CHAPTER 4

"UNFENCED HOURS": MALABAR IN KAMALA DAS’S POEMS
I am Indian, 
brown, born in Malabar. I speak three languages, write 
in two, dream in one. Don’t write in English, they cried, English 
is not your mother-tongue. . . /Let me speak 
in any language I like. The language I speak becomes 
mine, its distortions, its queer nesses all mine, mine alone. (“An 
Introduction”; Best of Kamala Das 3-6, 7-9)

This poem has been heavily anthologized and is often considered as 
the poet’s “aesthetic manifesto” (Surendran 152). The lines may sound a little 
stereotyped for having been so widely quoted by reviewers. But the poem has 
special significance and relevance as it is a “paradigmatic” statement 
describing in a singular movement all the qualities of a postcolonial “subject”, 
crossing the temporal and spatial barriers. There is a contradiction that the 
progression from experience to communication is being expressed by a 
steadily “decreasing” number of languages, “three, two and one”.

But, the language she dreams in is ambiguous. English? Malayalam? 
Language of the human being? Imaginative language? Individual language? 
Woman’s language? Language of the instinct? We may have to conclude that 
the language she dreams, as the language she speaks, may be “her, hers
alone”, shielded from others. In answer to the question whether she dreams in English, since she has an amazing command over English language, Das said in an interview with Iqbal Kaur: “I don’t think there is any particular language you dream in. Of course, English words have come up in my dreams but I suppose, I haven’t given it much attention. Certainly English words are there just as English words are here in daily life” (157).

However, obviously, not so the language she “writes”; be it her mother-tongue, English or still another that is “half English, half Indian” (“An Introduction”; BKD 10), which definitely postulates her diverse observations on a variety of themes in its “deep structure”.

The free choice of language and the ability to transform it to individual needs would certainly facilitate the expression of individual honesty. There is no self-consciousness as has been accused of in the case of many Indian English poets, but a reinforcement of her choice of language is seen *ad infinitum* in Das’s solipsistic assertions. Dushyanti Mendis aptly remarks with regard to the eighth and ninth lines of the poem:

> Here is an instance of Das using lexical repetition very effectively—the possessive pronoun ‘mine’ is mentioned three times in two lines, occurring twice together in the second line, after the word ‘All’, and creating a powerful dactyl to underline the strength of Das’s identification with her chosen linguistic code. (129-130)
Be it English or Malayalam, poetry or prose, one thing is clear. Das never suggests in her writing; but only bares her open. Her “two dimensional nudity” is “stretched on sheets” (“Loud Posters”; BKD 9-10) for any aspiring reader to graze freely. Sachidanandan’s introductory words to Only the Soul Knows How to Sing are highly relevant regarding her writing: “female physicality is often associated with female textuality” (10).

Born in Punnayoorkulam in Southern Malabar in 1934, Das grew up straddling two cultures. In other words, her childhood was split into the “idyllic” existence in her grandmother’s house in North Kerala and the extremely lonely life in Calcutta where her father was employed in an American company. Apparently, she seems to portray her life as quite simpler “with upturned faces” (“Corridors”; Summer in Calcutta 6) in her ancestral home compared to the hypocritical society in Calcutta. But, a more careful reading of at least some of her poems undermines this assumption and brings forth the fact that there are certain intractable rules governing such a matriarchal household. This has always been Das’s stance. Prima facie, she seems to abide by a value system or a cultural construct, but a deeper analysis shows that her poetry is at once the subject-victim of an order and a critique of it too.

Again, many a time, she pictures the past innocent life in Malabar as a contrast to her present hypocritical societal relationships in the city. Ironically enough, we find that the Keralites are equally hypocritical and
conservative in their outlook towards women and women-writers. In fact, Das has, throughout her life, sent shock-waves through the straitjacketed Malayalees, be it through her brutally honest autobiography, sexually charged poetry or nude paintings. Her conversion to Islam may also have aimed in this direction, as she comments: “Yes, the controversial Madhavikutty is dead. This is the last time I am shocking you all” (Iype 1). But, she continued to be unpredictable as far as controversies are concerned, until her death in 2009. But more important is that, with all her assertions on the free choice of language for one’s full-throated expression, she seems to bear in mind two different groups of reading public, when she writes in Malayalam and English. As she herself admits, it is only “the controversial Madhavikutty [who] is dead” and naturally we tend to ask, “why not the controversial Kamala Das” too? Does it mean that she seemed to be “controversial” only to the Malayalee world and not to the non-Keralites?

She has been Madhavikkutty to her Malayalee readers and Kamala Das to her English readers. This may indicate that she considered them to be two different reading communities, entirely different in sensibility, that even a change in the pen-name was needed to address them. Is her change in the pen-name directed towards the marketability of her poems in English? Or, did she believe that a woman writer needed a surname to gain acceptance in an English-speaking sphere? While these questions remain open-ended, it is notable that in spite of her huge success as a poet in English, she has not
abandoned her mother-tongue for creative purposes, though not for poetry, and continues to be a bilingual writer. Anyway, it seems that her Malayalam and English writings are two compartments of a train, especially when she plainly remarks after embracing Islam: “I will be Surayya to Malayalee readers. I will be Kamala Surayya to the English-speaking world” (qtd. in Iype 1). She seems to strongly believe that there is a distinction between the worlds constructed through one’s native tongue and a foreign one, but without any indication of her priority of one over another. It is, at this point, that an exploration of the images of Kerala in her English writings seems to be relevant. It would be worth examining how the poet “manipulates” the English language to take the snapshots of her Malabar experiences. The term is used without its usual negative connotation, as Das comments in an interview that "manipulation is not a bad word all the time” (Warrier 1). The subtle difference between the two different language-worlds is brought out in her Malayalam short story titled “Neermathalathinte Pookal” (“The flowers of Neermathalam”). She seems to convey that something as amorphous as love refracts two different sets of colours when passed through the prism of language:

He had combed his hair. She touched his fingers.

"Don’t you love me?" she asked.

"Yes, I love you."

"Can you say that in Malayalam?"
"Why should I?"

She got up (281).

However, she clearly states that both in the Kerala and non-Kerala milieu, she is enmeshed in a disparate set of expectations like Amy, Kamala and Madhavikutty set by the “categorizers” (“An Introduction” 28). “Critics, friends” [and] “visiting cousins” (6-7) are clubbed together, but, in turn, they all become her critics. Initially, she tried to resist through an essential refusal to accept the dress-code. But, wearing “a shirt / a black sarong” and cutting “[her] hair short” are means to provoke only the conservative Kerala society, since such a “reversal” of dress code does not matter much in a polished city-life outside Kerala. Ultimately, she becomes reluctant to accept any pre-determined role, engendering many identity shifts while every deviation from the norm is deemed as a mental disorder, like nymphomania or schizophrenia. But it seems quite surprising that a person who refused altogether “to Fit in, belong” (28) later declared in her life: “Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the purdah” (Iype 1). But she swims ahead, “knowing only the flowing as” her “destiny” (“Advice to Fellow-Swimmers”; BKD 100). Swimming might be analogical with life with its elusive realities (Singh 111), and especially for Das, life is inevitably yoked to creativity. Consequently, it is only natural that “Kamala
Das craves the total freedom that language can give to express herself fully in all her paradoxical and complex ramifications” (Dasan 119).

