



1. POETRY PORTFOLIO

Figures in Fine Print

and

2. MINI-DISSERTATION

Hindustani Hopes and Fears:

Identity and Expectations in the Poetry of Kamala Das

by

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Supervisor: **Professor David Medalie**

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I herewith declare that

Figures in Fine Print

and

Hindustani Hopes and Fears:
Identity and Expectations in the Poetry of Kamala Das

are my own work and that all the sources that I have used have been
acknowledged by means of complete references.

A.J. James

7 February 2011



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Abstract

Kamala Das is one of the best-known contemporary Indian women writers, albeit largely for the controversy that her candid, confessional writing has sparked in the relatively traditional context of Indian academia. Since the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), Das has been considered an important voice of her generation. Her provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, and women's roles in traditional Indian society. Critics have expressed a range of opinions on her work: some laud her boldness, compelling sincerity and striking originality, while others dismiss her work as sensationalist, limited in scope and unsophisticated.

In this dissertation, issues of selfhood represented in the poetry of Kamala Das will be analysed with regard to various aspects of her identity, such as those of a housewife, a lover, an Indian, a female writer, and a confessional poet. Selected theories on identity formation posited by Erik Erikson and Norman Holland will be explored, as will relevant hypotheses on female identity by Nancy Chodorow and Judith Gardiner. I propose that selected aspects of these theories shed light on the themes, tones and subject matter of Das's verse. Almost all of her poems are personal and are fuelled by an intense need for emotional fulfilment. I suggest that the poet's search for love is central to her identity and I aim to show how this (largely unsuccessful) quest, as reflected in Das' poems, stems from various expectations by and on her. The recurring theme of expectations and the resulting tones of despair (the 'hopes and fears') in her work will be traced and analysed.

This research is valuable in that there has been little exploration into identity and expectations in Das' work and there is almost no research on her emanating from Africa. Through close textual analysis I also aim to highlight how useful insights into identity formation and female writing can enable a more in-depth understanding of Das's poetry. Both female identity and women's writing are increasingly significant fields in academia today, and there has been a rise in autobiographical writing in recent years; thus this research will contribute to debates about these issues in contemporary poetry.

A portfolio of my own creative writing will accompany the essay. Like Kamala Das, I am also a Malayalee woman (from the province of Kerala in India) and I identify with some of her concerns with regard to the roles of women. Although my writing is not confessional or as personal as Das's, our shared experience of the socio-cultural expectations placed upon us (due to our gender and ethnic background) links this mini-dissertation to my poetry portfolio.

Key terms

Kamala Das/ Kamala Suraiyya
Indian poets
Female Identity
Female writing
Personal poetry
Confessional poetry
Malayalee/ Kerala
Theme of expectations
Themes of love/lust/sexuality
Contemporary Indian women writers



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1. POETRY PORTFOLIO

Figures in Fine Print

By Ann Juli James



Rekha

**How foreign in your finery
My friend of summer sleeves and jelly knees
Your schoolgirl scars now hidden
Under the heavy *manthra-codi*¹**

**Tonight he will uncover them
Tonight he will tug at your ponytail
Tip over
Your ice-cream dreams
And let them drip**

**Down that aisle you never can return
To our gang of rhymes and roller-skates
Tomorrow morning you will be his Wife
And he, your new Playmate.**

¹ Wedding sari



Penne Kannan²

Remember:

- Only answer questions directed to you.**
 - Reply briefly – but respectfully.**
- Stand up straight – but don't look bold!**
 - Don't trip on your sari.**
 - Don't fidget. – Don't hover.**
- Don't spill.**

Priorities in Serving Order:

Males
Elders
Guests

(His father
His uncle
My father
Him)

4 cups
A tea tray
Serving
Unrest

What is lost
In that moment
When I first bend
To serve?

Something yet unripe
Still wading in paddy fields lush
Lingering in plantations
Of sticky bananas and potatoes sweet
Concealed in the air and sheltered in the earth
A sanctuary of green

Something yet unready
For trays laden
Something lost
In swirls of unconcerned tea

² 'To see the girl' – a tradition in Malayalee (South Indian) culture where a prospective bridegroom and his family visit a young woman's house to arrange a marriage. The prospective bride enters briefly to serve them tea (their first, and sometimes only, meeting with her before the engagement day).



