Indian literature in English has emerged as a well-defined branch of learning and among the women poets Kamala Das has distinguished herself with her highly subjective voice. Das's poetry marks a significant phase that the feminine poetic consciousness of India has reached in its development. Her genuine poetic talent has been acknowledged by even her severe critics like Linda Hess. Referring to the throbbing experience behind the words in her poetry, Ayyappa Paniker observes: "Emotional intensity is the mark of her poetry." He states that when her lines possess this intensity, we feel them "smouldering, burning and bursting into flames" ("Veedennal enthu?" 71).

Besides being one of the best-known poets of India, Das is also one of the noted short story writers in Malayalam, her regional language. It may be stated without fear of exaggeration that she is one of the most original of the Indian bilingual writers. Critics like P.P. Raveendran have accorded her a position along with the international group of trans-lingual writers like Milan Kundera, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Samuel Beckett who experience no difficulty whatever in moving from one language to another in their literary works ("Of Masks" 147).

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar has drawn attention to this "'aggressively individualistic' of the new poets" who is a "new phenomenon" in Indian English poetry (677, 680). Compared to the works of her poetic predecessors like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu which may be described as sweetly lyrical and the voice of conformity, the poetry of Das marks the inauguration of a new era. What she articulates through her poetry is "the speech of the mind that is here,
not there, / a mind that sees and hears and is aware" ("An Introduction" 12). Hers is "a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive, largely man-made world" (Iyengar 680). Das gives expression to the smouldering pain of the muted which she has experienced in her life. As a woman who confronts reality in a male-dominated society she is acutely conscious of her femininity with all the contradictory demands made on it by the family and the established society with its apparently irrevocable norms. In spite of her Indian background with its age-old traditions and practices, Das has manifested a genius well known for its candid and outspoken nature. She is basically a romantic at heart and the quest for love and the development of feminine sensibility in her are intertwined. Even though she was brought up in a conservative family, it has not imposed any restriction in her frank mode of expression.

Speaking about being a poet in a society with powerful restraints of convention Das has professed that the kind of inhibited poetry she feels compelled to write under the influence of the milieu is something she does not appreciate fully ("Of Masks" 146). She considers the taste of freedom an essential prerequisite for writing uninhibited poetry. She counts it a blessing that she escaped the interference of others in the development of her poetic talent. She believes that if she had gone for university education, it would have "dumped a lot of junk into her mind"; without it, she found it much more easy to become a "clean" person and she holds the view that this has definitely helped her as a writer ("Of Masks" 147). This view of the poet about her advantage resulting from lack of higher education is reiterated when Paniker points out that her language has "a freshness and vitality not found in the writing of some of the 'over-educated' compatriots of hers" (Preface vi).
Even though Das does not apparently attempt to communicate any philosophical truth or intellectual idea through her poems, they have an inherent value of their own which may be attributed to the intensity of feeling and the uninhibited manner in which she gives expression to the feelings and experiences of woman. Even among the Indian poets who write in English, who are non-conformists as a rule, Das stands out with a distinctive voice of her own. The Time magazine hailed her as "a poet who has broken the sexual barrier and torn the veil of respectability from the hypocritical and self-deluding middle class, exposing its corruption and neurosis" (qtd. in Paranjape xiii).

Far from being the secluded ivory tower artist, she is well aware of her social responsibility as a poet; she considers herself "a chronicler of events" besides being a lyrical poet ("Of Masks" 152). It is this very sense of social responsibility that led her to the writing of My Story, an autobiographical fantasy, which, eventually, heaped a lot of controversial criticism on her and earned for her a name which comes very close to notoriety in the conservative Indian society. It was the need she felt "to disturb society out of its complacency" which prompted her to write such a work ("I Needed to Disturb Society" 167). No wonder critics identify her voice with the voice of the new liberated Indian woman.

Das has a clear idea about the reading public for whom she writes her poems. Speaking about the "dreams" of this "sad mouthed human race" who are mute and insignificant, she cannot help expressing her frustration. She realises that her fellow-beings are deficient in imagination to such an extent that their dreams do not scale the heights "to reach with finger tips / a fringe of summer clouds" nor can they explore the depths of the sea "to count the mermaid's eggs / that lie beneath the anemones" ("Sepia" 3). They are capable
of dreaming only about "limbs and limousines." Things beyond their vision or hearing are beyond their understanding. "The newspaper-hate, the bulge/ in wallets," the "morning tea" and "the weekend's / tired lust" constitute their religion (4). She is the self appointed spokesperson of such a humanity.

With the all-consuming passion of a forest fire, the poet's consciousness embraces within its fold all that comes her way. The bald child in the open pram, the slim lovers behind the tree, the old who sit on the park bench basking in the evening sun, the cavorting cabaret girls, the resounding wedding drums, the eunuchs who "swirl coloured / Skirts and sing sad songs of love," the wounded who moan and the dying mother who yearns for a look at her child all are assimilated into her poetry ("Forest Fire" Only the Soul 134).

As a poet she considers it her duty to report every detail in real life faithfully. She even goes to the extent of identifying herself with her fellow-beings and confronting the different situations in life from their perspective. This quality, a rare virtue in poets, may be seen to be not different from "negative capability" about which Keats has written at length. The capacity which enables the poet to "live in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (qtd. in Bradley 235) is at work in Das's poetry and in My Story. According to critics like Irshad Ahmed, in her creative writings and particularly in her poetry, the imagination which is at work "distorts" and "dissipates" facts in order to "recreate." The systematic demolishing of her self should be seen as a necessary prerequisite in the reconstruction of her self. Ahmed identifies this with "negative capability" (131). No wonder Das finds it possible to identify herself with "the sinner" and "the saint," "the lover and the beloved and with each and every one" who calls himself "I" in this world ("An Introduction" 13). Das refers to writing as an
activity which leads her to discover her own self, "to get closer and closer to (her) true self... It is an activity that cannot be shared, so akin to dying" (Remedios 57). But she identifies herself with her persona to such an extent that it is difficult to disengage the personality of the poet from her writings.

However it may be stated that Das derives her inspiration to write from her own life and experiences. "I can only write about my personal experiences," states the poet, "and being versatile, I see poetry in an experience, and then see good prose coming out of the same experience" ("Of Masks" 149). Rich's statement that to her poems are experiences which contribute to her knowledge and emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it is comparable to these words. This should be seen in the light of the emphasis given to women's experience by feminists. It is from women's lived experience based on inter-personal relationships that feminist epistemology is derived. It is even possible to define feminism in terms of women's experience. This is what Spender has done: "Feminism, a flexible world view... is a set of explanations which make the most sense of my experience and my life and the lives and experiences of many other women I know" ("What is Feminism?" 215).

Das realized how cruel and harsh man could be in his treatment of woman. She wanted to sensitize women of her generation to the fact that if men were not bound by any restricting factors, there was no need for women to feel that they were obliged to obey any restriction. She knew that such an awareness would place women on an equal footing with men. She felt that a radical change was imperative in the society which had such strong inhibitions and which validated lies in public ("I Needed" 167). In a recent interview the poet has expressed her gratification in alleviating the mental and physical sufferings of women in Kerala in their every day life she, too, has played her part by her
writings and speeches ("I Needed" 163).

It is Das’s self-appointed task as a social critic and reformer which makes her raise her voice against hypocrisy and affectation. In her poem titled "Honour," for example, she says that honour is the dearest word of all in the nair dictionary. She elaborates it in the following lines.

... 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...

She goes on to relate how the unfortunate peasant girls were later thrown into wells and ponds from which they rose "like lotuses and waterlilies, each with / A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge below her navel" (138).

Das who exposes the hollowness of the "honour" of her ancestors, and through that the dubious nature of the honour of the menfolk in general in established society in this stark manner can speak with equal ease about an illicit affair which she calls her own:

Yet I never can forget
The only man who hurts,
The only one who seems to know
The only way to hurt ("The Suicide" 30)

Das considers it inevitable to identify herself with her fellow-beings and write poetry from their perspective. Referring to what is real in My Story she has stated:

Whether something happened to me or to another woman is immaterial. What really matters is the experience, the incident. It may have happened to another woman who is probably too timid to
write about it. I wanted to chronicle the times we lived in and I had to write about the experience ("I Needed" 165).

The brutal honesty of Das's writing is shocking. She has daringly admitted that even the experiences narrated in My Story were authentic. In her poem "An Introduction" she asserts her own self. Even though others may want her to be someone to their liking, she makes it clear that she is not prepared to change her individuality which is something like a birthmark in her. In this context it may be pointed out that Das's subject matter is said to be her own "personality: beautiful, sensitive, bold and tormented" (Kohli 21-22). In My Story she states that "a poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality" (157). She admits that although she writes with a lot of detachment, she does figure in her writings, unless when she is writing a short story.