However, there has been a consistent tendency to view Das as a confessional poet and numerous studies have been centred on the confessional vein in her poems. Similarly, profuse readings on her love-lust syndrome and man-woman relationship have also been shot up. This is not to presume that such studies are only superficial or of no relevance. But it is quite likely that a reworking of these relationships and subtle emotional shades on the basis of her Kerala background would yield an altogether different output. Moreover, it would be grossly unfair to exclude readings that may help to decode certain culture-specific structures. This might have happened since her readers and critics get highly carried away with the emotional extravagance in her poems. P.P. Raveendran rightly opines that “there is a great deal in her work to interest a cultural critic” (154). For instance, subaltern perspective gets obscured with this overemphasis on the confessional vein, viewing from the cultural vantage point. Arun Mukherjee’s anxious remark seems to be the most convenient point for highlighting the relevance of this sort of cultural studies: “Why the critical work on a book [often] ignore aspects that seemed the most important to me, such as a poverty, exploitation, social inequality, social and political conflict, imperialism and racism [Casteism]” (qtd. in Dasan 120).
As already mentioned, a major part of her childhood was spent in Kerala and though numerically few, the poems on her childhood experiences bring forth subtle vision of the cultural atmosphere of Kerala. They may not address a contemporary Kerala ambience of which the poet is not much aware of, being uprooted at an early age. But they surely present what a keen observer and a silent rebel Das was. Das and her personae frequent the past in an attempt to redefine their identity. Vrinda Nabar is right in deciphering that Das’s poems on her childhood like “My Grandmother’s House” try “to sentimentalize the past, to exaggerate its significance and, sometimes, to artificially manufacture a dichotomy between past and present” (34). It is true that she tries to recapture the past at least to balance her adult-life. It is difficult to agree with Nabar that Das uses the theme of her childhood “with increasing tedium” (66). She has admitted in some other part of her book on Kamala Das--*The Endless Female Hungers*--that the poet “retains a traditional flavour which adds to the charm of her ‘modern’ unorthodoxy in outlook” (34). As she feels herself a suppressed and lonely woman in the nuclear family in Calcutta, she conjures the emotional security of the joint-family set-up out of her imaginative re-visits to that matriarchal household. What-so-ever, these poems cannot, in contemporary circumstances, escape a feminist reading and a post-colonial reading. No critical work on her poems would be complete without at least a peep into the cultural aspects. By and large, this would include the physical geography, the flora and fauna,
religious practices, the cultural pyramid, the quality of relationships, the feudal structure, myths, rituals and of course, the gender roles too.

How multifaceted are the historically determined relationships of dominance and oppression in the Indian society in general was fairly well detailed in the introductory chapter. The chapter brought out the point that when the Indian writers try to delineate the oppressed, there is a complex intersection of caste, class, sub-class, community and even gender. Quite often, their own middle class/upper caste position raises more challenge to them. Increasingly difficult, they have to check the red signal of presenting these oppressed as “Other” in their own perspective.

The task becomes all the more arduous in the case of Kerala writers in English, since the Kerala society is no longer monolithic, but is constituted by a diversity of “non-synchronous” social formations, including many religious practices and political institutions. The second chapter explained how the caste system, one such instance, has always been largely hierarchical in the Kerala context. Moreover as Jeffrey observes:

The modernizing efforts of the Kerala Government in the 1860s, especially under the young enthusiast, Diwan Madhava Rao like the land reforms, the abolition of commercial monopolies, the encouragement of European planters coupled with the missionaries’ involvement with the low castes with their emphasis on the equality of men before God gave a tremendous
impetus to the movement from inherited authority to acquired status. (190)

It is quite dubious whether Das keeps her stand in the line of those who “had the oldest blood in the world” (“Blood”; Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 50) or of those whose existence does not matter at all. For her, the border line would be hazier for two reasons: she grew up at a time when the British still ruled India but was on its last legs; when the grand feudal structure was in its crumbling stage. Though she enjoyed the love and comfort in that matriarchal household, she was disturbed by its insensitivity towards the low caste/class people. Some of her poems, mostly from her third volume, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, which appeared in 1973, reflect the sympathy towards the oppressed and the marginalized groups of Kerala in terms of caste, class and functionality. “Nani” is a masterstroke in this regard.

The tragic suicide of Nani, a young and unmarried maid in Das’s grandmother’s house who was seduced and made pregnant is not described as anything out of the ‘ordinary and is not paraded by any melodramatics.

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself

In the privy one day. (1-2)

Das makes a brilliant usage of “meiosis”, un-emphatically bringing in the deeply pathetic scene into the reader’s mind. Use of the definite article before “pregnant” alludes to other maids who may also have been seduced,
but necessarily did not get pregnant as it was very common in the Nair Tharavads of those days in Kerala, that many low caste/poor/maids were “betrayed” by their masters. Though Nairs came beneath the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Ambalavasis\(^2\) in the hierarchy of ritual status, they were the largest, most important section of the Kerala society. Their unmistakable pre-eminence is evident from the words of Robin Jeffrey: “The eye, the hand and the order — all depended on Nayars” (14). They wielded the “distinctive privileges” of the Kshatriyas and were in good terms with the Brahmins too. Women of the lower castes were one such “privilege” that the Nair lords could “enjoy” at their leisure! Forsaken by their “seducers”, they had no option other than living with an ill-name or resorting to suicide. “Nani” is a bitter battle against such practices.

Everything associated with Nani’s death has a very slow pace, signifying its insignificance in the prevalent social context. The poem, *in toto*, has a slow tempo, but special care has been taken to achieve certain punches through plain “understatements”: “...three long hours / Until the police came, she was hanging there” (2-3).

The lines denote how trivial such an incident was supposed to be. No cross-questionings, no investigation and no witness-hearing either. The grim irony gets mixed with grotesque flavor when she describes that Nani’s corpse buffeted by the wind looked like a “clumsy puppet” (4).

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\(^2\) Ambalavasis: Hindus in Kerala involved in temple activities.
…it seemed

To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us, a comic
Dance… (5-8)

The lines are charged heavily with dark humour. Prasantha Kumar aptly opines: “The macabre images suggest total lack of sympathy for the dead maid” (32). Only the shrubs which grew fast offered their yellow flowers on her privy-tomb. It was considered infra dignitatem for an upper caste/Hindu/aristocratic/woman to have sympathy with the lower caste/maids. But Das even exalts the maid to the position of “a goddess who was dead” (12). It is just a matter of one or two years, when Das, still a child, innocently enquires about Nani “who bathed” her “near the well” (15), grandma in fact gets shocked. That’s why she “Shifted the reading glasses on her nose / And stared at” (16-17) her. But soon she reverts to her usual posture and Das’s query is whisked away: “…Nani, she asked, who is she? / With that question ended Nani” (17-18).