Untitled # 1

**Heavy from her heartstrings
Duty hangs
Crucial and cold**

**And though clots form
On cords of crimson
Knotted with gold**

**They cannot rupture
The threads that tautly
Strain, but hold.**



Aadhiya Rathri³

**Heavily adorned
The bride head-bowed shall sit
Raise her kohl-lined eyes
Solely when deemed fit**

**The patterns of her henna-ed hands
Figures in fine print
Repeat like writing on the wall
Fire against flint**

**Shadowed lashes and semen stains
Will be all that shall remain
Once dark ink fades to cinnamon dust
And every maybe becomes a must**

³ 'First night' – Malayalee term for the first night of union between a bride and groom.



Embrace

His hands

Emboldened by a moment's hesitation

a second's surrender, in which

the juxtaposition of what

he'd always imagined

with what he'd never dared

hung heavy and sultry in the surrounding air

Those hands

That slid up and around

And around and over

In that moment

Snuck

under



The Sandman's Kiss

**Last night, in
a moment light and milky
you crossed my mind
as I lapsed
from eyelash-twitch awake
to cotton-sheet asleep**



Domesticity

I dread

Last night's dishes

Piled up porcelain and leftover peas

Sunk in cold water

And thick-rimmed in grease

But you're up early too

As you enfold me in your morning embrace

You soak your fingers in the sink

And flick up a soapy droplet

Little prickles of thrill, like stubble against my skin

The droplet births a bubble

Magenta slip-sliding over indigo-blue

A liquid love child gleams

Golden in the stream from the windowpane



Post Birthday Blues

It's 12.53.

PM!

And I'm still waiting.

**I have plans, you know. For *your* birthday
Each sleep-lonely night, I revise them**

**How I'll arrive, soft-soled, at midnight
Robed in Grecian white, to throw
Pebbles at your windowpane**

**How you stumble to the glass
In sleep-dusted surprise,
How the shimmer of sparkler-light
Absorbs into your pores, and how,
The soft, sweet air of the velvet night
Trickles with Sufjan Stevens⁴, and how,
Your face of flushed delight
Says you couldn't have dreamed
Anything more perfect,
And how...**

**You'd *know*, without a doubt, that I
Would never forget you.**

**Even though
It's 1pm.**

⁴ Indie singer known for folksy, romantic ballads.



Untitled # 2

12 a.m.

I fancy our flesh
Tuned like human mandolins
Midnight rhapsody

1 a.m.

A sodden duet
Slumber in the shelter
of

2 a.m.

Je – jerk alert
You! Here? No... alone with my
Hallucinosi

3 a.m.

Subliminal drift
You haunt in hours
unholy

4 a.m.

I arise at dawn
Whispers of
awakening
Tug me into being

5 a.m.

Activity, round,
Stirs like agitated
wasps
In a nest dislodged



6 a.m.

Insistent daylight
Hungers, dissatisfied
with

A ...

7 a.m.

Each footstep quickens
Till, down the passage, I
hear

Your tempered sotto

8 a.m.

A thrill exquisite
Warm like whiskey through the
veins

9 a.m.

No office affair
Is ours; but, a secret shared
Hearts of one accord

10 a.m.

Distracted labour
Black print on clean reams of
white

...

11 a.m.

I hover in the hall
And when your gaze
flickers

I hesitate not



12 p.m.

In the summer rain
Of your attention, I am
Soaked and

1 p.m.

Tension, red and ripe
Bursts like pomegranate
seeds

2 p.m.

The present thrill, of
You, my captive, I
yours

3 p.m.

In your drawer I find
Meshed into a Prestick-ed
knob

4 p.m.

Packing up, you could
Take me home – files,
keys

5 a.m.

Bitter welcome
back
My cavity existence



6 p.m.

Tormented replays
Rejection rains like
rocks

7 p.m.

Wrath simmers and
seethes
Solitary cups of tea

8 p.m.

