing the text from within itself replete with all the gaps and breaks in it. This was proposed while Derrida was interpreting Rousseau's "Essay on the origin of languages" as an alternative to the familiar method that normalized reproducing the thoughts of the writer as expressed in the text because the latter method works as an appraisal of the poet when what is required is a divergent technique, if not fully opposing: the critical method of deconstruction that produces the text. Apart from adhering to this method in trying to read Kamala Das's poems, the poetry also comes to us as deconstruction: it unravels itself as a constant stirring up: introspection.

In *Wages of Love*, the posthumously published uncollected writings of Kamala Das, the poem "In the Wings" churns itself up:

My vocabulary

Is limited.

My thoughts limitless.

How shall I pass them on

To you and you and you

Waiting in the wings?

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, "The Exorbitant. Question of Method", *Of Grammatology*, p.158.

(*Wages of Love*, 147)

To read this poem, one has to encounter what precedes the first line: the anxiety of the possibility of attributing word to meaning and/or vice-versa. Such an anxiety makes one always and already guilty of offence even without the act of offending.⁴⁸ Treading along the lines of the limit and the limitless, which is both spatial and temporal - spatial insofar as the relation of the verbal body to the body of thought and temporal with respect to the constraints and non-constraints of the quality of time: the terminable and the interminable-, what is invoked in these lines is the vulnerability that comes with the promise of poetry. The poem holds a promise: a promise that is responsible to the coming of the other. Das, through these verses, brings to the fore, the issue of the paradox that language creates putting communication at risk. It echoes the linguistic anxiety that we share as communicators and yet it has a deconstructive ability without the external reader. A poem seems to be reading itself: it is exposing the discontinuities that occur at the word-thought interface. The familiarized reading of these six lines would nourish the reader with the knowledge as it being a confession from a tired writer who is failing to communicate to the former. It is not about ruling it out: but that would ignore the gap that this poem is trying to depict - the gap of detachment between thought and word aiming for meaning. Is the poem here bearing witness to its own liability that comes with a lack? Most appropriately, but with all its inappropriateness: the poem has the responsibility of connecting the word and thought; to “pass” the thought to the “limited” (quantitatively measured as three in the poem) number of words. Those words are “waiting in the wings”: they have always been waiting, restless, to be able to carry the thought through the poem.

The linguistic anxiety does not just end there and it is never-ending too: for we are always and already guilty with respect to that which is not yet. “Puddle” is another poem from the same collection that opens up about the experience of poetry and/ poetic

⁴⁸ This idea is taken from Soren Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Dread (Anxiety): A Simply Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* where, while discussing at length about the notion of dread or anxiety among man as a result of the hereditary sin committed by Adam before the Fall. This concept has been taken here into account to decipher how the poem undergoes an anxiety of guilt for not being able to create a correlation between words and thought prior to the event.

experience of language: a classic example of how Das makes a poem speak about poetry. The poem anticipates a time when poetry shall shrink to a puddle:

There comes a time

When poetry shrinks

To a puddle

(*Wages of Love*, 151)

The metaphor of a ‘puddle’ to the futuristic situation of poetry is an interesting one. A puddle is usually an accumulation of any kind of liquid, the most common one being what we find in nature - the ones formed after rainfall. These are either collected in depressions on ground or inversely they create depressions on flat grounds. How does poetry become a puddle? And from what does it “shrink(s) / To a puddle”? Is Das trying to warn us of an impending catastrophic arrival of a reduced state of poetry from all its vastness of “liquid turbulence”⁴⁹ to a small repository of residual thoughts? This is yet another verse that requires addressing of the singular poetic experience that paves the way for such an inquiry: the experience at the language-meaning interface. “There comes a time” is indicative of the anxiety that was referred to while discussing the previous poem, foregrounding the uncertainty in the arrival of such a specific or singular ‘time’. But this ‘time’ is not just futuristic: ‘comes’ is also a present that probably has occurred previously. That is, the nature of poetry is such that it is not always true to its vastness: it can get reduced to a ‘puddle’ when “The oceans turn away/Winds stop their sough/ Dry rot kills/The temple’s trees/And locusts/Carry off the grain”. This reminder of repetitive ‘time’ that can occur is that which is located along the linear progression of time: these are times when the ‘search’ (what Kamala Das calls poetry) causes distress and disillusionment.

The uncertainty and brutality of language with respect to meaning are very graphically represented in the poem “Words”:

All round me are words, and words and words,

⁴⁹ Kamala Das, refers to poetic experience as “liquid turbulence” in her autobiography.

They grow 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....

(Summer in Calcutta, 11)

Words are considered a “nuisance” that grows slow on herself. This poem is seminal in shedding light on our discussion at hand: poetry as deconstruction. By trying to intervene as a poet at the edge of the cliff to the abyss of language or the crossing point of language and meaning which is always and already blurring because of the fleeting nature of language, Das explicates the discontinuities and contradictions that occur during the process of deciphering. The words are always growing: “...they never/ seem to stop their slow growing”; the words, she composes, are like “leaves” and they are all around her seeming to never stop growing. This image of ‘words’ as ‘leaves’ ‘all around’ her, propounds the idea of an internal/external divide: the poet or the subjectivity of the poet

with an external system of words that are in waiting to mean something. But there is a contradiction here again, which the poet encounters and is wary about: the “words” are growing “from within”. It is the inside of the poet or the poet’s self⁵⁰ that gives birth to the words which grow all over her. The “words” then are external but not really external: like the leaves of a tree; the leaves come from within the system that the tree is but grows all around it to cover it. The characteristic feature of leaves is that they are born, they grow and they die: words too are born, they grow and they die; in other words, they are always changing, and hence they can mean anything from time to time and space to space. The very preceding sentence stands to testify that: the same but not the same idea attempted to be conveyed through different set of words with a phrase in conjunction - ‘in other words’. Das is concerned to the point of being insecure about the disparities that occur in the process of translation: translation from word to meaning and vice-versa. The insecurity stems from the realisation of the untranslatability inherent in translation: the already impending loss in translation is encountered and the openness such a loss or untranslatability offers is readily comprehended in “...words/Are a nuisance, beware of them, they/Can be so many things”. In the article titled “Only the Soul knows how to sing: A post-structuralist Analysis of Kamala Das’s Poetry”, the author, Swetha Anthony, underscores the plurality of voices prevalent in Das’s writings by reading the same along the axis of the Lacanian understanding of the ‘self’⁵¹:

The major theme of her poetry is an inherent conflict both within and outside of herself with the world at large. Conflict between Love and Desire, Body and Soul and the conflicts between her many Selves as woman, lover, daughter, wife, mother, writer etc She comes alive putting these conflicts into words. (Antony, 4)

⁵⁰ ‘self’ in the Derridean understanding of a shifting self which is disjointed and incoherent primarily because of the lack of an origin or on the contrary, the existence of a playful origin or centre that a ‘self’ structurally adheres to. Hence, the self of the poet is decentralized and always subject to change: it alters itself constantly with respect to the dispersed idea of Time and Space. The identity of the poet hence is in a state of constant flux.

⁵¹ The Lacanian ‘self’, though not very different from the Derridean idea, denotes an idea that is relative. A ‘self’ cannot be fixed according to Lacan, for, every time any meaning is enforced upon a subject, it undercuts the process. Hence, the ‘self’ becomes both the possibility and the impossibility of meaning, i.e., everything but a singular subject; a plurality.

While it is rightly pointed out that Kamala Das's poetry is an encounter between conflicting ideas, this rendering is rather incomplete insofar as it positions the conflict in opposition to each other. The 'self' is often read throughout Das's poems as the opposite of the 'other'; it is defined against 'other'. This is as dangerous as nullifying what poetry meant to Kamala Das: a search. As opposed to the reading of the 'self' as something hostile to the 'other', what Das's poetry covertly illustrates is the movement towards the 'other' through the language: but this is always deferred as complete translatability is possible only at the messianic arrival. Hence, the 'self' or identity or ipseity is always deferred through the process of alienation as Derrida would call it. But then wouldn't this bring the 'self' as not the 'other'? Yes, definitely; but the 'self' as the 'other' which is not yet. That is to say, the 'self' as the 'other' because that 'self' is yet to arrive: "...in difference *with itself* [*avec soi*] rather than difference *from itself* [*d'avec soi*]... It is not to be opposed to the other, nor even distinguished from the other" (*Monolingualism of the Other*, 68). So, in Das too, rather than reading the conflicting ideas in contradiction one needs to read into how those ideas exist through one another: a flowing together of sorts.