Das's poems incorporate the stuff of the real world and of the dream world. She has a genuine talent, the skill of an alchemist, to mix fact with fiction in the right proportion to evolve a "mandarin" language which is fascinating (Pathak 50) Das sincerely believes that a creative writer should live in two different worlds -- a world that is supposed to be real and one that is only a shadow of this real world, an unreal world-- at the same time, simultaneously enjoying the fruits of both ("Of Masks" 149). As a creative writer, she considers it possible for her to perfect her life by adding things which may not really have happened to her. She believes that unless fantasy is added to reality, one's writing is likely to be "as drab as white khaddar" ("Of Masks" 150). Probably the secret of the authentic and convincing manner in which she portrays the experiences of life is that the world of imagination is at least as much real to her as the world of reality. Her own words bear witness to this rare trait in her: "There is some discovery which I made recently that while I live I cannot write
and while I write I cannot live. Either live or write poetry. I cannot do both at
the same time” (“Of Masks”150).

The themes that recur in Das’s poetry such as the quest for love,
death-wish, the longing to restore childhood innocence, obsession with guilt,
all may be interpreted in terms of the confessional mode of writing. Without
the slightest compunction, she asserts, “I must let my mind striptease / I must
extrude / autobiography” (“Composition” 79). Keki N. Daruwalla points out
how Das explores relationships and her inner world of failings and frustration
through her poetry (xxvi). According to another critic, her poetry abounds in
“details of misery and grief, loneliness and helplessness, death and disease,
coldness and frigidity, frustration and dejection” (Singh 254). This vein of her
writing is quite significant since it allies her with the Confessional school. It is
found in the writings of the confessional poets in general, such as Anne Sexton,
Allen Ginsberg, Snodgrass and Roethke, that each of them seems to be “obsessed
with some sort of open and vainly superior receptacle of traumatic experiences,
sex-torments, guilt and encounters with disorder and death along with a
cultivated contempt for the establishment” (Jha 49).

The confessional mode adopted by Das in writing poetry necessitates the
peeling off of layers of her self, in narrating “the ordinary events of an ordinary
life” (“Composition” 81). She speaks out in daring tones and without the least
trace of inhibition her innermost feelings and sentiments. In “A Souvenir of
Bone” her woman persona says, “My desires / Were many, if granted freedom I
knew they would burn / Down like tongues of flame, the monastic peace of my
home” (Only the Soul 79).

Das’s frank way of writing has made her a controversial figure in literary
circles. The overt references in her poetry which unveil even intimate physical
details in heterosexual relationships and the physiological details generally considered taboo by society make her poetry disagreeable to the conservative. Most of these poems have a woman persona as the speaking subject and this leads the majority of readers to identify the subject with the poet herself.

It is noteworthy that the confessional mode requires that the poet should give the illusion of a true confession whether the facts presented are authentic or not. This mode of writing demands of the poet “a willingness to put oneself on the line, to expose one’s follies and errors, one’s conflicting desires as Lowell does in his best work” (Perloff, “Private Lives” 136). Confessional poetry is marked by sexual candour, private humiliations and a tone of utter sincerity. In the poetry of Das, many of these qualities can be perceived. Private humiliations and grievances have always been the themes of her poetry. But, as E.V Ramakrishnan indicates, Das has “perfected” a way of treating the most intimate experiences “without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos.” He insists that a distinction should be drawn between the autobiographical “I” and the confessional “I” in this genre of poetry. However the poet does not feel shy of “flaunting” a "grand flamboyant lust” through her poetry (“Freaks” 42). It may be observed that even though “a good deal of tinkering with fact,” as Robert Lowell calls it, may be expected in her poetry, it has its mainspring in her own life (qtd.in Perloff, “The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell” 80)

The poet seems to validate her own policy in the following words: "A writer derives inspiration from his life, what else? A writer is like a mirror that has learnt to retain the image reflected in it: indelible reflection. Those who do not write retain nothing of life, ultimately Life runs through their fingers like fine sand" (qtd. in Remedios 57).
Even though the range of her experience was limited, she exploited her resources in an appreciable manner. In this respect, she may be compared to Jane Austen who is well-known for her “two inches of ivory.” Like Austen, Das too moves "within her limited range with grace and skill" (Dwivedi 119). Das writes about persons and experiences she is familiar with in real life situation after subjecting them to a process of transmutation through her imagination. However there are a few poems where she seems to be opening her heart articulating her sincere feelings and hurts.

According to Adil Jussawalla, Das writes almost exclusively of "love, sex, and loneliness"(86). The following lines indicate the terrible nature of the loneliness experienced by her: "At three in the morning / I wake trembling from dreams of a stark white loneliness, / like bleached bones cracking in the desert sun was my loneliness" (“Ghanashyam” Only the Soul 95). In the "Anamalai Hills" the poet hears the mountain speak: “I was alone, I am alone, I will be alone..." (149).

The feeling of loneliness and aridity can be traced back to the childhood days of the poet when she felt as if she were neglected by her parents. She considered herself as a child born “of an arid union of parents who were “dissimilar” and “mismated” (My Story 4,5). Her father, an “autocrat” who used to shout at children was singularly devoted to his office work; and her mother, a poet, did not encourage any intimacy. The parents were “an ill-assorted couple” but her mother’s timidity helped to put up "a show of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends" (5). The parents took the children for granted and considered them “mere puppets” (74). In addition to this, Das was haunted by a sense of physical inferiority because of her dark complexion. This had its psychological impact on her as her own words seem to suggest: "i was born fair
but within weeks like the rolled gold bangles on the poor ladies arms my skin grew tarnished i was the first dark girl in the family there was something tainted in me of this i was aware" (qtd. in Kohli 31).

In order to get a clear insight into Das’s fragmented adult life with its overwhelming despair projected through her poems, a probe into her childhood memories would be helpful. In My Story we are told about the breakdown of her childhood world. When her mother left Calcutta following a severe attack of typhoid, along with the younger children and her elder brother went to Madras to study medicine, she stayed on in Calcutta. It was a life of loneliness and unhappiness for the young girl: "Whenever all of us got together and began to feel secure, some cruel illogical destiny always rudely brought the edifice down like a house of cards"(81).

She was shocked to realize that she was “a burden and a responsibility neither (her) parents nor (her) grandmother could put up with for long (82). Without giving any attention to her wishes and without considering whether she was mature enough for a married life, they hastily fixed her marriage when she was just sixteen.

She was hopeful of getting love out of this new relationship. She expected her life partner to be "all that (she) had wanted (her) father to be, and (her) mother." She wanted "conversation, companionship and warmth" (84). But it was not fulfilment or insight into new dimensions about her own self that she derived from this, but despair and a sense of shame and she was disillusioned with marriage. She had expected her husband to take her in his arms and stroke her face, her hair, her hands and whisper loving words (84). But the experience that was meted out to the young girl was abjectly humiliating. Her "woman-body felt so beaten" ("An Introduction” 12). It was indeed an excruciating
experience for a girl who was still in her teens.

Here the concept of love on the part of a young girl who is still in her adolescence should be taken into consideration. To a teenager love is something ethereal and dreamlike. As she narrates in one of her poems, love, to a young girl who takes delight in writing verse, drawing pictures and going out with friends for walks, is a synonym for friendship ("Love" 35). As she states in My Story, sex was far from her thoughts (84). It was just a few summers before that she enjoyed herself in the company of her brother drawing the toy cart by a string and listening to the clatter of the wheels, playing with "the sprightly dee da dum of the red-painted drum," making paper boats, counting cars in the Park Street of Calcutta and watching the noon day ponds in silence in Malabar ("To a Big Brother" 10).

In this context it should be remembered that Das has the rare gift of perceiving life through the artless vision of a child, untouched by guile or malice and untainted by the artificialities of culture (Titus 134). When she renders childhood experiences, whether in poetry or prose, it has a special appeal to the readers, even though she has a tendency to look back at childhood through rose-coloured spectacles. The "hum of a few sunny dreams / trampled into childhood soil" re-echoes every now and then in her poetry, rendering it deliciously sweet to our palate. The charming childhood memories like "the clatter of wheels drawn by a string on gravel" and the temple built by her brother and herself with cardboard and in which a candle was lit" stand out in our memory ("To a Big Brother").

Though she was told that she had grown up, it did not make much difference to her. Her grandmother cried when she took her bath in the pale green pond of her family house in Malabar: "Darling, you must stop this bathing now. / You
are much too big to play / Naked in the pond" ("The Suicide" 29).

The male perception of a sixteen year old girl is as a woman. It may be pointed out that the difference between her own view of herself as a child, and the male perception of her as a woman results in the agonizing experience Das's sixteen-year old persona goes through in the poem.

. . . When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask for, he drew a youth of sixteen into his bedroom and shut the door. He did not beat me but my sad woman - body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank pitifully . . . ("An Introduction" 12).

There is reason to believe that the incident left a deep scar in the sensibility of the poet, if it is taken for granted that the poem has relevance to her real life. In My Story she has recorded her disillusionment when she realized with disgust that her lot in life was to be the "victim of a young man's carnal hunger" (85). This was enough to drive her on a quest in search of "real" love which would complement and enrich her identity and make her attain fulfilment in life.