Sharpening cutlery
The shards of shattered
pledges

9 p.m.

I window witness
Your spouse: fluorescently
fair

10 p.m.

Wipe the edge with care.
(If you were as faithful, I'd
Clean up for you too.)

11p.m.

Awake and restless
In silent Stygian
darkness
I keen after you



The Big Bang Theory

**Universes collide
And in their midst, between
A little dust, and a little drop
Intimacy flares
Behold! A mortal in time**



Quarter Life Crisis

**His wits grasp for a grip between
What's real and what's surreal
Paperbacks, philosophy, packed
Neatly on the shelf
This Sartre-son in charge of none
Denies that faith is what he lacks
Trapped inside an echo-chamber
Wholly of the self**

***I am afraid to awake in a few months, a few years
Exhausted, disappointed
In the midst of fresh ruins⁵***

**Outside, he shines with repartee
And cultured tricks, his intellect
Though blind to what's been
Underlined, he gets
His kicks in high society
Inside, he lies, uncertain still
While creases on his sheets confirm
His course downstream, up dream quick
Down scream on the narrow Styx**

***I am gently slipping into the water's depths
Towards fear***

**And he realises too late that
He has been reading for far too long**

⁵ Both italicised extracts are from Jean-Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*



Attention: Sir Horatio

**This notice serves to remind you that
Your pre-frontal cortex (CEO, Executive Decisions)
Will not exonerate your dithering conscience**

**Should you find success in survival
In the passing on of your pattern
(An infinitesimal but necessary perpetuation)**

**Will you not yet be plagued
By that canker that
Your revered cosmos (CEO, Decisive Executions)
Will reply: That'll be all, Sir
Thank you but we no longer require your services**

**Crashes to ashes, mud to mud
The dilating dread:
All that is now required, is death
(An infinitesimal but necessary procedure)**

**For never will you overcome
The furtive, discomfoting fear
That there are more things in heaven and earth
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy**



Iago

**Awake, he, cunning, lies in wait
For doughty providence to pave
With his byzantine calculations,
The road to Eden, or damnation**

**Ever-alert for gleaming breaches
Into which his schemes can slide
Glide inside an oblivious mind
Like an otter into water
On a still, dark night**



WedLock

Her foot caught

In the gap in the lining of the carpet on the floor

(It got caught on the way as she crawled for the door)

The gap he'd promised to fill

To fill and fulfill till death do them part

And part they did, in cavernous silences

Only the sound of seconds and lives

Could be heard above his dormant hulk

The familiar countdown of comfort and fear

Accompaniment to each muted tear

Hollow, both the gap and the oath

From the carpet on the floor to the gulf to the door

Her mind entwined and all lined with

Control

In which her foot was caught



Luncheon on Wisteria Lane⁶

**Polly puts the kettle on and waits
For pale cellulite to settle into place
Soon, within neatly plastered walls,
Golden brown bubbles begin to thaw
Tongues keen to be set aground;
A polished murmur swills around**

– clinks of curiosity –

**And, with a careless nudge,
Onto navy-framed saucers,
Scandal spills**

**A cushion or two away
Over the intonated drone
One teacup hovers**

⁶ Wisteria Lane is the fictional name of a street which appears in the television series *Desperate Housewives*.



A Social Casualty

11pm. The Red Room, Manhattan. Exclusive entry.

**Against the streetlight grime she leans
Hip thrust
Heel out
Lip twitch
A small smirk of practised indifference**

**From inside, muffled but mean
Bleed party sounds; another round
To her left, long-legged smokers
Dissect and leer**

**'Hey, outsyd club. 4got i.d, can u cum?
Sent: 23:13**

**She seizes snippets
Of the song she hears
And feigns immersion in
Evenly-spaced beeps
Reassuring repeats**

She's typed the lyrics out thrice now

**'Where r u?? Wayting!!
Sent: 23:21**

**Eyes bore in, surgery-sharp
Their judgment scalds like meth
Her mind weighs up dramatic potential
(Show body, save face?)
But, immobilized by
Insignificance
She sinks, while the gallery watches**