In the poem "Words", *ellipsis* as a literary device is used. This is a very common trend in most of Kamala Das's poems; for example, "The Freaks", "Doubts", "Coral Snake" and "Substitute" from among many others. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines an ellipsis thus:

The omission from a sentence of a word or words that would be required for complete clarity but which can usually be understood from the context. A common form of compression both in everyday speech and in poetry, (eg. Shakespeare, 'I will [go] to Ireland') it is used with notable frequency by T.S. Eliot and other poets of modernism. The sequence of three dots (...) employed to indicate the omission of some matter in a text is also known as an ellipsis.

Attributing the second definition of an *ellipsis* from the above quotation for the text in question, we are forced to think what must have been that "some matter" that Das seemed to have omitted from her poems. Notwithstanding the particularity of the content omitted from the verses in each poem located or dislocated within its own different contexts of

space and time, the nature of Das's gamut of poetry as a 'search' has always culminated into a uniqueness: *uniqueness without unity*⁵². The use of the literary device *ellipsis* then points towards that very uniqueness; the use suggests an attempt of garnering the approaching impossibilities: the unspoken, the unheard and the unwritten. But these impossibilities are not unknown: for the knowledge of them not being there provides for the existence of the dotted lines. Michael Naas, in his essay "Blanchot... Writing... Ellipsis", while skillfully reading the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot's two texts- *Thomas the Obscure*, a narrative and *Writing the Disaster*, a critical essay - in alignment with each other, extensively discusses about the use of the literary device by the late philosopher. Naas argues, "...as Derrida speaks of the "very calculated logic of the comma" in Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day*, the ellipsis can equally be shown to function in Blanchot's other texts with a logic that is every bit as calculated and rigorous" (Naas, 90). This ellipsis, he further states can become the ellipsis of both possibilities and impossibilities: a possibility in the form of a silence and the impossibility in the form of the absence of speech. Das's poems too, "Words" in particular, is an ideal example of this characteristic. Das makes a commitment to the reader with the ellipsis about the omission of content or speech: such a commitment is "decisive"⁵³ as Derrida argues. The words for her never seem to stop coming "from a silence, somewhere deep within". Das locates her verses exactly at that point of contradiction: of the possibility of speech in silence - which in essence, also has a meaning of its own kind insofar as one is able to listen to it and translate it - and at the same time the impossibility of it. Naas writes, "by means of an ellipsis of language, by means of silence, one says more and expresses oneself better" (92). Her poem is also suggestive of the negotiation between silence and speaking, and how they work together in the paradigm of language.

The ellipsis is also a promise; in the discourse of the ellipsis of the possible and impossible, the promise heralded by the ellipsis of language can be located:

⁵² *Monolingualism of the Other*, pg. 68.

⁵³ In reading Paul Celan's poetry, Jacques Derrida talks about how caesura (pause in the middle of a line) and ellipsis are used in his works. The utilization of devices like the caesura and ellipsis "seems most decisive" in a poem: for, "a *decision*, as its name indicates, always appears *as* it is a cut that tears." Hence, Derrida argues, ellipsis and caesura when made use of in a poem, opens up the "limit between what can and cannot be determined or decided in *this* (referring to a poem by Paul Celan) *poem's bearing witness to bearing witness*." ("Poetics and Politics of Witnessing", *Sovereignities in Question: the Poetics of Paul Celan*, p. 69-70)

Between the two foci of the ellipsis, then, between the recoverable and the non-recoverable ellipsis, is what I hazard to call the “ellipsis of writing.” The ellipsis of writing neither recuperates meaning nor terminates it; it neither simply obeys the contact of language, nor disobeys it. The ellipsis of writing instead promises the impossible and then, as if it were the only way of remaining faithful to both the promise and the impossibility, breaks that promise. This... ..is the promise of writing itself. The ellipsis of writing is the promise which comes... from the other *in* or *of* the narrative, and from the other to the narrative (Naas, 105).

Working well in tandem with the Derridean idea of a ‘language to come’- a ‘threatening’ promise of a monolanguage - Michael Naas endures up the challenge of designation and coins the “ellipsis of writing”: to have the ‘dot-dot-dot’ then is to long for the impossible appropriation of language; the ‘threatening’ promise makes it possible for one to believe in the possibility of the impossible. Das’s poem “Words” then, is largely about the intimidation felt from the writing to come: of an unheard, unwritten and unread poem. The words remain a “nuisance’ as they fail to fulfil or lack the completeness of meaning for the writing to come about. But they are relentlessly coming from within, hence blurring the boundaries between the self and the other albeit always in deferral.

What most critics appraise, critique or assess in Kamala Das’s poems is how her poems are a reflection of her struggle between the binaries like the self/other, love/lust, body/soul and life/death. Almost all of her poems bear out the need for such a mode of enquiry. If that is so, it would mean the setting up of boundaries wherein there are claims of subversion from one to another, transcendence from the fixed to the unfixed, surpassing of the physical to the metaphysical. And in determinately meaning so, what gets established or more accurately re-established every time is a unity and/ or coherence of structure and identity. P.P Raveendran, one of the most reliable literary critics based in Kerala, in his article “The Ideology of Intimacy” - which is the introduction to a collection of Kamala Das’s poems titled *The Best of Kamala Das*- raises the issue of the play of/between polarities or dichotomies in Das’s work. With the aim of interrogating the “political orientations” and the “ideological underpinnings” of the genre of Indian English poetry, Raveendran delves deep into the question of language. With a

postcolonial view, Raveendran claims that Das's poetry falls among those that "represent a desperate attempt at escaping the colonial ideology and the strategies of political control implied in it" (Raveendran, xi). And the alternative "ideology" that the critic discovers in Das's work is that of "intimacy". By tracing this ideology of intimacy between the polarities of body/soul and love/lust represented in the poems, Raveendran concludes that the poet's "craving for intimacy is at the bottom of an unconscious flight from the dominating other toward a counter-creed that has a well-defined structure" (xi). But having been revealed to Kamala Das's poems bearing witness to the promise of a 'language to come' and testifying to the incoherence in meaning, are we to encounter her actually talking about dichotomies or binaries in her poems? Does her poetry demonstrate such an event? Or how is she responding to such conflicts through her poetry if they exist? Is poetry offering her any solution or is it an invariable resolution of that which is not yet?

In the poem "The Suicide", for instance, Das interrogates the relationship of the body and the soul. But contrary to the conventional reading of her poetry, Das, in the very first stanza does not speak of a boundary that needs to be transcended or surpassed; there is no subversion of one unity to be able to contain in another. In other words, 'body' and 'soul' as two entities are not aligned in opposition to one another. They aren't conflicting insofar as to one precede/succeed the other. Body and soul seems to be flowing into and out of each other. The first two stanzas begin with a doubt:

Bereft of soul

my body shall be bare.

Bereft of body

my soul shall be bare.

Which would you rather have

O kind sea?

which is the more dead
of the two?

(*The Descendants*, 1)

The above mentioned lines suggest uncertainty: the undecidability among the presence of the two entities mentioned - body and soul. “Which is the more dead/of the two?” she asks. Here, body and soul aren’t in conflicting terms so as to cancel out each other. But there is a more important issue at stake here: the doubt, the hesitation and the vagueness. Such an undecidability is an important characteristic of the process of deconstruction, for it attempts to interrupt the dualism which is always and already in a state of inconvenience. Undecidability can be deciphered as something that cannot come under the purview of dichotomy, dualism or binary. As decisiveness is an interruption or tearing apart, so is indecision: it splits apart the fixated understanding of contexts and ideas within those contexts and exposes the already underlying instability of meaning. Das, by expressing her doubt is also demonstrating this very shaky and fragmented foundation upon which such dichotomy rests, because there can be no one definition for either of the two - body or soul- to the extent that definition or designation becomes a possible impossibility, a promise of the proper definition when all meanings will fall into place and also, the two cannot be in opposition to each other because of the myriad designations that come along the movement towards the singular definition: but this again has to come from the other, for the other, to the other.

Kamala Das’s poems are mostly written in recollection: memory plays a great role in her poetic experience. There is a looking back into the past with nostalgia; of times lived, that too lived happily or lived in fullness according to the poet. Of the many poems attributing to reliving the past or bringing back the lost times, is “My Grandmother’s House” from *Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. This poem was written in memory of her grandmother Das loved much and who loved her unconditionally too. The poem begins with “There is a house now far away where once/I received love....” The poet here muses over that house located in the past which she yearns to get back. The memory forms a resource for Das to relocate or dislocate her experience to a present in the past. But memory is not just about recollection or the past; it is also about retelling, rewriting or

bringing back a past to the present in the future. In other words, the past is looked upon with the hope for a future: it is either to have the same or similar experience or to learn from those moments which could have been avoided in order to achieve a rectified future. As such, memory is also about promise. Alexander García Düttmann, in his book *The Gift of Language*, elaborates on the relationship between memory and promise:

Memory: always a promise of something to come. Promise: always a memory of something that has happened, has come to pass...

