An excuse for a preamble
Kamala Das is one of the few Indian English poets to have engaged the attention of a greater number of critics than probably any other Indian poet writing in English. Her poetry has, however, been subjected to certain stock responses ever since the late 1960s – that is, when her work started gaining critical attention. All these responses have been based on repetitive readings of Das in her various avatars as a love poet, a confessional poet, an autobiographical poet, and a feminist poet. Although it is difficult to keep these identities separate.

from one another, some critics have tried to do so and have read her poetry along a given line, while others have tried to take a holistic view by referring to her various identities cumulatively. In whatever they have done, their studies have broadly contributed towards essentializing the poet. It is important to assert here that not only has the poet been essentialized in this process, Kamala Das criticism itself stands essentialized for all it has posited so far.

For a critic trying to assess her work today, it is difficult, therefore, to alter or even resist what has been reiterated over all these years. The poet is in a critical quagmire, and any effort at re-locating her as a poet of some other consequence would call for a fresh appraisal of her poetry. I would suggest that we may do this by approaching her poetry with the same old references to love, confession, autobiography, and feminism but only after laying down their parameters in a context suitable for the reading of this poet. This revaluation would also be an attempt at disengaging her from stereotypical, exaggerated, or biased readings and at determining a context for the poet, which, I suggest, is to be found in her own tradition rather than in the one that is borrowed, alien, and lies at a farther remove.

Laying the parameters
Writing of love is confession; written confession is autobiography; and a woman writing autobiography is writing feminism. These four identifiers are most often, if not necessarily, inter-related as they draw closely upon one another. In this process, they are liable to be meddled with and be mistaken for one another, as, I would suggest, has happened in the readings of Kamala Das as a poet.

The poetry of love has had a variety of representations in both the Eastern and Western traditions through the ages.\(^2\) Even while the

\(^2\) Innumerable examples may be drawn from ancient Arabic and Sanskrit poetry as also from Greek, Roman, English and other Western languages down the ages. From Sanskrit one may refer to *Meghaduta* (5th century) and *Sringastaka* (7th-8th century). From the Arabic, reference may be made to *Hamasa* and the *Mullakat* (10th century). Other examples may be drawn from Persian and Turkish poetry of the Middle Ages. From the Western tradition, we may cite examples of Sappho and Anacreon from the Greek and Cattulus, Propertius and Ovid from the Roman. There are other examples in medieval Latin poetry. This tradition was carried forward in the subsequent ages,