Hannah

A north-easterly brought

Dry livid heat

It reeled about

Her sand-cracked feet

It whisked away

Each timid start

And left there, parched

Her

Tumbleweed heart



Bachelorette

**It was when she wore that hideous skirt –
Mother insisted on skirts to church –
That she first felt
The soft, sweaty friction,
That overly intimate touch
Of fatty thighs
Rubbing against each other**

**And the sudden, insidious rise
Of bile
Flooded her throat,
Swamped her senses
And leaked into
Her *Clinique Happiness***



Thirteen and Three Quarters⁷

**Jaw raised in caution,
He lifts nail-bitten digits
To his cheek:
Freshly shorn, and patchy
Like a lawn, ineptly mowed,
With cuts too deep;
Bristly sprouts of growth,
Artless tufts of adolescence**

**And, as he considers,
Whether the façade of confidence
In that foam-flecked face
Will suffice
To carry him through the day,**

**Anxieties swell
Like the pimples that cluster
Into peer groups on his chin**

⁷ From *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*, the first of a series of books by Sue Townsend.



Flirting

flirting

is like a rubber band

it leads either to

a sharp sting

or to

the smell of rubber



***Beulah*⁸ Says It Best**

**The mall
Catwalk of the credit-carded
Rendezvous of nervous lovers
Peppermint-green and puppy-eager
As we once were**

**But now my feet feel foreign
On gleaming tiles
Reflections in the gilded rails
Have halved**

***Cos all I ever found, my love
Were clichés bent on rhyme***

**I slump into the book store
Sanctuary of the mull-er over
Feigning fascination in
Home Gardening, Crime Fiction
Java Programming For Dummies**

Popular Mechanics for Broken Hearts could help me now

**And in my bitter, caffeine-infused,
Elysian-dreaming mind,
The giggles of impressionable teens,
And cups and curses and jangling keys,
Pages of maudlin romances turning,
And droning muzak and watches whirring,
Meet, fall in love and elope
Into a gangly indie melody**

***And there's no sense in
Trying, I know cos I've been
Trying all the time
For something to make you mine***

⁸ This poem refers to a song called *Popular Mechanics for Broken Hearts*, by indie music band Beulah. It forms part of the soundtrack of the teen TV show, *The O.C.*, of which the character Adam is most popular.



**And in that moment I realise
My existence
My eyelid-staring, pillow-kissing
Life
Has turned into an O.C. episode
And I am not Adam**

***Cos all I ever find, my love
Are clichés bent on rhyme***



Untitled # 3

**It was she, who tossed the first fine stone⁹
Bound as it left her fingertips
To the sound of judgment from scarlet lips,
It swivelled and sharpened in the cool night air**

**The force with which her words took flight
That spit that flew from honest lips
Strike the walls that shield his pride
Strike the walls that crack inside**

***The bells he cries the bells break down
In my tower,
And swing but go nowhere***

⁹ Reference to John 8:7-11.



The Phone Call

**No tinny hum, nor sonic static
Nothing that suggests
The galleons Atlantic
Or acres of clodden earth that lie
In the cavity
Between you and me**

**Just the crisp immediacy
Of your voice
Signed and delivered
From careless lips
To careful ear**

**When, with the residual warmth
Of beating blood
In the cup of my neck,
The receiver is returned
To its cold, plastic bed,**

**The silence is full,
With lack.**

**I am left alone with it
In the subsequence
Of your goodbye
The silence, and
A faint trickle of concern**

**That, like a snail, lingers and trails
Around the outskirts
Of my mind
Around the outskirts
Of my mind**



Margaret¹⁰

“Chicken”¹¹

**A fertile breeder, can't you tell
By my glossy feathers and
Favourable frame?
(BWH 36 24 36¹² – if you'll agree,
Approximate to the most flattering degree)**

A mass producing egg-machine!

**Speckled ones, freckled ones
Even some bespectacled ones!**

**(A lack of vit A,
Was that me, too?
Must be careful! Must do
What's best for baby
Best for you)**

**Scarlet drop, drops
Into water and white porcelain
Mama died at fifty¹³
For thirty years, her lifeblood
Drained out of her
In nine month intervals**

What, are you scared?!