Grandmothers, who were the pillars of the matrilineal, joint-family system in the feudal Kerala, had “this designed deafness” (19-20) to avoid such “botherations”. The use of “the dark / Plump one” (14-15) again indicates a faint shade of “chromatism” while “bathed me near the well”, points to the fact that all the household duties were met by these low caste maids who were otherwise kept away as “untouchables”. And the matriarchs like Das’s grandma had a sedentary lifestyle. In fact, Jeffrey’s observation that “the ritual status of a caste carried its privileges or disabilities which we
may regard as “resources” of a kind” (9) is somewhat zoomed into the poem, “Nani”. “The reading glasses” and “bathed me near the well” bring together two ends of a pyramid--one of servility and oppression, the other of authority and dominance.

“Shifted the reading glasses” is paradigmatic of shifting the subject too. Nani had ended long back in actuality but not necessarily in the poet’s mind. But the grandma’s blunt retort worked almost as a “shut up”, a counter-discourse to her turbulent thoughts about Nani or even “Nanis”. It seems that she comes to terms with “ignorance is bliss”. Anyone who goes in line with the existing politico-social structures, “unscratched by doubts” (“Nani” 25) will be at peace, but it is the “clotted peace” (26), underdeveloped, still in the embryo-stage. It is almost a “life-in-death”, “if not allowed to manifest” itself (Nabar 71). Once expelled, scratched by doubts, it loses the energy to develop into a being too--“powerless to be born”. Subsequently, peace is no more real peace but a fake one. In a way, she ridicules the “wisdom” of those (here grandma being the representative) who reside in their ivory tower like a donkey-king with a fear inside of getting dethroned. That is why they have been trained well in the art of “designed deafness”.

As pointed out earlier, there have been many writers who have tried to portray the encounter between the middle class/upper caste and the lower class/caste with different perspectives; some of them challenge the cultural
hegemony of the upper caste, projecting exclusively the point of view “of” the “Other”; others, retaining their middle class/upper caste background, treat the experiences of characters from lower caste/class still “as” the “Other”. It has often been alleged that Das often disrupts the notions of orthodoxy, but fails to escape those very forces which mar her ability to initiate any action in engaging or resisting imperial power. Dasan’s comment may be quoted as an instance:

Though [Das’s] poetry deals with the everyday practices of subordination and expropriation of the oppressed, its implications for the politics of class, caste, colonialism, ethnicity and a whole range of other structures of domination that determines the lives of subalterns remains silent. Her defiance is not, in the final analysis sufficient to break through the constraints imposed by the social and sexual traditions of a conventional society. (129)

It may be true that such poems on the themes of oppression lack the overlapping significance of sudden and violent urgency as in, say, “The Dance of the Eunuchs” (Summer in Calcutta), that Das achieves through a rather peculiar exploitation of “phonetic intensives”; but, arguably, by their distance and detachment, they serve as an implicit critique of the very life they “reflect”, yielding a “negative knowledge”, as the Frankfurt School of
German Marxists propose, of the dehumanizing institutions and processes of a feudal structure.

The brutal games of the feudal lords are portrayed in another poem “Honour”, but on a different level. Through the poem’s eyepiece, patriarchy is seen operating through multiple hierarchies in Kerala society. The poem, as Ramachandran Nair suggests, is a “powerful expression of unmuzzled wrath and righteous indignation at the cruelties” unleashed on “the depressed class people” (57). Though Das herself belonged to an affluent Nair family, she brings into the poem an ironic exposition of the dishonor a community is subjected to: “the poor / were ravished, strangled, drowned, buried at midnight behind/snake shrines” (“Honour” 18-20). The snake-shrines or “serpent-groves” which had been “at one time a prominent feature of the houses of almost all Namboothiris and affluent Nairs” (Menon 31), are considered to be sacred places almost like temples and the fact that the massacre was “conducted” in the very premises of them, adds special pungency. The feudal concept of pseudo-honor is severely attacked by Das:

…Honour was a plant my ancestors watered

In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres. At night their serfs

Let them take to bed their little nieces… (11-13)

The end shocks the conscience of the readers where there is a cryptic reference to the death of an alluring “Moplah” bride--“even dead and rotting /
the wench was alluring” (26-27).

The comparatively longer poem “Blood” takes us back to a Kerala in the 1940s when “all Nayars followed the matrilineal marumakkattayam system of inheritance, based on the matrilocal joint-family called the Taravad” (Jeffrey 15). Unless aware of this matrilineal pattern in which “all members of a taravad were descended from a common female ancestor” (15), it is difficult to extract the full sap of the poem. The opening scene of the poem where Das and her brother as children play on the sands brilliantly foregrounds the ancient house with the great grandmother as its “narrator”. The particular poetic device she adopts to evoke the historical sense of the house is in terms of the poet’s own childhood memory of it. The poem rather runs on an elegiac note, lamenting on the dilapidated house, “Now four hundred years old;” (“Blood” 7). Jeffrey’s statement bears evidence to the claim: “The taravad house was originally built to be defended. It was surrounded by a walled garden, and was itself built as a rectangle around an inner courtyard. A single house might sometimes contain a hundred people, spanning three or four generations” (15).

As mentioned earlier, Das was born into the paradisiacal world of the joint family (though she questions the moral fabric of such a system) and uprooted to the hypocritical city-life in Calcutta from where she “lost” her “faith in the essential goodness of human beings” (*My Story* 132). The feudal system was also ebbing away. “It hadn’t broken down completely. But, there
was generally a sense of condescension implied, (like that of the grandma) which perpetuated a degree of unease in social relationships” (Singh 112).

It is precisely against this context that the poem is to be read. The house is invoked in terms of its antiquity and dignity. With its “walls” “cracked and torn / And moistened by the rains,” (“Blood” 10-11), with its “tiles” “fallen here and there” (12), the house is “falling to little bits” (8). The house is equated to an ageing matriarch. Rats replace the once nobly-born inhabitants, and the tragic irony reaches its crescendo in the lines:

And all the snake-gods in the shrine
Have lichen on their hoods. (18-19)

The great grandmother’s agony is specially touching in that the deterioration is happening “Before our very eyes” (9). It might be that Das covertly deploys her great grandmother as her confidante to draw our attention to a rather eclipsed social structure which she might be supportive of at heart. Arguably we are witnessing a deliberate and insistent attempt by the poet to relocate and reconstruct the lost matrilineal social system in the present Kerala social milieu. Prasanth Kumar’s remark invites attention: “She often strategically brings in grandmothers, who were the pillars of joint family system” in her poems and “harnesses the imaginative sojourn to grandmother’s house as a device to hint at the symbolic return of the system” (46).
Even the stately elephant-ride of her great grandmother is incorporated to augment this aristocratic grandeur:

She told us how she rode her elephant
When she was ten or eleven
Every Monday without fail
To the Shiva shrine
And back to home again” (“Blood” 35-38)

A Nair girl’s first menstruation was celebrated with a ceremonial bath after three days of strict segregation and “on the seventh day she was taken to a far away temple” (My Story 125).