.... The promise is inscribed in memory. Inversely, the promise (of redemption) is only a promise in as much as it includes a memory (catastrophe) (Düttmann, 82-83).

Düttmann deduces this argument by reading Gershom Scholem's Jewish Messianism alongside Walter Benjamin's conception of history. Hence, Das's memory holds a promise for redeeming the love she once was showered at in her grandmother's house and which she now beg "...at strangers' doors to receive (love)/at least in small change". The poetic experience is a manifestation of this yearning and longing.

I. Sea as a metaphor

Kamala Das, a trilingual speaker and a bilingual writer as she claims in her poem *An Introduction*, is one who has always been promoted by readers, scholars, critics and fellow-writers as possessing a dual identity with respect to the languages she wrote in. But Kamala Das always held the view that being the same person she saw poetry in an experience, and good prose coming out of the same experience.⁵⁴ At the same time, one cannot turn a blind eye to the claim that Kamala makes in the above mentioned poem:

.....The language I speak,

Becomes mines, its distortions, its queernesses

All mine, mine alone. (*Summer in Calcutta*, 59)

⁵⁴ As quoted in the *Translator's Preface* to Kamala Das's collection of short stories titled *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories*

This declaration of Das about owning the “half English”, “half Indian”, “funny” but “honest” language that she spoke and chose to write in, as has been argued many a number of times, points towards the appropriation of her ‘Indianness’ in English, attempting to create an identity of her own as an Indian English writer. But as already discussed in detail in the previous chapter, Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other, Or the Prosthesis of Origin*, where he critically engages in the relationship between an individual and his/her “own” language, and hence, the formation of identity, provides us with a platform to acquaint ourselves with the knowledge that the identity of Kamala Das as a poet or any identity that she is conferred upon is always and already in jeopardy. Derrida provides a messianic notion of the promise of a language that is yet to come. And along this line, there is an interesting phrase that Derrida makes use of while expressing his concerns over one’s belonging to and ownership of one’s language. The phrase is *on the shores*, indicating that one’s identity dwells on the shores of a language, thus, offering one’s selfhood a position on the unplaceable line of a language’s coast which is neither inside nor outside it. What this research thus has been ambitious about is the possibility of critically engaging in Das’s tussle with the elusive nature of identity with respect to language as she tries to belong in/to them. By placing the poet *on the shores* of her language of poetic experience, and reading between her lines would yield an understanding of “identity of her literary practice” that K. Satchidanandan was talking about, if there’s any. In fact, her poetry demands for such an enquiry as “sea” becomes an important image in most of her poems. For instance in the closing lines of the poem “The Suicide”:

Lights are moving on the shore.

But I shall not return.

Sea, toss my body back

That he knew how to love.

Bereft of body

My soul shall be free.

Take in my naked soul
 That he knew how to hurt.
 Only the soul knows how to sing
 At the vortex of the sea.

(The Descendents, 4)

Apart from “The Suicide”, references to the sea are also apparent in poems like “Composition”, “The Invitation”, “Convicts”, “The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road”, “The High Tide”, “Advice to Fellow Swimmers” and “The Morning at Apollo Pier”. The image of the ‘sea’ in these poems mentioned above, directs us to unearth the ‘messianic promise’ that Das holds in her poetry with a yearning for a language to come. The subject in each of these poems is placed *on the shores* of the sea looking towards the fruition of some kind of lack that has been looming over it. The image of ‘looking toward’ or yearning has provided a range of critics the platform to argue in myriad ways about the ‘transcendence’ that the poet attempts from her own self. Such an argument is effected on the basis of two presumptions - one, that the ‘self’ is a coherent entity that can be attributed to by a unified subject, hence creating a homogenous identity; and two, that the ‘other’, is clearly distinguished from the ‘self’ as a contradictory entity. Hence, the sea, with its vastness becomes the prime metaphor of the possibilities of ‘transcendence’. But was the poet really ‘transcending’ her ‘self’? Or is there a possibility that she was always and already in longing to encounter the ‘other’?

The image of the ‘sea’ in various poems penned down by Kamala Das has been extensively dealt with as a literary image in terms of mere symbolism. A.N Dwivedi, in his work, *Kamala Das and her Poetry*, argues that the recurrent use of the image of the ‘sea’ in the poems by Das has accorded it “the status of a symbol” (73, Dwivedi). By quoting Devender Kohli from one of his works, Dwivedi states that the sea-imagery is “part of Kamala Das’s elemental symbolism” with the understanding that Das made use of the imagery because of her affirmation to water as the “prime mover”. Though one cannot rule out the possibility of such an argument, what the image of the ‘sea’ in Kamala Das’s poetry requires is a more intense engagement, as it forms the key to

understanding the journey of the poet towards an identity of her own taking recourse to language, rather than just adding to the themes in her poetry. Another critic, Anisur Rahman, who has comprehensively worked on the poet, also speculates the recurrence of the sea-imagery thus:

“Kamala Das is close to the Greek as well as Hindu thought in so far as she considers *water* to be the prime mover, the first principle of life. This is, in the final analysis, the reward of all her pains in surviving upon earth. Her real home is the cosmic water which she ultimately chooses to merge with, so as to retain her identity” (*Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das*, 53).

Anisur Rahman adheres to the image of the sea in Das’s poetry for the eternal abode where she could “retain her identity”. Departing from such an understanding of how Kamala Das has worked with the image of the sea, or how the image itself has worked for the poet, the fleeting nature of language urges one to argue that the image in fact depicts or is symptomatic of a horizon to come. The retention of the identity of the poet is an impossible outcome as such an identity is not yet because of the impossibility of inhabiting one’s language that imparts the possibility of an identity. How does one retain an entity that is yet to arrive? So the ‘sea’ with its multitude of possibilities is that metaphor which more fittingly represents the uncertainties. In the poem “Composition”, the poet stands “face to face” with the sea. The poet writes that ultimately she has come face to face with the sea, the basement of which has “greater hungers” lurking that need to be conquered. The poem talks at length about the growth of the person that the poet was. Das has beautifully composed the negligence on the part of the growing person that the poet was towards the ‘sea’ that was only two miles away.

In the years that followed

I was busy growing,

I had then

No time at all for the sea.

(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing, 22)

Realizing the mistake on her part to not attend to the 'sea' that was always and already there, she acknowledges that she finally come face to face with the 'sea'. What the image of the 'sea' in this particular poem suggests is the promise it always held of "greater hungers" to come, which, according to the poet, lies at the basement of the sea. These "greater hungers" could be of any form: intimidating or soothing. The apologetic tone for not having "...time at all for the sea" indicates the responsibility towards what is coming from the 'other'. Similarly, in the poem, "The Suicide", Das longs to be one with the "vortex" of the sea from where her soul could sing. Considering that Das performed her act of writing by being at the shores of the sea (also indicative of her insistence of owning the Indian English language in which she wrote but always failing to do so because of the impossibility of appropriation due to the alienation⁵⁵ that one faces from one's own language), she longed to be one with the sea that held the promise of the language to come which would give her true identity. Each time she wrote, she acknowledged a promise or made a promise herself. Hence, when she comes "face to face" with the sea, she acknowledges what Derrida would call acknowledging the other that haunts the self and which therefore has a spectral presence. Even in poems like "The Invitation", "Convicts", "The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road", "The High Tide", "Advice to Fellow Swimmers" and "The Morning at Apollo Pier", the image of the 'sea', even at a referential level, is always lurking in the background as the eternal abode of meaning. Hence it wouldn't be wrong to infer that Kamala Das, by urging us to re-read her poetry through the image of the 'sea' to understand her identity as a poet, which is always in the process of formation *on the shores* of the language she writes in, facilitates the location of the idea of the messianic in the language to come. This language would in turn make possible the advent of a messianic notion of history.