In Das the quest for love is entangled with the quest for identity, which, in turn, is a significant aspect of feminist poetry. It has been observed that the intensity of Das's search for the roots of being brings her close to Dickinson and Plath (Sreenivasan 77). Sreenivasan asserts that "John Wain's homage to Dickinson that 'she is deep rather than wide . . . She has scarcely a poem that does not go deeply to the root of existence' can as well be paid to Kamala Das with some qualifications" (77).

It is possible that Das was spurred on to this quest by the void left in her by the death of her grandmother who loved her without reservation. There was not another person to whom she could look up in her hour of need. A number of
references to this lady can be seen dispersed in her poetry. In "A Hot Noon in Malabar" she speaks about the shelter provided by the red-tiled home in Malabar being withdrawn from her since she is "so far away." In "My Father's Death" she refers to the woman who was "generous with her love," who is no more. The death of her grandmother was a severe blow to her and it left her desolate and disconsolate.

The only secrets I always withhold are that I am so alone and that I miss my grandmother ("Composition" 79)

The only consolation she seems to have received in her turbulent life was from the nostalgic memories of the days she spent at Punnayurkulum:

... you cannot believe, darling, can you, that I lived in such a house and was proud and loved? I who have lost my way and beg now at stranger's (sic) doors to receive love, at least in small change? ("My Grandmother's House" 21)

In "Composition" the persona confesses how she failed to keep her word to her grandmother who had asked her to spend one night in her company in the old family-home. This is apparently an incident taken from Das's real life. She relates in the poem how she regrets even now that her grandmother's lamp burned / all night / on the window-sill" (81). In My Story Das has related the incident depicted here in detail. She states that it was her father who dissuaded her from going to the Nalapat home that windy night. The house was four hundred years old and its rafters shook in the wind. He did not let his daughter...
spend a night in "that ramshackle house". Das narrates that at four o’clock in the morning she woke up and was worried to see the lamp still burning on the window sill. It symbolized for her "the loneliness of old age" (112). She says that her grandmother did not refer to this incident or betray her disappointment. Probably she had realized that her "grandchild who had once lain against her body at night to fall asleep had grown out of the need for the kind of love that only the old could give" (112). The grandmother passed away before the poet could get an opportunity to make amends for her failure.

The grandmother and the family-home at Malabar symbolize for Das childhood innocence and enduring affection which instil in her a sense of security. The mother-daughter relationship, an important trope in feminist writing is touched upon here by Das. Her nostalgic memory of the old house at Nalapat and her longing to return to the blissful company of her grandmother may be viewed in this light. It even invites comparison with the sentiments expressed by Rich: "to return to one's mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her" (Of Woman Born 218). This may be interpreted as a feminist attempt "to relocate a new centre in the physical bonding of mother and daughter, changing the lines of filiation from one's father to the mother" (Vijayasree 138).

The poet speaks about the heavy loss she suffered through the death of her grandmother:

Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death;
I wonder why the ache still persists . . .

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

... All through the sun singing
Day, all through the moon wailing night, I think
Of her, of the warmth that she took away,
... no longer was
There someone to put an arm around my
Shoulders without a purpose. ("The Millionaires at Marine Drive" 71)

These lines indicate how the picture of her grandmother looms large above the cloud of despair as a symbol of love (Nair 35).

The prime concern of Das as a poet is with man-woman relationships, or rather, with love in its manifold aspects. Critics seem to be more or less unanimous in describing Das as a poet of love. Iyengar observes that "her sensibility seems to be obsessively preoccupied with love and lust" (679). Nabar states that there is "indeed a lot of love" in her poems (19). Eunice de Souza states that Das writes about "love, or rather, the failure of love or the absence of love with the obsessiveness of a woman who can realize her being fully only through love" (85). Sreenivasan asserts that Das is preoccupied with "love in its undisguised, purely physical form in a way reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence" ("The Poetry" 74). A.N. Dwivedi holds the view that Das is "primarily a poet of love" and that she is preoccupied with "an intense search for love" (121). Raveendran maintains that it is "the quest for intimacy" that is 'pervasive' in Das's poetry ("The Ideology of Intimacy" xi). Sunanda P. Chavan asserts that the experience of love is a multi-dimensional phenomenon in Das, involving tensions of different kinds (The Fair Voice 61).

It is her bold treatment of man-woman relationships which makes her poetry remarkable. In "An Introduction" after narrating the humiliating experience of the sixteen year old girl who asked for love, Das goes on to describe the revolt of the young girl: "... Then I wore a shirt / and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of / this womanliness..." Her rebellious spirit
refused to listen to voices of conformity which exhorted her to "dress in sarees, be girl or be wife, ... Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreler / with servants." Being a non-conformist, she found it difficult to "fit in" as the "categorizers" wanted her to do (12 - 13).

Such difficulty to "fit in" or conform to the accepted order is not something unique to Das. Feminists, in general, have written about this turbulent phase they had gone through in their lives. De Beauvoir has observed that society has a tendency to view any woman who does not conform to its set conventions as eccentric. This would lead women to choose to keep their natural proclivities in check rather than appear eccentric in the eyes of society (759). Spender, too, has written about the difficulty she experienced to "fit in" ("What Is Feminism?" 211).

In order to make a proper study of Das's poetry, it becomes necessary to delve deep into the complex nature of love as it manifests itself in her poetry and gives a kaleidoscopic view of woman from different angles of vision. In order to analyse this phenomenon in its complexity, an enquiry on multiple planes will have to be undertaken.

As has already been pointed out, there are critics who are of the view that Das's concern in depicting man-woman relationships is with love in its undisguised, purely physical form. A number of her poems bring out this aspect in her. In "Gino" Das's persona speaks about serving herself in "bedroom-mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter / while he lies watching, fair conqueror of another's / country" (56). It is with a kind of total abandon that the poet deals with man-woman relationship declaring how unconcerned she is about spoiling her reputation. In her poem of the title "Spoiling the Reputation" the woman persona articulates her disregard and even scorn for those who
advise her not to spoil her name. What she counts to be of real value in life is the total involvement with a man, which, she thinks, should not be denied to "each 'nameless' corpuscle" in her. It is evident that the poet experiences hardly any inhibition in depicting intimate human relationships with clinical detachment. In "The Looking Glass" she takes the stance of a veteran in the art of love making and states that getting a man to love is easy for a woman provided she is honest about her wants as a woman. A number of precepts are administered. The woman is asked to stand nude before the glass with him so that he sees himself the stronger one. She should remember to admit her admiration for him. All the fond details that make him male, the poem says, should be taken note of. Then an exhortation to woman follows:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers . . . . (Only the Soul 55)

She can articulate the need for a date with clinical detachment, as the following lines in "A New City" indicate. "I have come with only a picnic bag to this new city, / to seek a blind date, to shed, as snakes do, in coils and coils / my weariness." Here the persona states her intention "to awake anew at the touch of a strange young / mouth" (87).

In spite of the conservative Indian background of the poet, she is capable of giving vent to the feelings of a passionate woman in a daring, forthright and uninhibited manner. Speaking about the "energy of utterance and daring of tone" which are the distinctive attributes of her writing, Kohli says that they would "instantly attract notice were they found in another but lesser talent"
Even when she gives detailed descriptions of the intensity of the moment of physical union, unlike Dickinson she does not make any attempt to "say it slant":

... We were earth under hot sun.
There was a burning in our veins
and the cool mountain nights did
nothing to lessen heat. When he and
I were one we were neither
male nor female ("Convicts" 38)

The image of two suns each raging to burn the other out to suggest the intensity of passion occurs in "Conflagration." In the poem the woman is the forest conflagration which should burn the forest, the man, warming the cool streams of his eternal flesh till at last "they boiling flow, so turbulent with life." In "Winter" the warmth of the physical union is depicted against the image of the cold winter evenings. In her poem "In Love," "the burning mouth of sun" is suggestive of the glow of passion. In "The Testing of the Sirens" there is a similar reference to "my limbs / warm from love..." Later in the poem we see the woman posing to be photographed, lying down against the rusty nineteen-thirty four guns, with eyes shut, ready to smile:

... but inside eyelids, there was
no more night, no more love or peace, only the white, white sun
burning, burning, burning...
Ah why does love come to me like pain
again and again and again? (59)

Philip Lindsay, writing about Judith Wright observes: "Other women have sung of love, but apart from Sappho... none have written honestly and
without shame of their desires" (qtd. in Kohli 29). It can be seen that the compliment Lindsay pays Wright applies to Das as well. Her explicit treatment of sex, extra-marital affairs and unconventional relationships brought no little 'notoriety' to her. It is noteworthy to remember that Nalapat Narayana Menon, her mother's uncle, an acclaimed poet for whom she cherished great regard, has written, among other works Rati Samrajya, "an academic study based on the writings of Havelock Ellis and Indian sexologists" (My Story 23). It is possible that Das was inspired to treat this aspect of life with such candour under the influence Menon might have had on her.