My great grandmother, attaining puberty at eleven, rode her father’s elephant to the temple seated elegantly on the howdah wearing the heavy (Amadakkootam) which covered the upper halves of her delicate breasts, while her maids ran on ahead of her crying out Ho Ho to warn the untouchable communities to steer clear of her path. (125)

The entire passage is quoted since it throws light on many aspects of the cultural milieu, viz. the rituals associated with a Nair girl’s puberty, and the hierarchy inherent in the caste system. Of all the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, God Shiva, Vishnu and Ganapathi are worshipped most widely. “Every Monday without fail / To the Siva shrine” (“Blood” 37-38)
may be indicative of the *Somavaravrata*, the Monday fasting that the girls and women used to observe in order to get good husbands.

“And her marriage to a prince” further gives a flying leap to her royal status of being “the only daughter of a wealthy chieftain, the Raja of Punnathore Kotta” (*My Story* 125). It is thus projecting the glory of the bygone days that Das’s great grandmother tries to inculcate in her young mind the pride of their aristocratic lineage:

That we had the oldest blood
My brother and she and I
The oldest blood in the world
A blood thin and clear and fine. (“Blood” 48-51)

Das almost succeeds in taking the reader to her good faith that the end of such a woman shouldn’t have been pathetic like this. As a critic observes:

“The woman (the matriarch) who had once controlled the whole family in the subaltern social is now reduced to a subjective degraded point” (Usha 8).

Finally she lay dying
In her eightysixth year,
A woman wearied by compromise,
Her legs quilted with arthritis
And with only a hard cough
For comfort; (“Blood” 57-62)
“Woman wearied by compromise” is to be underlined, for the compromise had been so hard and heavy, juxtaposing her earlier position as a matriarch with a plethora of servants at her will, now only a hard cough to comfort her with “all the servants disbanded” (*My Story* 124). This is comparable with the plight of Das’s mother-in-law, another representative of the system, who once accompanied them to their small flat in Bombay.

She was a member of one of the wealthiest joint families in Malabar and was also its eldest lady. The city’s shabby methods of collecting sub-standard grains from the ration shops and living shut up in little nests of concrete in the air seemed to her revolting. She was used to large open spaces and flowering trees. She was used to hordes of servants obeying her slightest whim. (86)

The above paragraph gives us a good slice of the social layer to which all those grand old matriarchs enviably belonged. Inevitably, even these heads of joint-family have to succumb to their ultimate end. Metaphorically, great grandmother’s death is the death of the existing social structure. Das’s single achievement in this direction is that she “reject[s] both imitation and protest--two forms of dependency--” (Showalter “Towards…” 177) in the treatment of the theme of matriliny. Further dissection of the poem would make this diplomatic stand clearer. “The death of the house need not be interpreted literally in terms of its physical decay. It could also refer to the
corruption of the old bond, of traditional values, and the erosion of the moral fabric on which the house / family-circle had been built” (Nabar 67). As per the Hindu belief, the dead body is cremated on a funeral pyre made of logs of mango tree.

When they burnt my great grandmother

Over logs of the mango tree (“Blood” 75-76)

The rest of the poem has almost Biblical undercurrents, the poet “seeking forgiveness” (101), for having “set forth again / For other towns” (83-84), leaving behind and letting down the old house with its “shrine, / The sands, / The flowering shrubs / And the wide rabid mouth of the Arabian Sea” (85-88). But all this she carries on in her consciousness and the guilt of not keeping her promise to her great grandmother that lingers in her brain obtruding into her nights in cities:

When I grow old, I said,

and very very rich

I shall rebuild the fallen walls

And make new this ancient house. (24-27)

It should be specially noted that Das does not use the words “repair” or “reno-vate” but rather, “make new” “this ancient house”. The point she wants to emphasize would be that she does not want to modify or change it into a better “physical” condition but she looks forward to “a revision and even the subversion” (Showalter “Towards…” 178) of certain aspects of a cultural construct, a social system or a ritual hierarchy. Das, being a poet who
has lived in both pre-colonial and post-colonial Kerala, “personally”
experiencing these social changes would be the best person to make such
authentic comments. Her promise succeeds in its perlocutionary act of
pleasing her grandma though she was too young to learn that “to grow rich /
Was a difficult feat” (“Blood” 69-70). “Similarly, while the great-
grandmother addresses the poet and her brother, it is the poet who responds to
this sense of family honour” (Nabar 67). She admits herself to be a fallen
angel and flagellates herself, taking full responsibility for the desertion. We
could willingly suspend our disbelief until the skeletal key of the poem, “O
mother’s mother’s mother” (“Blood” 107) underscores the intentional fallacy
and draws our attention to “what is only dimly present in our consciousness:
the matriarchal system of societal relationships to which Kamala belongs”
(Nabar 67). Moreover, the way the poet tries to “establish the continuity of
the female tradition…” (Showalter “Towards…” 176) by recovering the past
and re-discovering herself that way merits special attention.

Unlike her autobiography, the poems on her grandmother--on her great
Nalapat house--only unobtrusively bring in the theme of matriliny, without
assuming the reader’s awareness of it. Reading the poem seems like driving
along a round-about, the poet directing only a possible exit, to assert her claim
of having the “oldest blood in the world” (“Blood” 110), “So thin, so clear, so
fine,” (109). It may look like that she is only parroting her great grandma.
But, there is nothing wrong in presuming that the poet is overtly ironical,
though all epithets used to invoke the house as well as its sole authority are
highly sincere and dignified. However, she regrets a mistaken choice of action; “Call me callous / Call me selfish” (106-107) sounds like a cathartic bid to come to terms with it. Her autobiography strongly supports this: “I belonged to the serenity of Nalapat. Nalapat belonged to me. By abandoning it to the care of vulgar caretakers and managers, I had hurt the spirit of the house. I HAD UNWITTINGLY SPILT THE BLOOD OF ITS SPIRIT….” (My Story 176).

The last lines are even capitalized in order to assert the honesty behind. On the final glance, Das succeeds in bringing in the faintly political color of a social structure, though she herself cannot completely get away from it, perhaps due to her blind affection towards her grandmother. Consequently, she admits that many a time, she is trapped in the “cages of involvement” (“Composition”; The Descendants 254). In an attempt to overcome such emotional bindings, it may apparently sound that Das heralds a relocation of the lost matrilineal system followed in Kerala with its sense of sharing and togetherness. V. T. Usha’s remark is relevant in this connection:

The women who were accustomed to gentle maternal care and consideration are at a loss in a male centered society [and that] It was only when the matriarchal structure was broken down by the phallocentric norms of a colonial culture that the woman’s position was reduced to that of her female counterparts in the West. (8)
But, Das has shown how such a matriarchal household has been exploitative of women of lower caste. Ultimately, a closer reading of her poems shows that it is not a “relocation” but an erasure and re-inscription of, obviously, a lost “way of life”.