Furthermore, Kamala Das, by claiming to own a language in which she wrote, was not indicating to have expressed her poetic experience in that language as she believed, but was standing face to face with the failure of not realizing the lack in tracing

⁵⁵ 'Alienation' as asserted by Jacques Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*. One is always alienated from the language that one calls one's own. This is because, alienation "institutes every language as the language of the 'other': the impossible property of a language" (Derrida, 63). Hence, alienation establishes one's own language as that which is not yet.

her identity of an Indian English writer which will always be deferred as it is with respect to a language to come. The desperation to make that language her “own”, only to place herself outside that language each time she performed, and the extreme anxiety to express all that made up her ‘self’ in a language that can never be owned stems from the threat of the promise of that which is always arriving. The image of the ‘sea’ substantiates this threat by holding the ‘promise’ or the ‘desire’ of that to come and thereby urging to try and decipher the language of her poetic experience and the making of her identity as a poet, which, is always deferred. This constant deferral does not mean a pessimistic end to reading and re-reading Kamala Das, but indeed calls for revolutionary breaks in interpreting her poetry as unified and not disoriented. The identity of the poet therefore is also always and already deferred.

A sly sense of freedom,

vision so crystalline and clear.

I stare at my empty breasts

with freight trafficked into my throat

of some lost voice of the future.

Calenders have no time at all

my Time, disrupting, breaking in.

The clarity of the vision,

a tragedy in place-

of loss, nothingness and despair.

Chapter 3

Poetic Experience as Linguistic Experience

“... I see poetry in an experience, and then see good prose coming out of the same experience.”

- Kamala Das

“He who writes the work is set aside; he who has written it is dismissed.”

-Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*

*“...Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
I; ...
...I too call myself I.”*

- “An Introduction”, Kamala Das

3.1. The Poetic Experience of Language

Kamala Das as a writer who wrote poems in ‘Indian English’⁵⁶ and prose in her mother tongue Malayalam was often challenged with the question of the existence of a ‘dual identity’ as a writer. Albeit claiming to be a ‘trilingual speaker’ and a ‘bilingual writer’, Das asserted that ‘being the same person’, the experience was the ‘same’. A multitude of possibilities of interpretation and conceptualisation loom when approaching the ‘dual identity’ of the writer, the approach being either ways: to adhere to and extend that particular truth or to depart from the structure of a fixed identity. The factors that contribute to such a multitude of possibilities for interpretation are not just one. Firstly, one cannot overlook the two names under which the writings were published in two different languages - ‘Kamala Das’ in Indian English and ‘Madhavikutty’ in Malayalam.

⁵⁶‘Indian English’ in the sense of the term, a person of Indian origin and/ with a citizenship of India writing in the English language.

While Kamala Das was the real name of the social person that the writer was, ‘Madhavikutty’ was a pseudonym or pen name that the Malayalam prose writer adopted in order to avoid being a ‘misfit’:

I think I was compelled to choose a name because I did not want to embarrass my conservative family. I knew that I was a misfit within my family. I think I practised writing as people practise a secret vice. Like boys going to the bathroom to smoke. Especially, I didn’t want to hurt my grandmother who was my favourite human being. And I don’t think she that I was Madhavikutty till she died.⁵⁷

The two names in two different languages clearly came with two different social positions and hence, the particular responsibilities within those two social circles. For Kamala Das, the Indian English poet, there was no need for the garb of a veil in order to express with utmost sensitivity the angst in her poetic experience. In contrast, the pseudonym ‘Madhavikutty’ was required for two reasons: the recognition of the audacious Malayalam prose in the literary circle as well as the acceptance of Kamala as an ordinary Nair woman in the social circle she hailed from.

A second parameter that contributes to the multitude of possibilities of interpretation arising from Das’s ‘dual identity’ is the multiplicity of languages in her work of writing: her writings were available for reading in both Malayalam and English, which were the causes as well as the effects of two different definitive structures of society. Her act of speech involved a third language, Hindi, which she had acquired as a result of her travel from place to place both with her father as a young child and with her husband as a young bride. The use of two different languages certainly implied the aim of reaching two different readerships: the English-speaking and/or the English-knowing and the Malayalam-speaking. Though the politics that defined the themes of her literary practice in both writings were almost similar, if not same, the experience of her writing as Kamala constantly emphasizes certainly is the ‘same’. The adherence to the word ‘same’ needs to be dealt with in detail and hence, serves as the driving force of this chapter.

⁵⁷ As quoted in the “Translator’s Preface” of *The Sandal Trees*, which is a collection of short stories written by Madhavikutty in Malayalam and translated into English by V.C Harris and C.K Mohamed Ummer, p. vii.

Apart from the two factors mentioned, another third aspect that can be brought to light is the existence of two different forms of literary practice emerging from two distinct languages: that of poetry in English and prose in Malayalam, although she attempted prose-poems in both languages once in a while as if to negotiate between two forms of literary work. It is interesting to note that even while there's a stark difference in the forms of writing in the two languages, Das advocates for the need to highlight the experience involved in the act of writing itself. It is pertinent to investigate into the nature of this experience that Das holds in high regard.

What is the 'same' experience that Kamala Das talks about? Considering that she was a writer who constantly reminded that what was of utmost importance to her was her persona, we are obliged to look at her poetry coming from her personal experience. Many critics have done so while assessing and re-assessing her poetry. Sharad Rajimwale, one such critic, in his article titled "Kamala Das - Need for Re-assessment" published in the edited volume *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum*, while stressing that "there are essentially two sides to Ms. Das's poetry" (163), argues that her poetry is constituted by "a compelling expression of personal experiences" (Ibid.). Rajimwale writes thus:

There are essentially two sides to Ms. Das's poetry; one is that which is extraordinarily centred around her own self, probing the malaise and morbidity that seem to clamp on her poetic vision... Things that came from her pen was something new, as no woman writer had ever before written with such power and honesty. The other side emerges from this... Her poetry constitutes not just a compelling expression of personal experiences and a forceful subjective voice, but more importantly, a phenomenon unlike any other in Indian English poetry. She is the first woman poet to crack the mould, and establish an attitude and viewpoint the Indian readers were quite unfamiliar with (Ibid.).

The above statement by Rajimwale encloses many arguments. The acknowledgement of 'two sides' to Das's poetry stems from the dissatisfaction of reading Das mostly along the lines of confessional poetry in comparison with the likes of American poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. With an aim to emphasize the strong "subjective voice" that is almost

empowering its way out, Rajimwale critiques how underscoring the first side has been key to dismissing Das's work as coming from a poet of "dissatisfaction and discontent"(Rajimwale, 163). While such critique holds significance in shifting the gaze on Das's poetry from the confessional mode arising from frustration and unhappiness towards the strength of individuality, Rajimwale's interpretation also categorizes Das as an epitome of feminine consciousness when he contends her "poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self" (Rajimwale, 166). The attempt to resuscitate Das from the mould of a 'confessional poet' only resulted in the poet being conferred another identity of the defiant poet. Quoting Das's famous lines from the poem "An Introduction": "...why not leave/ Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, / Every one of you? Why not let me speak in / Any language I like?" (Rajimwale, 163), Rajimwale urges on to look navigate beyond the confinement of categorization; but by stressing the need to explore into the other side of Das's poetry, he only reinstates what he was drifting away from. Hence, it is imperative that we remove Das's poetry from categorization in order to be able to account for the poetic experience that is the source of her works.

The "subjective voice" that speaks for all may be the truth for most of her poems, but the entire corpus of her work cannot be compartmentalised as 'break-through women's poetry', 'poetry transcending the body', 'poems of feminine consciousness' or the most clichéd of them all, 'confessional poetry' because of the way she addresses her personal experiences as a woman. When Das is speaking of an "experience" from which her works come, she is hinting at breaking the shackles of subjectivities and identity. Before we delve deep into the nature of "experience" that she speaks about, let us arrive at what we decipher from the word 'experience'. We have been able to unearth in the first chapter how Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher defined "experience". Such a definition comes along Heidegger's tryst with the idea of language. In *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger suggests an 'experience of language' which is a realization while we embark upon a journey: here, a journey of truth. It means to "obtain" or "attain" something along the way. Since the quest for understanding the concept of language was perceived and argued as always continuing because we are always 'on the way to language', the 'experience of language' is a journey in itself. With his seminal claim of

language being the abode of man's existence, Heidegger explains what really means to experience something:

To undergo an experience with something -be it a thing, a person, or a god - means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of "undergoing" an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something that comes about, comes to pass, happens (*On the Way to Language*, 57).