The theme of frustration in love is another noteworthy factor in Das's poetry. "In poem after poem, there emerges the dark sinewy figure of femininity complaining of the failure of love: a wild shriek of despair fills every room until the walls visibly wobble," observes Paniker ("Peacocks" 26-27). According to Parthasarathy, few of her poems, have escaped the note of despair (30). This is probably because in spite of the intense nature of her quest, what she meets with in real life is disappointing to her. In "The Freaks" the poet unveils a stark situation in which the female perception of the male partner is shockingly unromantic. He is far from attractive with his "sun-stained cheek" and "dark cavern" of a mouth with "stalactites of uneven gleaming teeth." Kohli suggests that this poem, coming as it does from a woman poet, reveals an important facet of woman's psychology of love in her refusal to be pinned down to a passive man (11). A man who is lacking in soul, and makes love with his limbs and his robust lust alone, "grunting, groaning, sighing" is not capable of overpowering her. She has no regard for such a person; she entertains him just for the fun of it, says the poet in "Cat in the Gutter": "I was just a high bred kitten / Rolling for fun in the gutter . . ." (Only the Soul 103).
There are many lines in Das which suggest that the woman persona is disappointed at the prospect of love-making which has nothing to do with love. When the need for love professed by Das's woman persona in "The Suicide" who prefers to die rather than face the possibility of going without love is contrasted with the disgust expressed in "Convicts" about the meaninglessness of "... the only kind of love, / this hacking at each other's parts / like convicts. ... breaking clods," the great distance traversed from the hope of fulfilment in love to utter despair and disillusionment becomes quite clear. This is in a way similar to the disastrous change brought about by "the malevolent alchemy of the city air" which turns gold into lead as the poet shows in "Summer 1980."

In this context it should be remembered that the city air has exerted its influence on the poet to no little extent. Das has been referred to as a poet of the city like Ezekiel (Kohli 45). In spite of there being an anguished awareness of her having incurred some loss in adopting the city as her home, which is there in Ezekiel too, Das is not indifferent to the pleasures of being in a city (45). She uses the metaphor of the city for life in her poem, "A New City." Das records in My Story that it was Calcutta that gifted her with the beautiful sight of the eunuchs' dance for the first time (157). She derived the inspiration to write "The Dance of the Eunuchs," from this. Paying close attention to the details of their performance, she writes: "Some beat their drums; others beat thir sorry breasts / And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy" (60).

In My Story, Das writes about the corrupting influence of Calcutta. She refers to Calcutta as "a playground for children between the ages of twenty and eighty" and its winter as "the cocktail season" (147). Her relationship with Calcutta was one that evolved with time and through the different phases of her growth. She who had spent her childhood and adolescence in Calcutta,
later returned to it as a married woman and the mother of a boy-child. During this period she was thrown into a world of cocktail parties patronized by the city's luminaries which was not quite to her taste. In "Of Calcutta" she laments the transformation that has come over her life and the thirty years that have gone waste.

In "Farewell to Bombay" we are struck by the genuine pain experienced while bidding farewell to the city. The persona here takes leave of the city, bequeathing her tears and smiles to newcomers:

To the streets that I never walked
But in dreams, to lips that I never kissed
But in dreams, to children
Lovely as flowers, out of me
Never born (Only the Soul 38)

"The House-Builders," another Bombay poem depicts Telugu workers crawling up the scaffoldings, "building houses for the alien rich," and humming away to themselves "scraps of Telugu songs" (146).

Delhi also figures in her poems. She writes about her house crouching in dust in the evenings when "the buffaloes tramp / Up the road, the weary herdsmen / Singing soft Punjabi songs" ("The Snobs" 41). Her discovery that all Delhi streets were fragrant and murky made her feel very young as she records in My Story. She also mentions that she picked up a handful of friends in Delhi who were well-read and intellectual (162).

It was while Kamala Das and her husband were staying in Colombo that anti-Tamil riots broke out there. It left a lasting imprint on the sensibility of the poet and she has composed a few poems which depict "the whirring planes" ("A Certain Defect in the Blood?") and "the silenced streets" ("Smoke in Colombo")
where the smoke lingers on even after the fire was "dead" in the rubble and the ruins." The unsavoury plight of the Tamils none of whom was in sight on the streets of Colombo is the theme of the poem, "After July": "Like rodents they were all holed up in fear." It was as if Hilter had risen from the dead, hailing the robust Aryan blood and condemning the dark Dravidians. The poet posits the idea that perhaps something in our blood has made us the land's inferiors: "A certain muddiness in the usual red / Revealing our non Aryan descent . . ." ("A Certain Defect" 135). Her concern for the race becomes explicit when she expresses the hope that perhaps in a kinder country their stigma might stay unrecognized and the children might feel free to play again under the benign skies of summer months. As Paniker has remarked, "Das is not unmindful of public affairs even though her major concern is with personal experiences" (Preface vi).

Das's own comment on the stint she had in Sri Lanka is like this: "I was in Lanka for two years and came back in June, feeling like Cinderella at 1 a.m." (Nabar vi). She makes it very clear that terrorism and the cult of violence should be fought against. Das's concern for the welfare of humanity is manifest in Delhi-1984 "where she laments over "the dry-eyed adherents / of the newest cult" who practise violence as a religion as it were (120). She refers to this "brand new cult of killing "in yet another poem,"If Death Is Your Wish." She calls the practitioners of violence "the curse of this decade." They are bent on cleaving this earth into two; or with a clap they may "shatter / like an unblest babe and its cradle / this accursed decade and what it holds" ("If Death" 115). These lines provide sufficient proof to show that Das is apprehensive regarding the future of humanity.

During all those years the quest for love was an important mission for the
poet as is reflected in her creative writings. In her lines on sensual love the suggestion of the lack of fulfilment cannot be overlooked. Das's woman persona declares that she does not call this "skin-communicated thing" love at all ("In Love" 36). Even though there is the race towards love, all that is realized is "tripping idly over / puddles of desire" ("The Freaks" 42). What she does here is drawing a hard and fast line between love and lust.

It has been suggested that like Ezekiel, Das is a "poet of the body" (Kohli 34). The acceptance of one's body, its nakedness and its individuality is a theme which is pervasive in her writing. A readiness to accept the female body as her own, as a source of potential imagery can be perceived in her poetry. This, again, is a trait she shares in common with the feminists since woman's body is a prime source of imagery in feminist writing. The female body was considered impure for long by patriarchal norms and even reference to the woman's body was considered indiscreet and taboo. Feminists in general, and French feminists in particular, react against this by "writing the body," thus celebrating womanhood.

The disgust for a body which is no more attractive after a surgery is expressed in "The Tom-Tom":

... At last you too are finished.  
Hope, rise no more, you piteous thing,  
Paint up your husk, thirty seven year-old woman.  
Let your armpits exude Revlon Intimate mist, with half your  
Ovaries out, even the soft voice that you had is now.  
A sexless groan... (Collected Poems 77)

However, it appears that it is not only such "paltry, human details of the body that disturb the poet but also the fact that it cannot be called her own..."
possession. It is, in fact, "a toy" owned by someone else, and her rebellious spirit finds the very idea intolerable as indicated by the following lines in "Gino": "... this body / burdened with lenience, slender toy owned / by man of substance" (57). Such an attitude is quite typical of a feminist, a woman who is quite conscious of her identity who would like to call her body her own. In this context it may be pointed out that feminists are acutely aware of the patriarchal tendency to denigrate woman as an object or a possession of man, which they have always resisted. De Beauvoir, Rich, Millett, Spender and Steinem are some of the feminists who have raised their voice against it. Apart from the feminist perception the tragedy of physical love is that it cannot survive the passing phase of youth and beauty. In "Age" Das calls love "youth time's magic". This explains the alarm and helplessness she felt when "One night I woke to find age stick a crusty finger down my throat" (Collected Poems 34). The poet who sang:

I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead: just dead ("The Suicide" 28)

seems to be displaying a flamboyant lust, "the sad lie of my unending lust" ("In Love" 36) in these lines since she is well aware of the hollowness of this kind of love:

What have
we had, after all, between us but the
womb's blinded hunger, the muted whisper
at the core...  
("Captive" Only the Soul 91)

It is the painful realization that spiritual fulfilment is beyond her reach through
sex with her lover that causes frustration in her:

Can this man with
Nimble finger tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers? ("The Freaks" 42)

In a letter Das has stated, “Sex I can get in abundance from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for.” (qtd. in Chavan, "The Unity" 143).

Kohli asserts that Das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman’s ambivalence (27). He is of the view that this ambivalence is rooted in her duality; as she has a good deal of the conventional woman in her make up, she is in a position to speak of the common woman and her basic need for love and security as an insider; along with this she has the desire for an independence which is consistent with a non-domestic mode of living. Probably herein lies the explanation for those poems of Das which depict marital relationships that are far from blissful.

The absence of the traditional image of the feminine mystique is significant in the poetry of Das. It indicates the consistent rejection by the poet of the image of woman approved by established society. She has positively defied the traditional image of woman in a bourgeois society in her prose articles too; “I could not allow myself to be domesticated” she admits in an article (“I Have Lived Beautifully” 41). This throws light on the unconventional frame of mind she possesses.