“Evening at the Old Nalapat House” also somewhat reverberates the *ubi sunt motif* characteristic of Das’s poems on her childhood. Still, her sensitivity towards the marginalized, low caste field labourers is felt between the lines describing the deteriorating condition of her ancestral home in Malabar.

We can visualize the structure of a typical, ancient Malabar *Taravad* through the snapshots and impressions coming alive in the poem. The “white Sand / Of the courtyard” (8), “The barred doors, all brass knobbed” (11) denote the architecture and historicity of Kerala *Taravads*. Those houses used to be very old and “so commodious to accommodate as many as 150 to 200 inmates” (Menon 142). But the words such as “barred doors” and “brass-knobbed” may also indicate the rigidity or the inflexibility of certain rules that were part and parcel of such households. It is pertinent to ask whether the barred doors were meant for the women inside the house that prevented them to get out, or the women outside from getting in.

It is notable that these poor field workers also carry the emotional debris of the lost system even though they themselves were the victims of it. They can remember the grandma with only an ache in them. The poem
unobtrusively brings in “the exploitation of the peasantry by the landlords and the state and the consequent economic conditions in which they lived during the colonial rule” (Panikkar 417). In other words, Das helps us to notice that, even in a much “revolutionized and modernized” Kerala social milieu, the condition of the oppressed has not changed much.

…The field hands

Returning home with baskets on their heads,

………………………………………………

...then thin legs crushing

The heads, the shrubs, their ankles

bruised by thorns, their insides bruised by memories…(3-4, 7-9)

“A Hot Noon in Malabar” also portrays these vagrant and deprived people like, “beggars with whining / voices,” (1-2) fortune-tellers with their fortune-cards, “all stained with time,” (4) “brown Kurava girls / with old eyes” (4-5), and bangle-sellers with bangles, “all covered with the dust of roads” (8). Das paints a typical village-scene in Kerala and seems to be one with these Kurava people. Ironically, these people who are devoid of any good fortune are the ones who "predict" the fortunes of others. They represent the marginalized without even having a voice:

…silent ones who rarely speak

At all, so that when they speak, their voices

3 Downtrodden group of fowlers in Kerala, who earn their living as well as fortunes through fortune-telling and basket making.
Run wild, like jungle-voices. (18-20)

It is interesting to juxtapose the poem with “Summer in Calcutta”
(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing), since the hot season takes the title role in both the poems, in two different geographical backgrounds. The heat is only an outward one in the earlier poem while it is the heat in the poet’s mind which is vehemently portrayed like “Drink again this juice of / April suns” in “Summer in Calcutta” (24-25). Once reaching the city and assimilating its freakish, violent rhythm, the poet, for a moment, wants to forget the “noble venom” (8-9), the “blue blood” that she spoke so passionately about. She seeks pardon from her ancestors, and assures that it is still unblemished. As Amga observes with regard to “Summer in Calcutta”: “… the luxuriant mood of sensuous feeling becomes entrenched in the poet’s perceptual encounter with the external reality” (170).

The general ambience and the poet’s disposition are poles apart in these two poems. While she makes use of “summer” in “A Hot Noon in Malabar” to bring into the purview the sufferings of the tribals in Kerala, “Summer in Calcutta” brings forth the humdrum and materialism that she encounters in a city outside Kerala. The latter poem has sardonic overtones and brings forth clearly the fragility of love-relationships in a hypocritical social set-up, where one lover does not last even until the next summer. When she drinks “again” the juice of April suns, his reign is over, and “unhurried laughter” (11-12) creeps into her mind. The mood of frenzy is
enhanced by Das’s peculiar device of sandwiching sights and sounds in between the lines. Her stand is quite clear when she honestly admits: “To / Be here, far away, is torture” (“A Hot Noon In Malabar” 22-23). The cadences of her tone are sincere when she remarks: “From every city I have lived I have remembered the noons in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a homesickness” (My Story 120).

Similarly, “My Grandmother’s House” (BKD) speaks of the poet’s psychic conflict between an alluring past in Malabar and a bleak present in Calcutta. Even darkness from that past would, she believes, guard her as a “brooding dog” (11-12) while light in the city is like a “sunshine cat” (Summer in Calcutta 12) and would fade without assuring eternal security. But “the darkness” of the past could be indicative of the indifference of such houses towards the lower caste people.

It is, by this time clear that she represents both the upper caste Hindu woman who enjoyed the comforts in her maternal house in Kerala and the middle class woman of the city who has to beg for love at stranger’s doors “at least in small change” ("My Grandmother's House” 16). A society brewing with consumerism views even love as a commodity and evaluates it in terms of currency. “Small change” could be indicative of this sort of commercialization of love. It is disheartening that, at times, “raised in the warmth of a tight-knit Kerala matrilineal society” (King 148), Das can respond to the existing social order only in a weak manner--she gives the impression of being extremely
sensitive and impatient, be it in the form of anger to “scorch to the very marrow / this sadmouthed / human race (“Sepia”; BKD 4-6) that has not “learnt to believe / in things they do not see / or hear” (26-28); or, in a sense of utter breaking down, as in the lines:

…while I was young

From every living moment I wrung

Only tears, …(“Afterwards”; BKD 65-67)

We have seen in the introductory chapter how English education had "revolutionized" the Indian society in general. The educated young men of Kerala had to move to other cities outside the state in search of better placements. Das is representative of many women in Kerala who had to accompany their husbands working abroad, completely getting transferred from a matrilocal joint-family to a patrilocal nuclear family. Married to a cousin at a very tender age who, over a single night, absolutely demolished her romantic ideas of what life with a man would be like, she had to move from her Tharawad in Malabar to the dreary city of Calcutta. Uprooted from her familiar surroundings, she finds it difficult to acclimatize herself to the claustraphobic, city life-style. Significantly, flowing against the conventional mores and modalities, in an attempt to mollify the “forest-fire” became a sort of “holy war” in her poetry too. “Both thematically and stylistically her poetry should be read in the context of her unique experiences of gender” (Prasanthakumar 43). As a sharp digression from the water-tight compartments of gender roles imposed by a patriarchal society, Das never camouflages her
need for love, under a torrent of innuendoes; consequently, a quiet and happy “child”, suddenly transplanted to an unfamiliar and hostile milieu, tries to overcome the odd circumstances she finds herself in, through an essential longing to return to her ancestral home where “she lived, and was proud, and loved” (“My Grandmother’s House” 13-14). While she is very affirmative about the love received from the maternal home in Kerala, love recedes like an oasis in another milieu.