Etymologically, Heidegger makes use of the verb form of the word 'experience' by employing 'undergo'. To undergo an experience becomes an action that is active in a person with respect to the events s/he encounters. And this 'undergoing of experience' or in other words, the 'experiencing of experience' clearly detaches the individual from the experience: that is to say, the individual stands outside of it. This is no ambiguous situation, especially when we carefully consider Heidegger's statement, "It is something that comes about, comes to pass, happens". Or more elaborately, we experience (verb form) the experience (noun form) with a distance from it because it doesn't come from us; it rather comes to us. The noun form then, is an event or occurrence that affects us: "...we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it". The event is a happening. It "happens". It happens so as to leave impressions upon us. Heidegger does not stop here. He goes to replace the "something" with "language" and derives the experience of language and thereupon ponder over man's existence with respect to language in the following words:

To undergo an experience with language, then, means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into and submitting to it. If it is true that man finds the proper abode of his existence in language - whether he is aware of it or not - then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence. We who speak language may thereupon become

transformed by such experiences, from one day to the next or in the course of time (Ibid.)

As much as Heidegger's explication steers forth for a deep understanding of the idea of 'experience' and from it, the conception of the 'experience of language', one has to be wary about how such an understanding can aid to read Kamala Das's works. Das's works urge us to read in a different light, though not very different. The nature of a language as deduced in the first chapter of this research - language being a 'fugitive' - and the discontinuities in the writings of Kamala Das that offered 'poetry of promise' advocate for a slight shift from Heidegger's postulation. Das undoes the idea of a 'dual identity' that was proposed to her a propos her two kinds of literary works, when she proclaims that being the same person she sees "poetry in an experience, and then good prose coming out of the same experience". Clearly for her, works of writing - be it poetry or prose because the form did not matter to her and neither did the languages she wrote them in - are products of an 'experience'. They come 'out' of the 'same experience'. But this 'same' experience is not removed from 'same person'. In fact, the sameness arises from the relation the 'experience' maintains with the individual. It is the 'same person' that is governed by the 'same experience', or in other words, the experience is the 'same' only as long as it is the 'same' person. This leads to the personality influencing the experience of the poet and thereby contributing to an identity of literary practice. That is, we could surmise that Das maintains that the 'experience' which serves as the source of her literary works in turn seeks its origin in the 'person' that she is; or the persons that she is. This would be the first side that Rajimwale discussed about and from which his critique was categorically detached. Is poetry then a personal affair? Where does the promise lie in such an event? Why is Kamala Das attempting this never-ending search through writing if the experience is intensely personal? Or is there a necessity to read more into this claim? Can 'sameness' point towards a singularity of experience?

As much as Kamala Das's statement claims that the source of all her literary works is directly related to the person she is, one cannot overlook the paradox that she is trying to articulate without ever verbalizing it. The phrase "being the same person" is rather symptomatic of the impossibility of dwelling in an identity (dual identity in her case that was deliberated with regard to her work) in relation to an experience. To

explicate this further the essential task of a reader is to look closely at her words, regard the existential discomfort she conveys through them and expose the nature of experience that she ‘happens’ to witness or that ‘comes to’ her. Let us consider one of her seminal and first poems “An Introduction” which was published in the very first collection, *Summer in Calcutta*. The poem, written between the late fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century which marks the period soon after the Indian Independence from the British Rule in 1947 is one that has influenced most of the critical thinking gone into the making of the genre of Indian English Literature. With a post-colonial⁵⁸ view, the scholars and theorists read this particular poem as a perfect introduction or break through work that asks the polemical questions. In this poem of fifty- nine lines arranged into two unequal stanzas of thirty-seven and twenty-two lines each, the experiences of the person that Das was has been expressed in free verse. The opening lines of the poem are “I don’t know politics but I know the names/ Of those in power”. This is the most ironical line of the entire poem as what follows this first line is anything but apolitical. The whole poem is a highly opinionated illustration of the questions of language and identity. It is about the multitude of identities that coalesce and cause havoc within an individual.

I don’t know politics but I know the names
 Of those in power, and can repeat them like
 Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
 Nehru. I am Indian, very brown, born in
 Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
 Two, dream in one. Don’t write in English, they said,
 English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
 Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

⁵⁸ ‘Post-colonial’ both in terms of temporality and ideology; temporally as the years post or after the British left India and ideologically in terms of ‘writing back to the empire’ with the main purpose of ‘decolonizing the mind’ (the famous phrase of the Kenya novelist and post-colonial theorist Ngugi wa Thiongo) by expressing oneself in the language of the colonizers.

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
 Any language I like? The language I speak
 Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
 All mine, mine alone.

The above quoted first lines of the poem in consideration when read individually, - that is removed from her entire work of poetry- is an ideal example of a post-colonial backlash with regard to the issues of language and identity. There are many terms that Das associates herself with in this poem like ‘Indian’, ‘brown’, ‘Malabar’ and ‘mother-tongue’. These are grave issues that Das as a poet with Malayalam as her inherited language and English as her language for poetry had to deal with throughout her illustrious career as an author. But as pointed out earlier, even as Das tries to establish an identity of her own, the nature of language is such that the more she is associating herself to it the more she is dispossessed by the language itself.

The poem in particular, which can be taken as an infinitesimal fraction of her poetry in its entirety, is more than an ascertainment: it is rather an intervention into the impossibility of owning a language and dwelling in an identity in relation to that language. A reading against this would only render Das’s poetic voyages incomplete, which ironically again were always curtailed and coloured by dissatisfaction. Going by Kamala Das’s definition of poetry as a ‘search’ and how this ‘search’ would end the moment one finds what one was in search of; this particular piece of poetry encompasses the incoherence present when one is attempting to write a poem. The poem is only a ‘promise’⁵⁹ towards expressing the experience she undergoes due to the various factors that contribute to the identity that she lives. But as deliberated in many poems, Das, as a poet was concerned about how words could never fully decipher the meaning through an experience. A detachment was always observed, which, came out as fissures of disenchantment in her poetry. That the poet was in constant struggle with the experience

⁵⁹ The idea of ‘promise’ as deduced in the first chapter of this dissertation drawing from Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other*. When one attempts to speak or write, one only makes a promise to do so because of the impossibility of being able to appropriate the language that the attempt is being made; that language is messianic in nature and hence neither appropriation of it nor dwelling in it is possible.

of writing poetry was evident. So is this experience or the ‘same experience’ as Das puts it, the everyday experiences of being or not being a woman, a wife, a mother, a lover, a friend or a poet? Does this experience arise out of a figure that encompasses one of the identities mentioned above? Or is Das’s ‘same experience’ pointing towards a singular experience of language with respect to writing?

Jacques Derrida in his work, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, intensely explicates the idea of a ‘poetic experience of language’. His entire discussion on the poetics of Paul Celan⁶⁰ begins with the hypothesis put forth for verification: “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language” (Derrida, 66). The idea of ‘witnessing’, according to Derrida is a kind of promise that is made. In the realm of a legal trial, ‘one bears a witness’ to an event. When Derrida talks about bearing witness in “The Politics and Poetics of Witnessing” (a chapter in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*), he is addressing the ever-increasing demand of the relation between poetry and philosophy. As such ‘bearing witness’ is a task, according to Derrida, that is undertaken by a poem too. A poem ‘bears witness’, which in turn, as already mentioned is a promise that is made. But what does a poem bear witness to? It bears witness to a “poetics”⁶¹. In the hypothesis that Derrida offered to deliberate upon and did so in “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing”, the phrase ‘poetic experience of language’ is what is of utmost importance in the context of this particular research. Irina Sandomirskaja, the author of “Derrida on the Poetics and Politics of Witnessing” which is a comprehensive essay that attempts to read Jacques Derrida’s text on Paul Celan, throws light on this. Taking into consideration the hypothesis that Derrida works upon, Sandomirskaja breaks up the proposition into two parts. “Two components of this hypothesis require discussion”, she writes. The ‘two components’ according to her are: “a poetic experience of language” and “responsible witnessing” (Sandomirskaja, 249). The idea of ‘responsible witnessing’ can be drawn

⁶⁰ Paul Celan was a German language poet and translator who belonged to the group of great poets of the post-World War II era. In this work, Derrida, by analyzing Celan’s poetry, discusses at length how poetry hinges on the periphery of philosophy and as such, how philosophical ideas (predominantly of language here) can be deduced from poetry. One of the seminal works on Paul Celan, Jacques Derrida’s analysis offers itself as a methodology into reading poetry.

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida argues in “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing” that a poem performs the task or responsibility of ‘bearing witness’ to a certain poetics.

from Derrida's idea of how a poem 'bears witness' to a poetics. By bearing witness, as Derrida states, a poem makes a promise. That is, such a promise is a kind of response to the poetics that the poem witnesses. Drawing from this, we can possibly arrive at the responsibility of witnessing is to make a promise in response, which is a task at hand that requires accountability. The poem that bears witness to the poetics is accountable or responsible to the poetics insofar as it promises to testify its witnessing.