The vision of her future as the life partner of “the man of substance” projected in “Gino” is one totally devoid of bliss. The body “shall wither, battling with his / impersonal lust”; or, it “shall grow gross / and reach large proportions before its end” (57). The total absence of love in marriage looms large in these
lines. Such lines vindicate the criticism levelled against Das's attitude to love and sex as one of "blatant defiance of conventions" (Raghunandan 89). But if there is a slight shift in perspective, the lines may be read as a social criticism of conventional marriages where lack of love strikes a note of discord and still goes unheeded.

However it is indeed difficult to explain the fears about old age as expressed in "Gino" and other poems. Worries primarily about the possibilities of economic insecurity also seem to underlie the lines: "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." Her fear about being a patient on the hospital-bed can easily be understood. But the fact that she has listed the prospect of being a grandmother along with these fears is something that appears incongruous. Moreover, she can think of just one thing that she may execute as a grandmother -- "willing away her belongings, those scraps and trinkets / more lasting than her bones" (57). Here, once again, she seems to be apprehensive about her financial position in her old age.

Though Das seems to be "unused / to chores all except that of kindling love" ("The Sensuous Woman Ill" 144), she is not unaware of the prime concerns of middle class women in Indian society. Even those who are laid up as patients in hospitals will be obsessed with thoughts about their household chores from which they find it difficult to release themselves. In "Death of the Goat" the woman persona who is feverish is pictured as worrying about the smell of the Tur Dal burning even in her delirious state. In "The Word is Sin" "there is reference to women in cancer wards brooding over "branded cattle on their last long walk / past mountain passes" more than all "their new kitchen sinks"(145).

The poet seems to deny herself the "myth" of domestic bliss, as one is led...
to surmise from the following lines in "Anamalai Poems" VI:

No, not for me the beguiling promise of
domestic bliss, the goodnight kiss, the weekly
letter that begins with the word dearest,
not for me the hollowness of marital
vows and the loneliness of a double bed (156)

If at all life yields its true meaning, it is only “in early youth or in weary / age . . .” says Das's persona ("Anamalai Poems" IX). She has no faith regarding the middle years of life, as the following lines indicate. " . . . The middle is an opaque / glass pane, muddled by finger prints / In meaninglessness, trapped . . ." (157).

However, in “Life’s Obscure Parallel” where a woman's encounter with death is portrayed, "gaudy memory" is seen erasing the daintier ones and the memory that lingers until the end is that of her baby; in other words, it is her own vision of herself as a mother that makes life meaningful to her: “Was there a baby once in my bed for which / Goblets of breasts swelled burdened with milk and love?” (110).

There are lines in Das's poetry which suggest an endeavour on the part of the woman persona to project the image of a happy wife. But there is an unmistakable suggestion of failure which cannot escape our attention.

But,
I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife (“The Suicide” 28)
Dale Spender, a committed feminist has admitted a similar predicament she experienced in her personal life. “Publicly much of my energy went into projecting an image of wedded bliss. Privately I would occasionally drop my defences and admit to disappointment” (“What is Feminism?” 211).

In “The Old Playhouse” Das’s woman persona confesses that she entered into a relationship with the man not to gather knowledge about him but “to learn what I was and by learning, to learn to grow.” But soon she is shocked to realize that the effect of tasting “the magic loaf” of marriage is that she is cowering beneath the monstrous ego of the husband: “I ate the magic loaf and /became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason” (100). She resolves to revolt against him since he imposes measures which hamper her personality. She has to fortify herself against his technique of serving his love in lethal doses. Commenting on these lines Eunice de Souza says that “it is impossible not to be moved by ... the ultimate resilience in the face of any relationship that threatens to devastate her vital and potential self” (86).

Das identifies herself with the feminists when she brings out the pernicious effect of marriage on a woman; loss of identity and deprivation of will and reason will be the inevitable outcome of marriage according to feminists. They point out the way man uses woman for the furtherance of his ego in bonds of marriage expecting abnegation on her part. Millett, for example, observes that “to each masquerading male the female is a mirror in which he beholds himself” (28). Her words echo the famous statement made by Woolf on women’s role down the ages. She states: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (A Room 36).

Das’s personal observation on marriage is relevant in this context.
According to her what happens in ideal marriages is “the slow decay of personalities, the gradual degeneration of minds and the death of the spirit.” An ideal marriage is defined by her, as “a bond in which both (marriage partners) become mental cripples and cling on to each other until death” (qtd.in Nabar 86). In “Substitute” there is again, what appears to be a frank admission of failure:

It is hard to believe
That I only lost,
Lost all, lost even
What I never had  (Only the Soul 53)

In “Composition”, her longest poem, there is a reiteration of this: “To be frank I have failed” (83). This harping on the theme of disappointment in love in poem after poem makes critics wonder whether it has any personal significance for Das. It is this sense of sheer despair combined with her rebellious nature which prompts Das to advise her fellow-beings to fall in love in a suicidal venture:

I tell myself
and all of you...
fall in love
fall in love with an unsuitable person,
fling yourself on him
like a moth on a flame.
Let there be despair in every move.
Excavate
deep, deep pain  (“Composition” 83)
Das, however, seems to have reservations about falling in love, as some of her prose works also seem to suggest. In her story “A Doll for the Child Prostitute” the character Ayee makes a remark which sounds like Das’s own: “Falling in love with men is a dangerous thing. It is like tying oneself with a rope. If you do not love any man, you remain free” (52).

If the marriage did not turn out to be successful the husband was to be blamed for it. The incompatibility of the couple had its beginning in the infidelity of the husband:

. . . he folded
Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
Pleasures that had come his way, richer harvests of
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine; the embers died
Within me then (“Of Calcutta” Collected Poems 59)

She goes on to narrate how she lay at night in silence and thought of human love. The theme of infidelity of the husband is dealt with in “A Faded Epaulet on his Shoulder” too. Here the poet laments: “even a fair-skinned maid servant could / take him away from me for hours . . .” (Only the Soul 124). A further charge which is even more grave is levelled against the husband in the following lines:

. . . You let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands . . .
. . . You let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others’ arms . . . (“A Man is a Season” Collected Poems 80)

The charges levelled against the “fond husband” pictured as an “old fat spider” in “The Stone Age” are numerous:
You turn me into a bird of stone,

a granite dove,

You build round me a shabby drawing room

and stroke my face absentmindedly while you read.

With loud talk

You bruise my pre-morning sleep,

you stick a finger into my dreaming eye. (97)

These complaints remind one of the outburst of Ibsen's Nora who slams the door on the face of her husband in asserting her freedom as an individual.

The poet contends that the male chauvenistic attitude makes women out to be mere playthings. She speaks about innocent young girls presented by serfs to their landlords as living toys who are later thrown into wells and ponds, in "Honour." There is also a reference to women who have chosen to be self-appointed toys in "Composition."

With their greying hair,

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

who can say, looking at them,

that they are toys

fit for the roaring nights? (82)

Das harps on the same idea in "The Latest Toy":

It was indeed awkward for him when the latest toy

Began to speak after the day's best games were over.

A toy at best must only squeak, even his costliest

Ones did only that, all those plump walkie talkie dolls,

But this little thing spoke unfamiliar words in

A voice, softened as though with tears . . . (Collected Poems 89)
The predicament of a wife, according to Das, is no different from this: "A hausfrau for his home, and yet another nodding / Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to / Warm his bed at night" ("Of Calcutta" Collected Poems 59). A man who lets a woman take his name in order to make her feel she belongs cannot satisfy her ("Afterwards" 8). The rebellious attitude of the poet who questions the sanctity of the institution of marriage which is approved by the established society is evident in such lines.

But we are left to wonder whether it is the husband alone who is to be blamed for what follows since in poem after poem the woman persona admits her own failings. For example, in the poem "A Man is a Season" we find the confession of guilt: "Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps / I went astray. How would a blind wife trace her lost / Husband, how would a deaf wife hear her husband call?" (Collected Poems 80). It is despair which makes Das pronounce the epigrammatic statement that "fidelity in love / is only for the immortals" ("Mortal Love" 64). Whereas the woman persona depicted in "Blood" is one who is proud of "the oldest blood in the world / a blood thin and clear and fine" (15), the one in "My Grandmother's House" has degenerated into the plight of begging "at strangers' doors / to receive love, at least in small change" (21). Here we find the poet throwing to the wind the concern for conventions and social prudery and eagerly making a scoop for the longed for freedom from shackles. It may be said that this daring manner in which Das speaks about herself is the distinctive mark of her poetry. As C.V. Venugopal puts it, "Whatever may be the standing of Das as a poet, credit should solely go to her for rebelling so gloriously against the unjust domination of the so-called 'stronger sex'" (144).

Another dimension which may be attributed to Das's love poetry is spiritual. The quest for love which has special relevance in Das's poetic ethos
assumes spiritual dimension in her poetry. Ideal love, according to her, is fulfillment on the physical and psychic levels. As a critic puts it, it is “the experience beyond sex through sex” (Chavan, The Fair Voice 61). The realization that spiritual fulfillment is unattainable through sex with her husband makes her see the meaninglessness of married life (61). She wants to know the real nature of her own being which the sexual parameters may define and asks her husband, “am I hetero / am I lesbian / or am I just plain frigid?” (“Composition” 78).