Yes, I was thinking, lying beside him

That I loved, and was much loved.

It is a physical thing, he said suddenly,

End it, I cried, end it, and let us be free”. (“Substitute”; The Descendants 33-36)

The resultant “going back” and “growing back” from the adult world of sexuality to the idyllic world of her childhood is a technique adopted by many a woman writer trapped in the phallocentric world of male predatoriness. In fact, Das deserves special merit since she does not try to identify herself with any version of feminist activism, but at the same time, throws significant insights to the operation of sexual politics in the Kerala culture.

The Great house where she shared her childhood with her brother, was an idealized Eden “where each silent/corridor leads” her “to warm/yellow rooms” (“The Corridors” 2-4) and where she was welcomed by “rich, friendly
/ laughter, and upturned faces” (5-6). But the Nalapat idyll is now “a Paradise Lost” (King 156) and life in the city is barren with emptiness and darkness:

See the bed from which my love
Has fled, the empty room, the
Naked walls, count on fingers
My very few friends (“The Corridors” 16-19)

As she reviews her marriage, she painfully realizes the uncertainty and futility of the freedom offered to her, which is but, her “last strange toy. / Like the hangman’s robe, even while new / It could give no pride” (“Substitute” 37-39). A "naïve" woman brought up in a secure joint-family set-up gets shocked on realizing that she has to perform the roles as well as conduct the chores within the circumscribed limits of the so-called “diet of ash” (“Composition”; Only the soul knows how to Sing 58).

But,

I must pose,

I must pretend,

I must act the role

Of happy woman,

Happy wife.

I must keep the right distance

Between me and the low.
I must keep the right distance

Between me and the high. ("The Suicide"; *The Descendants* 40-49)

It is interesting to note that while there was a ritual hierarchy in Kerala where she was positioned on a certain level, there is yet another hierarchy, though not based on one’s ritual status existing in this "sophisticated" social milieu too! One tends to agree with Nabar on her observation that the “implied weariness with role-playing is itself a kind of role with Kamala” at this juncture (Nabar 23). “The reiteration on the word “right distance” is a device adopted by Das to highlight “the experience of liminality of being positioned on the border between two cultures (the high and low)” (Dasan 130). She suffers this even as a child since her mother belonged to a royal family while her father had a peasant lineage. The ambivalence in the above lines further suggests the codes written for women like Das who hailed from an upper caste but had to conform to *status quo* with the accompanying, self-engendering traumas and sangfroid. The inhibiting world of middle-class respectability has been poignantly brought out in the quoted lines.

Though Das does not attack the studied gender responses in the Kerala culture outright, many of her poems can be viewed as a refusal to be seen as a mere appendage of these predominantly male dominated social relationships. Undoubtedly, she has to battle tremendous odds, storm the conceptual ramparts of historically created and nurtured gender stereotypes, in order to accomplish this. But she is unique in that “Her response to the gender
question is not the studied, calculated analysis of a feminist. It is spontaneous, more of a gut response, and hence highly ideological” (Raveendran 154).

Das’s perturbed adolescence, tormented love-life, tortured dreams and wounded womanhood urge her to write with the female in her bones. As a tale of inadequacy, her poetry has special pungency with the distillation of her own experiences into it. She brings in the totally unromantic side of licit sex often associating disgustful images with her husband, her “ruthless one, / …
clumsy / with noise and movement” (“Luminol”; BKD 10-12), “old fat spider” (“The Stone Age”; BKD 3). Her autobiography also supports this angle. “In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence” (My Story 22-23). He is not the so-called husband inflicting physical assaults on his wife, for “He did not beat me but my sad / Woman-body felt so beaten” (“An Introduction” 22-23).

He is the archetypal modern husband who knows the art of “cornering and taming” the wife like a “swallow” (“The Old Playhouse”; BKD 1) “in the long summer of” his “love” (2). He never hits her physically; but injects love “in lethal doses” (26) and humiliates her sad womanliness by drawing “a youth of sixteen into his bedroom” and shutting the door. In fact, he shuts the door to all her “endless female hungers” (“The Looking-Glass” 16).

Unable to leave the magic line of patriarchal control, she is forced to get reconciled with the motley routine of “familiar scorn” (“I Shall Some
Day”; *BKD* 17). Using the metaphor of metamorphosis, Das equates her “habitat” with the “cocoon / you built around me with morning tea” (1-2). As mentioned in *My Story*, she got an opportunity to mingle with a popular Marathi film actress named Usha Kiran when she was in Bombay whose company and various artistic entertainments they rehearsed before the Ganesh Festival helped her to forget the bitterness of life. But, once the husband came to know about it, he stopped her from going there, warning “You must remember you are a wife and mother” (88). Das had no option other than resorting to the housewifely duties:

> Then I settled down to housekeeping and sewed the buttons on and darned our old garments, all through the hot afternoons. In the evening, I brought for my husband his tea and a plate of snacks. I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape…(88)

The cumulative burden of domesticity is sheer purgatory, and the drab weariness resulting from the diurnal duties of a wife is best expressed in a plain understatement:

> I shall be the fat-kneed hag in the long bus-queue
> The one from whose shopping bag the mean potato must Roll across the street (“Gino”; *The Old Playhouse*… 44-46).

As the foregoing lines denote, her domain is the household and her
pleasures and pains are purely self-referential. The irony reaches its peak, when the house is equated with the speaker in “A Half-Day’s Bewitchment” (BKD): “Ultimately the house and I became One” (10).

In shattering the gender codes inherent in her society, there is the triumphant assertion of “I”, with a parade of strong syllables and lexical repetitions.

She must, like a peach, have inside
A hard red core,
A wrinkled seed
That yields a certain sweetness
Which the connoisseur, ruthless in his moves,
Finally shall enjoy. (“Note to a Destroyer”; Only the Soul…1-6)

Das creates a powerful dactyl very effectively for the reinforcement of her identification. As has often been criticized, the repetition of words is not a “common flaw” in her verse, but a conscious device adopted by Das to achieve the desired effect. The reader can discover different shades of meaning on each reading.

The poem “Afterwards” is a neat sketch of the gradual growth, physical and emotional, of a girl in the cultural framework of Kerala, with special punches on each milestone in her life. The poem starts on a disagreeable note, especially for the feminists, addressing, “Son of my womb” (1); the choice of the lexicon, whether natural or contrived, indicates preferment of “son”—male offspring—to “child” or “baby”. Then the poem
swerves sharply, suddenly bringing in the clever twist, and that too completely devoid of any mask, not even an interior one.

Das seems to have realized and abhorred the socially determined relationships of dominance and of subordination in the Kerala culture from childhood itself.