The second component that Sandomirskaja branches out requires a deeper investigation. What does Derrida mean to say in "poetic experience of language"? How can the comprehension of this complex phrase aid in our understanding of the 'same experience' that Kamala Das talks about? Irina Sandomirskaja quotes how Derrida defines "poetic experience":

...Derrida defines "poetic experience" as a constellation of three singularities: "a *singular act*, concerning a *singular event* and engaging in a *unique*, and thus inventive, relationship to language". Thus, testimony as a speech act is determined by a triple irreducibility: the singularity of the event means that there is no collective experience or memory of it, hence no sharing, and hence no "witnessing for the witness". Whether it produces a poem or a piece of undecipherable traumatized speech, the relation between language and singular experience is also unique."

In the above mentioned quote, the author argues for an inference with respect to the relation between language and poetic experience by emphasising on the idea of 'singularity'. The poetic experience thus is a unique experience with respect to language. To go back to the nature of language we arrived at in the first chapter of this research on the basis of reading Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, it is the idea of 'singularity' that contributes to the core of the French philosopher's paradoxical proclamation, "I only have one language; but it is not mine" (Derrida, 1). Derrida talks about a "uniqueness to come" and this 'uniqueness' or 'singularity' is devoid of any kind of unity (Ibid., 68).

Marc Crépon, in his inaugural address at the Philosophy Colloquium⁶² titled “Philosophy, Language and the Political: Re-evaluating Poststructuralism” spoke at length about Derrida’s idea of ‘singularity’ within the paradigm of language by designating his paper as “The Invention of the Idiom: the Event of the Untranslatable”. In the wake of the question of ‘untranslatability’, Crépon elaborates on the nature of ‘singularity’. He writes,

Speaking (or writing), is translating, it is attempting to recognize law in language, a singularity: that of an experience, an encounter or an address - and it is, at the same time, the same moment, experiencing the impossibility of such a translation. For, every time I try to translate a particular perception, an emotion, or any other experience, every time I also try to acknowledge, also singular, the one who I address, with the unique and irreplaceable character of one’s encounter, in the manner that I have to use language to go towards him, it is the common singularity that escapes me, it is that which *does not happen* in language.⁶³

Going back to the idea of ‘poetic experience of language’ as defined by Irina Sandomirskaja, within the ‘constellation’ of singularities, the concept of the experience forging a ‘unique’ and ‘inventive’ relationship with language would serve the purpose of understanding what Das tried to articulate through the ‘same experience’. What manifests in Das’s works, irrespective of the particular language that she expressed this experience in or the form of the work, the ‘dual identity’ is not a feasible a proposition as the ‘same experience’ is always related to the ‘common language’ which is yet to come. Such an experience is always incomplete because it is loaded with the possibility of its

⁶² The Philosophy Colloquium was conducted marking the 10th death anniversary year of the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida during the second week of December, 2014 at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

⁶³ This quotation is taken from the printed handout of the inaugural address that was distributed at the colloquium. Crépon went into detail (particularly during the discussion session while answering a query on the question on ‘singularity’ being homogenous) how this ‘singularity’ should not be confused as a concept that is unified in nature. It is singular so long as it has its pluralities. The notion of ‘singularity’ in Derrida as explained by Crépon involves the expression of the singular experience in a common language. Crépon illustrated the idea inherent in such an expression with the phrase that finds its use in everyday speech, “I have no words to express”. This points to the untranslatability that is always present and has to be anticipated in translation (speech or writing). The expression is always rendered incomplete or rather complete translation or deciphering is an impossible possibility. Hence, the experience that comes with such a nature of language is yet to come.

untranslatability. It is discontinuous and without any unity, which is the concern in many of her poems like “Words” or “In the Wings” which has been dealt with at length in the previous chapter. Das, as a poet, isn’t concerned about the dearth in the number of words; in fact she is aware of the ever expanding number. But it is the limitation experienced in the expression that is projected as a never-ending struggle in her poetry thus making poetry an endless pursuit. Das’s ‘same experience’ then, deeply rooted in the notion of ‘singularity’ is a poetic experience of language which drives the incessant search.

The ‘same experience’ comes from a ‘common language’ that is yet to be completely comprehensible. It is a heterogeneous singular experience which cannot be simplified with a unilateral approach. The paradox then lies in the truth that such an experience is also not ambivalent, and yet it is not shared. One can only draw oneself towards or from this ‘same experience’ which is from the Other, always arriving. But this ‘same experience’ also has its residue in the past. The Other has always been there, hence the ‘common language’ has also always been present and the experience that comes from the Other as well as goes to the Other also has been ever present. That is, the poetic experience can be understood as a linguistic experience which can only be present in its purest form in anticipation. The ‘sameness’ in the experience of Das to which no particular language or form of literary work which are products of a particular culture can attribute its origin, can be understood as a quality of time. Hence, it could be argued that Das’s ‘poetic experience of language’ very much contributes to a poetic notion of time. Derrida, while discussing the German philosopher Edmund Husserl’s theory of signs in *Speech and Phenomena*, argues that the ‘present’ or the ‘now’ can never encompass an experience in its entirety. Or in other words, the experience cannot be exclusive to the ‘now’ time or the ‘present’ (*Speech and Phenomena*, 66-68). This is because an experience is always connected to another experience: that is, the experience at the present moment contains the residue of the experience of the past moment and the promise of the experience of the future. An experience cannot fully or purely exist in the ‘present’ or the ‘now’ time. Derrida’s radical argument refutes Husserlian notion of

temporality⁶⁴ to put forth what he later calls the ‘promise’ of time within the paradigm of messianism.

3.2. The Opening Up

Poetry for Kamala Das, as has been discerned, is a means to come into contact or more appropriately, be subjected to the singular poetic experience from the language to come. The singular nature of this poetic experience calls for the need to venture further into the domain of Das’s poetry of promise. In the relentless search for the arrival of the ‘other’ by placing herself on the shores of the language, was Kamala Das, as a poet, being further detached from the act of writing itself? With the experience of experiencing the ‘common language’ always marked by wait, longing and anticipation are we to construe that Das cannot belong to the poems that she penned down with much vigour? What is the process of literary event that unfolds or erupts rather, within the paradigm of a fleeting language and a singular poetic experience that is always deferred? Does Kamala Das’s literary work then exist on its own, away from the writer? Can we understand it to speak for itself in a separate space after alienating the poet? Or more threateningly, is there a disintegration of the figure of the poet to make possible the existence of the work?

The questions surrounding the act of writing and how a writer is related or unrelated to her/his piece of work have been purposes for study in many philosophical traditions. Several philosophers and litterateurs have pondered over these questions within the philosophical paradigms that have shaped their thinking. Maurice Blanchot, the French philosopher and literary artist, is one such thinker. In his unparalleled and most widely studied speculative text *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot defines ‘writing’ in a single sentence thus: “To write is to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threatens” (Blanchot, 32). This is a profound statement heavy with

⁶⁴ According to Edmund Husserl’s notion of temporality, a ‘now’ moment is capable of exhausting itself in a particular experience or vice-versa. That is, an idea of exactness of time can be extracted with respect to experience. Hence, the past, present and future will be distinct moments in the progression of time and as such, indivisible selfhood can be deduced from such a framework.

weighty concepts and deep reflective thinking. ‘Writing’, according to Blanchot, is definitely a movement: it is ‘to enter into’ something. This ‘entering into’ succeeds the idea that the one who is ‘to enter’ or the ‘writer’ has always been outside a particular space to which s/he is supposed ‘to enter’. Writing as an act then, is an enabling practice. It makes possible two events at once: firstly, to be able ‘to enter’ into something, there has to be the event of ‘opening up’. Something has to unfold itself unto you for the experience to take place. This event of ‘opening up’ alone can facilitate the act of writing or ‘entering into’ that space. Secondly, there is an occurrence of a possibility of a literary work evolving out of a poetic experience. This also heralds the birth of a writer. But whether a writer can actually enter the space and belong to her/his work so as to be able to own it is questionable.