All that she knows for certain is that he had promised her as much freedom as she wanted, but all the freedom that she has at her disposal does not give her any sense of attainment or make her happy. She feels that contrary to what he had promised her, he has been building around her a cocoon with morning tea, love words flung at her and his tired lust and making her imprisoned within it as she puts it in the poem “I Shall Some Day.” This makes her declare her determination to break out of it and taste the spirit of freedom. Her fiery “nature” full of aspirations, “the urge to fly, and the endless pathways of the sky” cannot be kept in check by any person or any force (“The Old Playhouse” 100). The poet cherishes freedom to such an extent that she seems to believe that lack of it may lead one to insanity and perhaps even to death.

In “The Sunshine Cat” she portrays a woman who is locked up in a room of books with a streak of sunshine lying near the door, like a yellow cat, to keep her company. One day the sunshine becomes a hair-thin line and in the evening when the husband returns to take her out he finds her “cold and half-dead.”

The poet speaks about the quest for “the great white steed of happiness” (“Gino”) which leads her woman persona “from one gossamer lane to another” (“Captive”), experimenting with free love. “After that love became a swivel-
When one went out, another came in, / Then I lost count... ("Substitute" Only the Soul 54). The band of cynics to whom the persona turned when she found that her husband did not love her enough could not give her what she yearned for. It became clear to her that love and lust are entirely different. Each of those men admitted that "I do not love, I cannot love. it is not / In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you" ("The Sunshine Cat" Only the Soul 54). Das’s persona in "The Sunshine Cat" becomes a victim of insanity by the terrible blow inflicted on her by the harsh world.

The general tendency to dub Das as a poet of physical love is rather unfair. Even though there was a period in her poetic career when she seemed obsessed with the physical aspect of love, it must be remembered that her poetry emphasizes the hollowness of physical love and does little by way of celebrating it. She considers the physical experience as nothing but mechanical:

... isn’t each
embrace a complete thing
a finished jigsaw...
... ignoring my poor
moody mind ("In Love" 36)

She is aware of the yearning for something lasting which evades her. When the time comes to end the game, she is apprehensive that she may not have anything substantial to leave behind. Her love, "an empty gift, a gilded empty container" will have nothing to hold; it will be more or less similar to the trunks of her grandmother, which, when opened after her death, was found to contain only dolls. In "A Cask of Nothing" she professes that the only content that the human cask can contain is "the nothing that resides / as an ache within" (108). In "A Request" she wants the meat and bones to be piled up instead of
being thrown away when she dies so that by their smell the real worth of earthly life and love may be understood. This poem is ample proof of the fact that the poet is totally disillusioned about the value of physical love.

On realizing the futility of "the tragic game the unwise, like children, play/And often lose in," she is stricken with deep desolation; even her dreams are of "a stark white loneliness" and she wakes from them trembling. She compares her loneliness to "bleached bones cracking in the desert sun" ("Ghanashyam" Only the Soul 95). In "Ghanashyam" the consciousness that is projected appears to be akin to that of Meera the celebrated devotee of Krishna, the picture of piety who "considered herself the bride of Ghanashyam" (Radha 14). Since Krishna, the mythological lover is beyond her reach Das tries to see the archetypal Krishna in her husband. The realization that he and she are all microcosms of Param Atma or God makes her wonder,

But if he is you and I am you
Who is loving who
Who is the husk who the kernel
Where is the body where is the soul (Only the Soul 95)

She feels guilty of a possible failing on her part. Does she commit the sin of loving her man, the disguise of Krishna, more than she loves Krishna himself? Yet she feels convinced on second thoughts that it is not expected of her to "weaken bonds" consciously. She identifies Ghanashyam with the cell of the eternal sun, the blood of the eternal fire and the hue of the summer air. She no longer demands love as such; she will rather be content with the attainment of peace. The ascetics, the ones in saffron robes, spoke to her about Ghanashyam. When they left, she meditated on what they left unsaid, and the inarticulate voice of wisdom stole in towards her "like a breeze" (95).
With the maturing of her genius as a poet, we can discern a corresponding mellowing of her attitude to life. Her obsession with the physical aspect of relationships undergoes a sea-change and her concern is with what exists beyond flesh. An urge to transcend the physical is a distinctive note in the following lines:

I throw the bodies out
I cannot stand their smell
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea ("The Suicide" 27)

It is evident that her concern is with joy immaculate which the soul of the righteous can attain in life after death, in the realm of immortality. In "Composition" her persona professes, "The ultimate discovery will be / that we are immortal" (84).

It is, however, remarkable that what directs her thoughts to God is her compulsive quest for the ideal lover. In her short poem "Radha" Das makes it clear that all that matters is devotion to God. Fulfilment is attained when the ego is subjected to a total surrender and elimination and the soul merges with God. As Niranjan Mohanty puts it she has come to the realization that it is "not through exhibition or assertion but through sublimation that one can approximate the truth . . . and comprehend the meaning of life" ("Sublimation" 33). In this poem we find Das's persona identifying herself with Radha and waiting for the immortal lover. In "A Phantom Lotus" she observes,

. . . Any stone can make
An idol. Loving this one, I
Seek but another way to know
Him who has no more a body
To offer, and whose blue face is

A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams *(Only the Soul* 93)

A passage in *My Story* makes it explicit that Das regarded Krishna as her eternal lover. During her first pregnancy her husband had sent her from Bombay to Malabar to stay with her grandmother. During that period she felt certain that she would be giving birth to a son and that he would resemble Krishna. Through the smoke of the incense in the prayer room, she saw the beautiful smile of Krishna and she whispered to him: "Always, always, I shall love you. . . only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine. . ."

(92).

Thus it is possible to attribute a mythical dimension to the poet's quest for love. This provides a new approach to examine her poems including those on man-woman relationships which have been controversial for long. If the flute lures her from home and her husband, she finds justification for it: "Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind" ("Vrindavan" 48). This may be viewed in the light of what Paniker has stated regarding Indian poets in English that there is a general tendency to dig up their national myths in order to be true to their poetic vision. He points out that the sensibility of the Indian poet which "assimilates myths and retells them through their creative work is a characteristic feature" of Indian aesthetics (*Indian Literature* 5).

It is obvious that the themes of Das's poetry are no longer "skin's lazy hungers" but are of metaphysical significance. Existential preoccupations are seen to underlie even her love poetry. This poet has matured into one capable of seeing through the hollowness of the tragic "husk-game" played by the unwise; on the contrary, it has transformed into a preoccupation with the quest for peace ("Ghanashyam"). She has discovered that" both love and hate are
involvements" and that they signify a certain stage of "growth" ("Composition" 77). She is aware of the basic hunger to crumble, to dissolve and to retain in other things "the potent fragments / of oneself" ("Composition" 84). However, her ultimate discovery is that "we are immortal" which has its underpinning on her faith in re-birth, as is indicated by the following lines:

... Even

oft-repeated moves

of every scattered cell

will give no power

to escape

from cages of involvement.

I must linger on,

trapped in immortality,

my only freedom being

the freedom to discompose (84--85)

Love, Death and God or Immortality are all mingled together in Das as in Dickinson. In "Anamalai Poems" IV, Das equates Death with God. She declares that ultimately we realize that there is only one claimant and we call him Death by mistake. It is our obsession with physicality and our inadequate power to perceive beyond "the farthest precincts of truth" that lead us to harbour mistaken notions about this claimant:

... If only the

human eye could look beyond the

chilling flesh, the funeral pyre's

rapid repast and then beyond

the mourner's vanquished stance, where would
The metaphysical preoccupations of Das's love poetry add one more dimension to it. For example, her poetry awakens us to the complex relationship between love and death, love's consummation in death and death's harmony in love. The undercurrent of "the lament of lonesomeness, of decay of death" may be attributed to this metaphysical connection according to critics like Asnani (77).

It is the association between love and death which is a regular feature of metaphysical poetry which underlies the theme of her poem "A Journey with No Return." A picture of Desire which swims like a dolphin "with sudden leaps and lurches" in "the rivers of (her) blood" is given in this poem. With limbs tense with embarrassment she says she is ashamed to "raise my face to yours." She is eager to put aside her sacred vows and forget the sweet domestic past in order to embrace this new love. "With an amnesiac's level gaze I shall walk / by this scorching love made new . . ." Only when we are told that "it would be a journey with no return," do we become conscious of the fact that "the fire that I bear to warm your bed tonight" which would "burn down the ramparts of my home" is none other than the funeral pyre (113).

Das is good at concretizing the vague, mysterious fears that lurk in the human psyche on the abstract concept of death. She brings out the reality of death by portraying the awesome thoughts about death embodied in the forms of preying birds and wailing carnivores. In "Life's Obscure Parallel," for example, she speaks about the built-in terrors of her mind which swoop down on her
Das, however, is unwilling to grant any grandeur to death. She even refuses to admit that Death is awe-inspiring. What she finds distasteful about death is that it is "So mediocre (that) any fool can achieve / It effortlessly" ("Death Is So Mediocre" 111), an idea very close to that of John Donne as expressed in his Ode to Death, "Death, Be Not Proud."