Children were told not to lie
And it was normal for a girl to sigh
Over a dying bird; we learnt kindness
As we learnt our books, yes. (14-17)

Most ironically, Das states that the utmost conservative society of Kerala as well as its educational curriculum insists that kindness and tenderness are the most “feminine” qualities that must be observed by the girls of this society:

There was no sign at all of what was
Coming then, the earth was
Sagging heavy, fruits were sweet
And ripe, fishes died on their bait. (18-21)

As a little girl, with not much of practical wisdom or worldly knowledge she simply enjoyed and got excited at the fullness and ripeness of Nature. As usual, the twist works and she is suddenly drawn to sights of fishes getting baited and “brothers” (male figures) blinding a beetle, rejoicing at their (trivial) valor!
And as a little girl, I watched
My brothers squat beside a hedge
And slowly blind a beetle. (22-24)

the insect curled its legs and died.
I felt sad, but my tears I tried to hide. (27-28)

By that time, she was well aware of her socially assigned “role-
playing”. While in such a constrictive social context, it was “only normal”
for a girl to sigh, she refused to cry. Her first steps of subversion of the
gendered responses in her culture are heard through silent rebellion.

But there comes the death-knell--that of “growth”. As a child, she
wished to “grow up”, but only to realize that:

…Growth was
Definiteness, the much-ironed folds
Of a school uniform;
A man who let me take his name
To make me feel I belonged. (83-87)

Characteristically, “the tragedy of life is not death but growth”.
Growth is but only a retrogressive leap into the “mirror stage”--to clear-cut
definitions of norms, rules and regulations of the social institutions for her
and to the trite discipline at school as the much-ironed folds of “a” school
uniform suggests. It might be the prototype of the clearly drawn tracks of later
adult woman-life. The use of the indefinite article points to the insignificance she associates with such customary practices. And, “growth” to “wife-hood” and to the freedom her husband “generously” offers her to “take his name” along with hers--Kamala Das--which again severely brackets her inside the wedlock as well as the hard and fast rules of the social milieu. In fact, she says that she “did all the growing there” (“The Suicide” 71) in her grandmother’s house; after that growth ceased in the linear direction. As in “The Suicide”, when she bathes in the "pale green pond" near her ancient “Taravad” in Malabar, her grandmother “awakens the realization in her about the changing contours of her body” (Nair 116) and cautions her against taking bath in public. Das seems to imply that women of Kerala are trained from their very growing stage to be conscious of their “feminine subjectivity” so as to fit themselves geometrically to their assigned, insignificant social roles of watering pots over personal squabbles. The realization that physical growth is robbing off some of her harmless enjoyments is certainly painful.

Darling, you must stop this bathing now.

You are much big to play

Naked in the pond. (“The Suicide” 79-81)

She painfully recognizes that in the orthodox Kerala society, man’s ego is protected “like the sword in its sheath” (“The Siesta” 39) while the woman is not allowed even “to pick an average / identity” (16-17). It is only woman who is trapped in “strange towns” (41) and enforced to “feel shame”
(41) having made love with men; who has to “lie dying” (also in the sexual connotation of the word) “with a rattle in the throat” (42)--with insatiable, unappeased desire that cannot be spurted out due to the society’s tightly worn knot. Das has made a special note in her autobiography that “women of best Nair families were never allowed to mention sex” (My Story). Ultimately, she is inevitably caught up in the male-created binary world, admitting: “I am the sinner, I am the saint. I am both the lover / And the beloved” (43-44).

But, there is a contradiction in her response to the gender issues in her society as the poem “I Shall Some Day” indicates. The poem is disappointing for its final stance of coming-to-terms with the male social order as an irreversible or non-demolishable way of life. The poem arrests the reader and kindles hopes in her in the beginning with its high-flown images like:

I shall some day take

Wings, fly round, as often petals,

Do when free in air, and you dear one,

Just the sad remnant of a root, must

Lie behind, sans pride, on double-beds

and grieve. (4-9)

The lines no sooner gain charge and momentum, than they somersault prematurely:

But, I shall some return, losing

Nearly all hurt by wind, sun and rain,
Too hurt by fierce happiness to want
A further jaunt or a further spell
Of freedom, and I shall some day see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
Just a skeletal thing, then shut my
Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,
Here in your nest of familiar scorn… (9-17)

No sooner she touches the finishing point than she falls, with the death sentence—“Return”—that too as a loser, losing “Nearly all”, without leaving even a stray of hope, with all her juices strained, ending up as “just a skeletal thing”. The lines sag with the heaviness of shame and failure in challenging him, and admit that penalty kick of taking “refuge” in nothing but the nest he specially built for her with “scorn”. The image of “cocoon” earlier associated with repulsiveness—“You built around me with morning tea” (2)—turns into one of shelter, of security. The end of the poem does not complement the title albeit its initial arresting outburst.

Thus, Das launches a woman-protagonist almost throughout her poetry who loathes the order she inhabits but in designing a critique of it she does not succeed always. Rather, she strategically deploys her grandmother, sea and often the Radha-Krishna “myth” when it calls for an “alternative medicine”. As Kumar observes:
Kamala Das seriously engages in revisionist myth-making in the ‘Krishna poems’…The immortal love between Radha and Krishna is the central metaphor of bridal mysticism in Indian poetry. Das modernizes this theme in the light of her own experience. (105)

Das has hinted in *My Story* that her mother, herself a renowned Malayalam poet named Balamani Amma, had inspired her to switch on to the working out of this mythic theme. But while various women poets in Malayalam and other Indian languages have entered into the spiritual aspects of the myth as well, Das has succeeded in revising the myth by the “female knowledge of the female experience” (Showalter *The New Feminist Criticism* 14).

While even licit sex was forbidden outside the orbit of the Nair women, we can imagine how the illicit relationship between Radha and Krishna would have shocked the conscience of this orthodox community and even the whole Kerala society. She does not care for the society since Radha and Krishna are portrayed as down-to-earth; there is nothing mystical or transcendental about them. Krishna could be her ideal lover, or the king—of latest poems, her last significant lover who was a politician (Nabar 71). The mythical framework is stretched out to four to five poems like, “Radha”, “Krishna”, “Radha-Krishna”, “Vrindavan” and “The Maggots” (all from *BKD*). The theme remains the same more or less, centering on the vibrancy
of the adulterous (by modern standards) affair between “Radha” and “Krishna”. Das has given a broad hint about her choice of this particular myth in her autobiography while mentioning the phobia associated with sex among women of the best Nair families:

They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi’s legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her… the only heroine whose sex-life seemed comparatively untumultous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jumna for her blueskinned lover. But she was another’s wife and so an adulteress. In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence. (22-23)

While Sita and Draupadi are known for their fidelity to their husband[s], who themselves are ideal heroes protecting their wives’ honour by all means, as per Ramayana and Mahabharata respectively, Das prefers Radha’s persona, whose ideal lover is decidedly outside the wedlock. Her choice is crucial, viewed from an “emancipatory feminist politics” (Felski, 7).