What is the ‘space’ that opens up to the act of writing? What is the nature of event that occurs at this juncture? How is there an ‘affirmation of solitude’ in this ‘space’? With Kamala Das encountering the ‘promise’ of a language to come with every word she writes (or speaks), does her act of ‘writing’ wait at the entrance of the ‘space’ that opens up to her? Before we make an effort to enter into this ‘space’, we need to clarify the idea of ‘solitude’ as deliberated upon by Maurice Blanchot. For Blanchot, the ‘solitude’ is “the solitude of the work”⁶⁵. Blanchot writes, “He who writes the work is set aside; he who has written it is dismissed” (Blanchot, 20). How do we account for such a statement? What is Blanchot trying to convey here? That a writer has nothing to do with her/his creative venture? Or in another sense, is Blanchot trying to argue that a ‘literary work’ is born only after it has been written and the writer has been dismissed from it? It is in this particular statement that this research is trying to decipher the meaning of ‘solitude’ as Blanchot puts it. This is because, to be able to understand Kamala Das’s struggle with the poems she penned down with the hope to encounter the language to come, the ‘essential solitude’ that is demanded by a work is of utmost priority. This statement primarily states that a ‘literary work’ exceeds a writer. A writer is incapable of attaching any identity with respect to the work that has been produced. Blanchot emulates the solitude of the work by detaching it from the confines of individualism. Irrespective of the biographical

⁶⁵ One of the sub-headings used by Maurice Blanchot under the title “The Essential Solitude” in his book, *The Space of Literature*.

framework of the writer, the ‘literary work’ stands on its own and the writer cannot claim it.

If the ‘solitude’ is the ‘essential solitude of the work’, the ‘space’ that opens up when one tries ‘to enter’ (to write) into the ‘affirmation of the solitude’ is a ‘space of literature’. To quote Blanchot again, “...the work is a work only when it becomes the intimacy shared by someone who writes it and someone who reads it, a space violently opened up by the contest between the power to speak and the power to hear” (Blanchot, 36). Blanchot here, while “approaching literature’s space”⁶⁶, throws light on the relationship between the writer and the reader. One also has to note that both the reader and the writer are at the mercy of the ‘essential solitude’ of the work, the power of which is greater than that of the power of speaking and hearing. To go by the above quoted statement, it may be comprehended that the existence of both the writer and the reader depends significantly upon the ‘solitude’ of the work. So can we say that the writer speaks to the reader through the work irrespective of the time and space the two are located in? If we do not contest Blanchot’s thesis, it is not possible. This is because, as Blanchot writes, a literary work “is neither finished nor unfinished: it is” (Ibid. 21). This is how a work speaks according to Blanchot:

What it says is exclusively this: that it is - and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing. Whoever wants to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing, finds that it expresses nothing. He, whose life depends upon the work, either because he is a writer or because he is a reader, belongs to the solitude of that which expresses nothing except the word *being*... The work is solitary: this does not mean that it remains uncommunicable, that it has no reader. But whoever reads it enters into the affirmation of the work’s solitude, just as he who writes it belongs to the risk of this solitude. (Ibid.)

It is interesting to view or re-view Kamala Das essentially as a ‘poet’ without any social or cultural appendages for her identity. As much as she resisted to contain herself within a confluence of subjectivities that shaped her identity, her existence as ‘poet’ itself

⁶⁶ The title of the second chapter in Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*

hinges upon the power of the ‘solitude’ of her literary work. If poetry was a ‘search’ for Kamala Das, and the condition of literature is such that the writer is always ‘dismissed’ from the written work, one can always raise the question: what does the approach to the space of literature have to offer someone like Kamala Das? Or more simply put, is the act of writing a futile exercise? Such a doubt only arises from, as Derrida would argue in *Monolingualism of the Other*, the urge of man to master everything. While reading Kafka’s experience of literature, Blanchot writes that literature is a “liberating passage from the first to the third person, from observation of oneself...to a higher observation, rising above mortal reality toward the other world, the world of freedom”(Blanchot, 72). This is very much in line with what Kamala Das was attempting through her poetry: liberation from the confines of categorization and captivity to an ‘other’ world of freedom that was always arriving. Her poetry was the promise to such a world, and from the ‘solitude’ of her literary work she longed for an alternative ‘I’ - a *being*, which is what a literary work essentially is: *it is* - to stand up and speak every time a reader encountered it. As she writes in the poem “Contacts”,

Only
 The world
 Shall die, and I
 Remain, just being
 Also being a remaining...

(*The Descendants*, 25)

3.3. Where’s the ‘Poet’?

The question that still remains is: what happens to the figure of the poet if a poet is dismissed from her/his own writing because of the progression of the ‘essential solitude’? Will this lead to the dissolution of the figure of the poet? Adhering to Maurice Blanchot’s postulation of the power of the ‘essential solitude’ of literary work which

causes the work to speak for itself, we can attempt at reading Kamala Das's search for an identity through the medium of poetry. Her entire work of poetry can be considered as a quest for an identity: the identity of literary practice; the practice here being poetry in particular. One cannot deny the argument that Kamala Das, through the myriad personal experiences, constantly made an effort to move toward the 'other'. The 'other', here, is all that which the self is not. The 'search' or quest continued because of the impossibility of arriving at the 'other'. The 'other', always arriving, also deferred its own arrival. This is manifested in the language that a poet attempts to write the poem in: the language can never be habituated in, which in turn means that the poetic experience in that language always has something lost in translation. Combining this idea to Blanchot's notion of the literary work or the poem existing on its own by disengaging itself from the poet, we can read through certain poems of Kamala Das that comfortably hold on to this perception.

By toiling with the idea of 'I', Kamala Das, in many poems questions her own existence as a poet. For instance, in "Loud Posters",

I am today a creature turned inside
 Out. To spread myself across wide highways
 Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
 Was always my desire, but all I
 Do is lurk in shadows of cul-de-sacs,
 Just two eyes showing ... oh, never mind, I've
 Spent long years trying to locate my mind
 Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
 The bone. I've stretched my two dimensional
 Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
 Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I've put

My private voice away, adopted the
 Typewriter's click as my only speech; I
 Click-click, click-click tiresomely into your
 Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of
 Me, I go on and on, not knowing way....

(Summer in Calcutta, 23)

This poem is a perfect example of the uncertainty experienced by Kamala Das regarding her existence as a 'poet' in spite of writing poems. The 'I' in the poem, while denoting the poet, is also signifying all the other 'I's' that can be represented. The poet in Kamala Das, takes the responsibility of reaching out to all these other 'I's' when she writes, "I am today a creature turned inside/Out.". The indecision and hesitation that comes with the knowledge of the impossibility of a coherent self is what is depicted through this poem. There is also an inherent acknowledgement of the ability of the literary work to exist on its own. Das, the poet, is aware and hence, concerned about the encounter between the writer and the reader or the speaker and the listener. The poet, for Das, sometimes acts like a 'loud poster'. The main characteristic of a 'loud poster' is to be able to illustrate (speak) what an other wants to see (hear). Das, basically is trying to unearth that intimate moment between the writer and the reader which Blanchot was talking about. This moment is very much within the 'essential solitude' of the literary work. The poet (speaker) spreads like a loud poster trying to illustrate the thoughts of a 'stranger', who is the reader because of the use of the pronoun 'your'.

The 'other' is a 'stranger' and it is an entity in which the '(my) self' tries to locate its mind. Since it is 'stranger', it is both threatening and also one that holds much promise. The identity of the poet, or the existence of the figure of the poet is always and already in jeopardy as it seeks its origin in this 'stranger' or the 'other'. As long as That is, we can decipher that through the poem Das tries to reflect upon the elusive nature of the 'I' especially with respect to the writing and the experience of language of expression. Neither the poet ('self'/speaker) nor the reader ('other'/listener) is able to fix

within a framework of 'I'. Or in other words, 'I' or identity evades the possibility of a structure with a set of rules and characteristics. The 'self' cannot be misunderstood to be in opposition to the 'other'. The 'other' is that which the 'self' is not in terms of temporality; that is, the 'other' is the 'self' which is not 'yet'. All that remains is a 'desire' to locate, which can be considered equivalent to the longing for a coherent language that would have the potential to give shelter to an 'I'. But as already discussed in the earlier chapters, the fleeting nature of language always gives rise to poetry of promise. The identity of the literary practice is also hence, always and already deferred. Where is the poet then? Is s/he hiding? Or was s/he never there? The poet simultaneously arrives and departs as long as the reader arrives and departs. This arrival is similar to a kind of citation. The reader tends to cite the writer as s/he reads the writing. This is not because the literary work contains the writer in it, but because the writer awaits such a citation, a calling from the future. The writer or the poet exists exactly at that moment when the reader acknowledges the writing.

Apart from "Loud Posters", Kamala Das has dealt with the question of the shiftiness of identity in various other poems. For instance, in "Someone Else's Song":

I am million, million people
 Talking all at once, with voices
 Raised in clamour, like maids
 At village-wells.

 I am million, million silences
 Strung like crystal beads
 Onto someone's else's
 Song.