Das's obsession with death is unmistakable and it leads us to equate her with Dickinson and Plath. She is interested in exploring those mysterious realms of death and life after death which are "by ear unheard / unscrutinized by eye" (Dickinson: "Just Lost When I Was Saved"). Taking us to the very edge of the familiar world of reality, Das tries to look beyond it into the vistas of life after death, enabling us to have a peep into the realm of immortality. The compulsion of "the sailor who skirts foreign shores" or of "the reporter from the awful doors / Before the seal" about which Dickinson writes, is shared by Das as well (Dickinson 312).

In depicting the moment of death, too, she seems to be similar to Dickinson. Her persona in "The Ferry Hour" speaks about everything being erased from her vision; the trees, the bright sea lassoing the shore, the hills paling in the blue, the birds hiding in the bough, the cow, the dog beside the door and even...
the lined face keeping watch on her, all disappear from her vision with the
coming of the ferry hour. This may be compared to the reference in Dickinson's
poem "The Chariot" to the scenes which fade from her vision -- a school where
children strove in the ring, fields of gazing grain and the setting sun -- which
the persona passed in the company of 'Gentleman' Death (and Immortality).

Facing a similar situation in life, under a different cultural context, Das's
persona speaks: "With chilling finger tips I have erased / Even the face with its
weeping eyes / On the laundered sheets of memory" ("The Ferry Hour" 147).
The idea of crossing the waters and reaching new shores to get access into the
realm of Life after Death seems to occupy her thoughts. She speaks with
determination that she is going to "squat all night to reach that shore." This
poem invites comparison with Dickinson's poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I
Died" also. Here, the persona, in preparation for "the last onset, when the king
/ Be witnessed in his power" (324), willed her keepsakes and signed away what
portion of her she could make assignable when there interposed a fly from
nowhere "with blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz" (325) between the light and
herself. Then the windows disappeared from her view and she realized that her
vision was gone and everything was a total blank.

Das refuses to look upon death as the tragedy of life; it is growth which is
the tragedy of life, according to her. A plausible explanation for this can be
that growth in awareness about life, its limitations and drawbacks can impair
the happiness of life. Here she fails to provide for us some proper objective
correlative. All that she succeeds in evoking are paltry details about
"black-rimmed nails" and "sweet-smelling scalps of the old" ("Composition" 77).

The poet points out certain vulgarities of the final rites -- the slow
unwrapping of the carcass that exposes a number of details that would disgust
the esthete, such as the flabby thigh, the sagging breasts and the surgery scar. Moreover the idea of the paid marauders stripping her and preparing the body for the fire is not quite to her liking.

Das has given a vivid portrayal of her father's death, giving attention to all the minute details, which again, indicates her obsession with death. She admits that she had feared her father and adds that he seemed close to her only in that last coma which lasted for twelve days and nights. From within his chest, a strange noise like the howling and moaning of a beast in pain was heard. Her mother once said with a sob, "It's not his death that I fear but this, oh, God, I cannot bear to hear it again and again . . . ("My Father's Death" 124).

Das's obsession with death may be viewed in the light of her being a confessional poet. All poets who write in this mode are seen to share an obsession with some sort of traumatic experience -- sex torments or encounters with death. The cult of suicide is not uncommon among these self-involved poets who seem to view the self as the pivot of the universe. Das seems to have had the suicide mania in her youth about which she writes in My Story (98, 104).

In "The Suicide" Das describes her own death. It is a step by step progression that we see in this poem. First she makes her choice between the soul and the body; she is ready to abandon her body so that her soul would enter "the vortex of the sea." She weighs her duties as a woman, wife and an individual with the duties of the sea and reflects that she is fed up with life. She wants to be simple and to be loved -"If love is not to be had, / I want to be dead, just dead" (28). She enters deeper into the sea, finds the inner chambers of the sea warmer and feels happy swimming. She remembers her house in Malabar and her grandmother who loved her without any reservation. She realizes that the only
movement that she really knows, the only movement that naturally comes to her is swimming. Then she remembers her failures one by one--her relationship with the white man who offered himself as a stiff drink and the only man who hurt her. She has by now moved far away from the shore: she can see lights moving on the shore but she declares, "But I shall not return" (31). She requests the sea to toss her body back to the shore. Now that she is bereft of her body, her soul shall be free. At the end of the poem, Das uses the device of a pun in order to interweave the ideas of death and love:

Sea, toss my body back
That he knew how to love

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

Take in my naked soul
That he knew how to hurt (31)

The moment of death is depicted as tranquil and quiet in "The Ferry Hour," with someone "holding my fingers tight / someone . . . sobbing beside my bed" (147). But it is a picture of cold-blooded murder that she paints with deft strokes in "Fear." Fear, "a lidless eye" is suddenly face to face with "a swift knife- gleam" and a deafening scream is heard by the unwarned human ear. In "The Fear of the Year" she states that even in the freedom of our dreams, we perceive the flying steel hands sowing over mellow cities "those dark, / Malevolent seeds." She also portrays in this poem "the red mushrooms" which "hotly sprout and grow" on an earth illogically stilled, silenced and dead (11).

But there is an undeniable dignity in setting out on that journey with no return: "Like an elephant not bidding goodbye while / Taking off for the secret edge of forests" where they slope into an invisible sea. Like Plath she seems to be in love with death and she has no qualms about visualizing her own death.
She says how she will go from this earth in silence, leaving not even a fingerprint behind, "carrying away my bird-in-flight voice and / The hundred misunderstandings that destroyed / My alliance with you and you and you..." ("Death Is So Mediocre" 111-12).

In "Ghanashyam" the poet speaks about gazing into the "red eye" of death, "the hot stare of truth unveiled." If life is moisture -- water, semen and blood -- death is drought, she remarks. Death is "the hot sauna leading to cool rest-rooms / Death is the last, lost sob of the relative / Beside the red walled morgue (Only the Soul 94).

When Das writes poetry in a manner that suggests blatant disregard for the traditional virtues of the Indian woman such as modesty, reticence and deference, we should remember that she has put her "private voice away" as she declares in 'Loud Posters" and is speaking on behalf of the inarticulate multitudes, "the mute, inglorious" women of India:

I am a million, million people
talking all at once, with voices
raised in clamour, like maids
at village wells.

I am a million, million silences
strung like crystal beads
onto someone else's
song... ("Someone Else's Song" 40)

This tendency to identify herself with every woman, more than that, every human being, is seen elsewhere too.

Anywhere and everywhere I see him who calls himself
I. In this world he is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath. 

I am the sinner. I am the saint. I am both the lover and the beloved. I have no joys which are not yours, no aches which are not yours. We share the same name, the same fate, the same crumbled dreams...  

("An Introduction" 13)

This attitude is not surprising in a poet who has proclaimed herself as a poet committed to "every living creature" and one who has acknowledged the role of Whitman in shaping her talent ("I Needed" 159).

Das's thesis about the self may be traced back to the Hindu philosophy which gives an elaborate doctrine of self. Hindu scriptures tell us that the central core of one's self is identifiable with the cosmic whole or Brahma. The Upanishads state that the self within you is the internal self of all things and is the Universal Brahman (Upanishads 64). In "The Over-Soul" Emerson quotes Krishna speaking to a sage: "You are fit to apprehend that you are not distinct from me... That which I am, thou art, and that also in this world, with its gods and heroes and mankind. Men contemplate distinctions because they are stupefied with ignorance" (American Lit. 34). The following lines from The Bhagavad Gita are noteworthy in this context: "I am the ritual action, I am the sacrifice, I am the ancestral oblation, I am the sacred hymn, I am also the melted butter, I am the fire and I am the offering. I am immortality and also death. I am being as well as non-being" (Discourse ix 248)

When Das speaks with sagacity about the tragic "husk game" expressing wonder,
But if he is you and I am you  
Who is loving who  
Who is the husk who the kernel  
Where is the body where is the soul  
You come in strange forms  
And your names are many  
("Ghanashyam" 95)

we realize how much she is influenced by the Vedantic concept of "Thou art me." Such pervasive influence of Hindu philosophy makes it easy for her to identify herself with all human beings however much they may differ from her. This would have been a satisfactory explanation indeed, had she professed nothing contrary to this. But it seems that Das is bent on being consistently inconsistent. When we take a look at the following lines, for example, it is difficult to imagine that the "I" denoted here stands for the entire race: "... I am / a freak. It is only to save my face / I flaunt at times, a grand, flamboyant lust. ("The Freaks" 42).

Perhaps Das is harping on the same idea when she writes: "... "At times a strange cowardice stalks me... I feel tempted to tell (my friends) that I have been conventional like them and that I projected a false image to make my books sell. But this is aging without grace." ("I Have Lived Beautifully" 41).