Das has attempted at universalizing her personal mythology as in “Vrindavan”:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman’s mind
and the flute luring her
from home and her husband. (1-3)
In fact, she never admits guilt over her romantic escapades; rather she tries to defend her adulterous relationships as a lover exists “in every woman’s mind” (9). There is, as Mary Eagleton observes, a “celebration of retrieved sexuality” (127) in Das’s deployment of the myth.

The mythopoeic motif is deployed by Das to render a sort of metaphysical aura to their adulterous relationship. But, in no way, it is a digression from the gender issues concerned; it is, adopting Eagleton’s term, an “imaginative continuum” (12), a recurrence of the same pattern. “Vrindavan” romanticizes the Radha-Krishna myth, and fumes the smell off adultery with exquisitely rendered beauty of the experience. Most ironically, Das renders a spiritual garb to their affair in “Radha-Krishna” as if to ridicule the people of Kerala who would accept anything and everything if clad in the spiritual garment:

This becomes from this hour
our river and this old Kadamba
tree, ours alone, for our homeless
souls to return someday,
to hang like bats
from this pure physicality….” (1-6)

The romantic rendezvous is the same river bank and the “old Kadamba tree” as the mythical Radha and Krishna had used. Das concludes that it is
only because the dehi\textsuperscript{4} needs a deham to exist in this world of “pure physicality”, that they have to “return someday”. This statement that their relation far surpasses mere bodily affair is enough to please a rigid society like that of Kerala.

Krishna becomes her sole goal and her way too. Ideologically, Das’s Krishna is entirely different from Sugathakumari’s (a distinguished woman-poet in Malayalam) Krishna, their treatment so different.

“Krishna, neeyenne ariyilla . . .” (‘Krishna, You do not know me’)

Sugathakumari’s speaker does not come into physical contact with her lover; she loves him and her love sprouts and grows in her mind only. She does not need “Krishna’s embrace” to make her chaste. She is not bothered even if her love is not recognized or even not requited. She is concerned only about her unconditional love, in which she indulges wholeheartedly. She considers herself as an ordinary woman, and not of any high rank to be among the gopikas of Krishna. Still her love is so strong that her “mute flute” almost brings him towards her feet, to her “small hut made of mud” (“Krishna, Neeyenne Ariyilla” 1-2), to love’s citadel. Das’s speaker heads to Krishna, admits her love, needs him for her salvation. Sugathakumari’s speaker does not approach her lover directly, but she makes him come to her through the silent strength of her love and devotion. Even while there is a stringent difference between these women-poets in terms of treatment of the theme, the

\textsuperscript{4} Dehi & Deham: As per the Hindu belief, dehi or the soul and the deham or body are not dwaitha or two
intensity of the feeling remains unsurpassed in both. Both the poets hail from Kerala while Das is a bilingual writer too. Ultimately, they share the “female sensibility” and prove what Patricia Spacks has observed: “the experience of women has long been the same, that female likenesses are more fundamental than female differences” (5).

While purely gynocentric thoughts are brought out in the different treatments of love-making with Krishna, the following lines prove to be quite the contrary. “In him…the hungry haste / Of rivers, in me… / the ocean’s tireless waiting” (“Composition” 7-9).

In an andro-centric world, it is always the woman who is “waiting”. Here, Radha is in “long waiting” for Krishna. In the ancient Vaishnavite poet’s concept, the longing of the lover for the beloved is synonymous with the yearning of the Soul for the Eternal. In the above lines, “If 'you' refers to Krishna, then ‘I’ am the soul that longs for the union with the Divine, the eternal attraction of the Atman for the Brahman” (Raghunandan 71). But, it seems that there is nothing transcendental about them as the statement claims to have.

It is notable that Das does not take after her mother, Balamani Amma, herself a renowned poet in Malayalam, or any of her female predecessors in her discourse. She hardly shows any “anxiety of influence”. In fact, her mother, who, being “timid”, “creates an illusion of domestic harmony” (My Story 5), stooping to her husband’s all dictates, is not at all Das’s role-model,
neither in her personal life, nor in her verse. Subsequently, her mother rarely enters into her poetic personae and sometimes becomes a missing link in her sketch of lineage through women.

On the contrary, there are a number of poems centred on her father that clearly bring forth a healthy relationship between him and Das. In “My Father’s Death” (Only the Soul Knows…), she is no more reticent about the character of their relationship, though she admits, “There was a cloud of tension / Between him and me” (38-39). The poem has very poignant undertones of guilt and attempts at self-revelation.

I brought him

Shame, they say. He brought me on each

Short visit some banana chips and

And harsh words of reproach (39-42)

A publishing poet from the 1960s, Das had been shocking the people of Kerala through her controversial writings. “It all began with her autobiography--My Story--that was serialised in the Malayala Nadu weekly” (Iype 2). While there is no apparent attempt to invalidate her father’s reproach:

I was bad, a bad

Daughter, a writer of tales that
Hurt, but in the task of loving

The bad ones were the ablest, yes, (46-49)

But the following lines are sharp arrows aimed at the conservative Kerala society that write off the frank, talented women as "controversial" without checking the honesty of the experience behind their creative attempts. This societal bar could be the reason for “the decreasing number of languages” that a woman uses for communication of her experiences that were mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

…you should

Have asked me who I was, in truth. (46-49, 50-51)

“With a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context” (Parthasarathy 22), Das expresses the sudden but exuberant unleashing of the feminine poetic psyche evidenced by the post-independence period. She created a climate for an honest gesture of a truly “cosmopolitan sensibility”. Scanned together, her poetic oeuvre reveals an uncompromising deal with the “hostile world outside” that forces her to “fit in”, “to belong”. She is relentlessly in pursuit of an ever-elusive liberation from these ideological configurations that lay behind the very order that is considered the established and the ultimate. But her voice is distinct and significant in that she responds differently to the value system enforced by the culture she inhabits.

Further, she has shown how a premature marriage and a sudden uprooting from familiar surroundings makes the subsequent life of an
ordinary woman of Kerala, a “blind walk” through an alley of strange roles, leading nowhere. It becomes ultimately a solipsistic sojourn into her self.

Das, in her isolated struggle to free woman from women, “choosing roads none has walked before” (“The End of Spring”; *BKD* 13), has performed a full circle, starting from “I”, negating the clearly-drawn tracks, and often even crossing them, only to come back to the “I”.

Ultimately, we have seen how Das has deployed the theme of childhood inevitably fused with her ancestral home in Malabar, to bring in so many political, social and cultural practices in Kerala quite unobtrusively. Her poems may still yield further output given the chance of a different cultural perspective. Das stands for the ordinary woman of Kerala for whom the memories of her regional background are so precious for survival. Even in her adult-life, Malabar “thump[s] so/Against” [her memories’] “shore” (“Substitute” 3-4). That is why, even after “years” (“Composition”, 44) of “busy growing” (45), she frankly admits that:

The only secrets I always

Withhold

Are that I am so alone

And that I miss my grandmother. (“Composition” 97-100)