(Summer in Calcutta, 31)

Expressing in almost opposing lexicons - voices and silences - Das highlights the possibility of the plurality of the 'subjective voice' that the critic Sharad Rajimwale was concerned about. The 'I' speaks with a voice of millions which is not exclusive of the silences from the same millions or different millions. The sound of speech, according to Das, is inclusive of the muteness of silence. As such, silence is also a part of the speech that the 'I' utters. Then the question arises, if the 'I' is a 'million, million silences and voices', why can't we use 'we'? Wouldn't 'we' be the apt denomination for the visible plurality that the poet is celebrating? No, perhaps not. This is because, 'I' as a pronoun denotes the notion of the 'singular', the 'one' and the 'unique'. But this uniqueness is laden with heterogeneity and not homogeneity. It is all at once, and not any one at a time. It is not coherent and hence, points towards the impossibility of the unified identity to exist through the poetic experience of language. Likewise, the following lines from the poem "An Introduction" is written within such contemplation:

... Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
 The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and
 Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
 I; in this world, he is tightly packed like the
 Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
 Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
 It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
 And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
 With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
 I am saint. I am the beloved and the
 Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
 Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

(Summer in Calcutta, 60)

Kamala Das very poignantly ponders upon the irony of any one and every one calling themselves 'I'. She, as a person, was tired of being expected to behave as different people at different times and in different spaces. She was called 'Amy', 'Kamala' and 'Madhavikutty'. But in spite of these three names, she never ceased to call herself 'I'. And this 'I', she writes, while trying to express in a 'common language' that promises to be comprehensible to one and all undergoes the 'singular experience' filled with 'joys' and 'aches' which cannot be claimed as one's own. The identity or the 'I' of the poet is a disintegrated figure that only appears by gathering its fragments when another 'I' (the 'other' or the 'self' that is not yet) partakes in the poetic experience of the language which is always and already deferred.

I may be the 'I'

Or I may be not.

As 'I' is 'I'

For every other I,

And 'I' is 'I'

From every other I.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The Promise of Language: A Reading of Kamala Das's Poetry was in the first place, a humble attempt at reading Kamala Das's work alongside the philosophy of language. Three core chapters form the body of this work.

To be able to read poetry in conjunction with the philosophy of language, it was pertinent that the research at the outset dealt with the essential question of language. The first chapter, "The Promise of Language", hence, set out with the basic questions of 'what is language?' and the 'nature' of it. Drawing from Walter Benjamin's *On Language as such and on the Language of Man*, the chapter cruised towards the possibility of a solution while also deriving valuable insights from Martin Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* and *Pathway to Language*. Citing the possible origin of 'language as such' in Genesis, it was deduced that the nature of language is fleeting. Language has a moving tendency and language as such is itself a tendency: a tendency towards meaning. It was further inferred that no language possesses the ability to completely decipher a meaning. The expression in a language is always characterized by a lack or untranslatability. The translation of thought into expression is complete only with its untranslatability hence hindering the possibility of a purity of meaning and language. Drawing from translatability of language as such was comprehended the notion of language as *gift* to man. This *gift* is a task; a task of translation. But together with the typical idea of the *gift* is attached the notion of 'belonging' and 'property'. The nature of language of man as *gift* is not about ownership. The 'fleeting nature' of language as such prevails and when it is 'invested to man' as *gift* by God (or the source of all knowledge), it becomes a task of translation and denomination. The conditionality that comes with such a task is non-belongingness or the impossibility of ownership: that is claiming to belong to the language.

The 'task' of giving when denoted a responsibility, also stood for 'promise'. The chapter heavily relied upon Jacques Derrida's influential work, *Monolingualism of the Other* for this. The chapter arrived at the conclusion that if the *gift* of language was a 'responsibility' of man, this very *gift* which disallows possession and is always in hiding as a fugitive is one that offers a 'promise' of a redemptive arrival on the other hand. This

redemptive arrival was discerned as the arrival of a language, which is from the ‘other’, for the ‘other’ and to the ‘other’.

The aim of the second chapter - “Kamala Das: Poetry of Promise”- was to rigorously deal with the works of Kamala Das to look at how deconstruction is at work in her poetry. Drawing insights from the earlier chapter on language, this chapter conducted a semiotic analysis of the poet’s works by firmly holding ground to the central question of language. Beginning with an extensive biographical sketch of the poet in order to understand the reasons for her foray into the field of poetry, the chapter looked at how Das’s struggled with the incompleteness of meaning when expressing through poetry. Taking recourse to the idea of the messianic ‘promise’ of language from the earlier chapter, the second chapter extensively deduced the idea of ‘poetry of promise’ as evolving from the works of Das’s gamut of work. By adhering to Kamala Das’s definition of poetry as a ‘search’ that ends when one finds someone or something and delving deeply into this ‘search’ within the paradigm of a language to come, this chapter was able to conclude that poetry forms a process of experience: of poetic experience, where the poet gets detached further away from *the* poem as s/he attempts to write it. To arrive at it would then be the end of poetry: alternatively, there is no end, there is only longing because poetry has to go on. Flashing insights have also come out of the way Kamala Das makes use of ‘memory’ in her poetry and ellipsis as a literary device to further enrich the notion of ‘poetry of promise’.

Hinging upon Jacques Derrida’s postulation that one’s identity is always *on the shores* of a language -that is to say, one is neither outside nor inside it -, the second chapter looked intensely at the metaphor of the ‘sea’ as utilized by Das in her poetry. The subject in each of the poems was seen to be placed *on the shores* of the sea looking towards the fruition of some kind of lack that has been looming over it. Considering that Das performed her act of writing by being at the shores of the sea (also indicative of her insistence of owning the Indian English language in which she wrote but always failing to do so because of the impossibility of appropriation due to the alienation that one faces from one’s own language), she longed to be one with the sea that held the promise of the language to come which would give her true identity. Each time she wrote, she acknowledged a promise or made a promise herself. Hence, when she comes “face to

face” with the sea, she acknowledges what Derrida would call acknowledging the other that haunts the self and which therefore has a spectral presence.

The third and the final core chapter centred upon the relation between ‘poetic experience’ and ‘language’. Key definitions like ‘poetic experience’ and the nature of poetic experience with respect to language were arrived at successfully. The ‘poetic experience’ was inferred as a ‘singular experience’, taking aid from Jacques Derrida’s notion of singularity. According to Derrida, ‘poetic experience’ is “a *singular* act, concerning a *singular* event and engaging in a *unique*, and thus inventive, relationship to language”. This notion of singularity in the ‘poetic experience’ was studied in parallel to the ‘same experience’ that Kamala Das always held onto. Being a trilingual speaker and bilingual writer, she was always conferred upon with a ‘dual identity’ as a writer. Das rubbished that identity when she claimed in an interview that the poetic experience was the ‘same’ irrespective of the language she wrote in and the form of her literary work. This idea of ‘same’ put forth by Das is compared to ‘singular’ as posited by Jacques Derrida with respect to the ‘poetic experience’ in order to bring to light the philosophical underpinnings in the act of writing poems. The chapter also finds truth in possibility of the ‘poetic experience of language’ of Kamala Das advocating for a ‘poetic notion of time’. From the ‘poetic experience of language’, the chapter - on the basis of close reading of Maurice Blanchot’s *A Space of Literature*- scrutinizes the opening up of a ‘space of literature’ where the literary work demands an ‘essential solitude’ and detaches itself from the identity of the poet. Hence, it was found legitimate that within the space of literature, with the evolution of the ‘poetic experience of language’, there was disintegration of the ‘figure of the poet’.

As much as this research was done with utmost dedication and sincere effort, a work is always a work in progress. This is primarily because of the shortcomings that were taken in the stride for the purpose of completion of this project within a set time-frame. One of the major limitations that had to be endured was the impossibility of the analysis of Kamala Das’s poetry in its entirety: the scope of an M.Phil dissertation seemed shorter for the consideration of all of her poems. Many poems only received a passing mention in the process while a couple of them were made use of under each

philosophical conception. These only points at the opportunity that Kamala Das's poetry provides for further investigation.

Speaking about the possibility of further investigation, this research foresees that the question of 'the feminine'/ 'femininity' / 'womanliness' can also unwrap and get released from all sorts of presuppositions and encoding within the established paradigms of the 'promise of language' and the 'space of literature'. Such an inquiry would then make possible to move forward towards a phenomenology of the question of woman from the linguistic experience through poetry. For making this possible through this particular research project, Luce Irigaray's works can be read alongside Helene Cixous', both of whom have proposed at length on the idea of sexual difference. If there is disintegration of the identity of the poet, how do we account for *écriture féminine* or women's writing?

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