All this indicates that it is neither the genuine "I" nor a representative of all created things who has been speaking through her poems; she has put on a disguise as a writer who speaks through her works. What matters to a creative writer is imaginative truth. She holds the view that every writer with talent is abnormal and one is being unfair when one tries to evaluate a person who is abnormal with a measuring yard used for measuring a normal person ("Of Masks" 150).
The psychoanalytical approach will take us a long way in interpreting the poetry of Das. Sreenivasan points out that Das's obsessive concern with physical passion points to the real source of her power. He asserts that her power lies in "the urgency with which she explores the life of the libidinal instinct" (75). Quoting J.A.C. Brown, a modern interpreter of Freud, Sreenivasan says: "Libido is best conceived as drive energy the principal components of which are sexual" and that "Libido in an individual is regarded as a closed energy system regulated by the physical law of conservation of energy, so that libido withdrawn from one area must inevitably produce effects elsewhere" (75).

The energy of the libido which remains with the ego is capable of attaching itself to an object for its gratification and Freud calls this phenomenon object-libido. The condition of libidinal energy attaching to itself is described as ego-libido. Freud has stated that object-libido and ego-libido are mutually transformable. According to critics like Sreenivasan, the real conflict that lies at the centre of Das's emotional world -- a world fraught with "frustration, loneliness and angst" -- is primarily "a conflict between ego-libido and object-libido." In other words it is the frustration and tension arising from the failure of the libido to attach itself to an object that can be detected in Das's poetry.

The failure to establish intimacy or obtain fulfilment explains the note of inadequacy perceptible in the man-woman relationships depicted in her poems. In "An Apology to Gautama," for instance, she speaks about another voice that haunts her ears and another face that haunts her dreams in spite of which she is compelled to lie in the arms of a particular lover.

A psychoanalytic reading of some of her poems would suggest that there is also a case for father-fixation in her poetry. The poem "Glass" is remarkable
for its complex nature. It is not possible to overlook the Freudian quest for the father-figure in the lines: "On me / their strumming fingers may revive the fond melodies / of a past" (103).

In the opening lines the poetic persona says, "I went to him for half an hour as pure woman. / pure misery, fragile glass . . ." Then she goes on to describe how, with a lover's haste, he drew her to him rudely, suggesting how it resulted in the breaking of the fragile glass into "an armful of splinters."

The woman persona even identifies herself with the broken glass; but soon she brings about a shift in emphasis as a result of which the splinter becomes the weapon and she blurts out: "... I no longer care whom / I hurt with love and often without (it)." Probably it is her sudden realization that the feeling she has for her victims is not really love that prompts her to effect this shift. She declares that it is with the indifference of a cheap toy that she enters the lives of others and makes of "every trap of lust a temporary home." In the concluding lines of the poem Das makes this suggestion explicit: "... I have misplaced a father / somewhere / and I look for him now everywhere" (103). Her father seems to have been a man of serious disposition, apparently a man of few words and hardly inclined to be demonstrative of his affection. He had little time for his daughter who was growing up fast as she suggests in "Next to Indira Gandhi." She even wondered whether her father had ever wanted a daughter. Again, she was not sure whether it was her dark complexion and her "brooding ways" that made her disagreeable to him. However, it appears as if there was a wide communication gap between the father and the daughter. The following lines in "My Father's Death" are indicative of this: "There was a cloud of tension / Between him and me. I brought him / Shame, they say" (125).

On his death she expresses her longing to have been hugged by him at
least once: "You should have hugged me, Father, just once, to your breast..." (125). "She was ready to change places with her father and die if she could, instead of letting him die, as she states in "A Requiem for My Father." She wants him to know that she loved him all her life. In "Too Late For Making Up" the woman persona says that it was not easy to have loved him more than she did: "If I have loved others, father, I swear I have loved you the most" (Only the Soul 40). There is ample suggestion in her poems that there is disappointment, discontent and agitation lurking in the poet's mind which may be a reflection of her unsatisfactory relationship with her father. When her poetic persona finds it difficult to derive happiness and satisfaction out of marriage, she enters the lives of other men with total indifference. The lack of concern for moral values and the spirit of revolt and non-conformity which may appear puzzling to the readers is attributed thus to her search for paternal love which was denied to her in childhood.

According to Freud, when the libido which has attached itself to an object abandons that object and sets the ego in its place, narcissism results. Sreenivasan suggests that it is this narcissism that is at work in Das's poetry. Agarwal is also of a similar view and has commented on her "lack of...mystical association with objects other than herself" (142). He has added that "so long as the poet's ego remains a personal ego, it cannot attain meaning unless there is a mystical expansion of the self" (145).

The insistent note of self-pity which is pervasive in Das's poetry may be viewed in the light of her narcissistic tendency. In "The Sunshine Cat" the woman persona is projected as one who was sexually exploited by all, except, of course, by the husband, who was but "a ruthless watcher." She was denied love and freedom and died of a broken heart: "They did this to her, the men who
knew her, the man / She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish" (Only the Soul 54). In "The Freaks" despair born of failure in physical love is depicted. The male persona who makes love is far from attractive in appearance as is made clear by the reference to his "sun-stained cheek" and "dark cavern" of a mouth with uneven teeth. The woman persona first expresses her disgust for the man who can unleash nothing more alive than the skin's lazy hungers. But in a self-sacrificing mood, she shifts the blame to her own self and admits that it is all her failure: "I am / a freak." She meekly confesses that it is only to save her face that she shows off "a grand, flamboyant lust" (42).

While this note of self-pity can be related to the narcissistic drive in the poet, it is important to remember that such narcissistic strain is in keeping with the tempo of confessional poetry. The words of Mohan Jha are relevant in this context. In an analytical study of Confessional poetry he states:

Confessional poetry . . . may be something in the nature of a spiritual odyssey or a quest for salvation; it may be an exercise in self-exploration, self-discovery, or self-revelation; it may even be a striving towards rejection or annihilation. It may be any or all of these, or it may be something else too . . . It is the element of exaggerated self-importance, a narcissistic quality, a sort of bumptiousness, the ingredients of aggressive egocentricity in the character of these confessional poets that vitiate their writings. . . . (51-52)

The poet herself, however, is not unconscious of this streak in her: "... love is Narcissus at the water's edge haunted / by its lonely face, and , yet it must seek at last / an end, a pure, total freedom . . ." ("The Old Playhouse" 101). There is reference to ego-centric love in "Captive" too: "... for years I
have run from one / gossamer lane to another, I am / now my own captive" (Only the Soul 91).

In “The End of Spring” the poet speaks about the inward journey in which she indulges while she is alone: “... I journey while alone just / Backwards, taking secret steps inwards and / Choosing roads none has walked before ...” (26). It is possible that she refers here, not to a journey back into memory, either individual or ethnic, but into the “unknown depths of the ego where the libidinal instinct is invested” (Sreenivasan 79). This “flight to the self,” according to Raveendran, is at bottom “an unconscious flight from the dominating other” (“The Ideology of Intimacy” xi).

The poet seems to be aware of the complex nature of this inward journey: “... other / journeys are all so easy, but / not the inward one ...” (“Anamalai Poems” VIII). A similar reference about diving into the ego is made elsewhere too: “... I journey while alone just / Backwards, taking secret steps inwards and / Choosing roads none has walked before ...” (“The End of Spring” 26). But there is also the awareness that the course is likely to be very involved and complicated in the absence of sufficient landmarks:

... this is to be a blind walk this is to symbolize my life i
have always had a passion for symbols

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

... .has the city changed

too now that he has gone has it filled itself with strangers
i lose my way all the time he was the only landmark i could
recognize ...

... the poets ultimately

lose their way inside their own minds on dark rivers they
sail they sail their lighted boats on murky waters they go
to seek their past in the future . . . . ("The Blind Walk" 73)

In *My Story*, too, the poet has established the ultimate connection between
one's beginning and one's end (109). With the mellowing of her vision she has
cultivated the habit of contemplating life, and with an insight that is typical of
sagacity she asserts that the outer world is only the world of illusion and that it
is "the immeasurable world inside" one that is "real". She states that "only the
one who has decided to travel inwards will realize that his route has no end"
(109). It may be noted that Das's quest for love which is identical with her
quest for identity transcends the physical realm. She is not one "ignorant of
destinations" (208). She wants us to remember that when we learn to swim we
should not consider flowing as our destiny. It is imperative to be aware of the
ocean into which one should flow with the water. The weary rivers of the blood
will bear the scum of ancient memories. But first the familiar trouble of one's
body should be overcome. And once the barrier of the body is "crossed," one can
be safe in swimming since one will ultimately merge with the ocean.

As Merrily Weisbord the Canadian writer puts it, Das is a courageous
writer whose perceptions are greatly influenced by her being a woman and her
voice which is capable of capturing even the delicate nuances of life can also
communicate with women across cultures (Nambiar 11). The spirit of freedom
that manifests itself through her poetic works and prose writing is the keynote
of her writing which cannot be overlooked even by a casual reader. As a writer
she has been daring enough to subvert the traditional ways of writing prescribed
for women writers and to pioneer a new mode of her own. Her use of anatomical
imagery and celebration of the female body are typical features of feminist
writing. Her poetry gives expression to the urge for emancipation experienced.
by the feminine psyche. Her anxiety to uphold the identity of woman in relationships including marriage and her attitude of protest against male violence make her feminist stance explicit. But contrary to the Western feminist attitude, what we see in Das is a willingness to transcend her spirit of revolt and submit herself at the feet of the Deity, the Eternal Lover, as His faithful devotee.