***Buk buk*, she softly cried**

“Flower bud”

**Oh, pomegranate¹⁴ pod!
Sweet, juicy ovaries,**

¹⁰ Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) American birth control activist, the ‘mother of the Pill’.

¹¹ The poem is divided into sections; titled after different meanings (i.e. from different languages) of the name ‘Margaret’; according to an online ‘name dictionary’: ‘chicken’, ‘pearl’, ‘child of light’, ‘bud of a flower’.

¹² Bust, Waist, Hip ratio that has been rated as most attractive by men from European cultures, as it is supposedly indicative of being an ideal child bearer .

¹³ When her mother died after 18 pregnancies, Sanger confronted her father over her mother’s coffin and charged, “You caused this. Mother is dead from having too many children.” – Nancy Gibbs, in ‘Love, Sex, Freedom and the Paradox of the Pill’, pg 26, *Time Magazine*, May 3, 2010.

¹⁴ Pomegranates, peas and chrysanthemums are traditionally plants associated with fertility and creation.



**Red and hard as an angry birth,
Ripe and ready
To deliver and devour**

**Oh, fruit of my womb!
Oh, darling, devilish chrysanthemum!
Sown in distress and sprung of tender loins
My little bud of want and need!
My pea blossom! My blossom pees!**

“Child of light”

**I am not sick, just sick and tired
My medicine gives me means
When our good Lady Marge¹⁵
Has too much on her plate
(One pill daily: a solid meal
Foetal freedom, with a side dish of hopes)**

**My little pearl of
Possibility**

Let me choose you

“Pearl”

**Oh, blessed and most precious
Inheritance¹⁶ of mine,
My heart is where my treasure lies,
For you, beloved, a mother fights**

¹⁵ St Margaret, patron saint of expectant mothers

¹⁶ Psalm 127:3 “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord”



A Story Untold

**That day her word
Broke out, choking and defiant,
Though raw with disuse,
Ripe in pent-up potency**

**Her word
Spun in the air, till struck
And in frantic flutter, fell
Thrusting this way and that,
Then once more surrendering to
The silence**

- - -

**Cast off from every quarter
Her cup is
Heart full, heart empty
And the dregs churn
With the agony of
A story untold**



Father

**He wasn't the type
To inform us of the midnight rendezvous
The crickets chirped out invites to
Or weave our dreams with golden yarn
And hold us safe away from the Minotaur's harm
 But every Saturday we pilgrimmed to the land of towering tomes,
 (By eight, we'd consumed the entire Children's Section
 Then the lady with the stamp banned us from Sweet Valley High)
 Sometimes, on a quiet afternoon
 He'd tell us how when he was a boy
 He could recite 39 psalms, the Indian Constitution and Shelley
 Though he didn't understand what any of it meant**

**He wasn't the type
To beat us in Monopoly or any other game
To take us ice-skating or to the arcade
 But instead of a city-flat around the corner to a Quick Shop
 We roamed the sheltered bushveld, creating tigers from thorn tree twigs
 And only had to be in after nightfall
 'Last one's in a rotten egg!'
 Sometimes, on a quiet afternoon
 He'd tell us how when he was a boy
 They'd go down to the paddy fields to pursue tiny darting fish
 Points for the boy who could catch the most, barehanded**

**We'd say, 'But Ben's dad plays cricket with us. And Annie's going to Gold Reef City.'
You'd say, 'But I'm not Ben's dad and you're not Annie.'**

**You spared the rod but never spoilt
Only bikes and bags and graduation gowns later,
Did we understand
What type you were**



Henry

**His golden fleece
Wears heavy on him
The sceptre of power
Stabs from within
Inexorable forces
Freeze the young king;**

His diadem

And indecision



First Day

**Ma-mee serves him cornflakes,
Circles of syrup in a milky whirlpool,
Just how he likes it**

**And strokes his hair, afraid
Though sticks and stones could break his bones
That words would never hurt him**

**Nor would they help;
Afraid,
That within his world, a silent globe
He would never hear and know
He would never live and grow
To become independent
Of her salt-stained prayers**

**And he,
Drowning soggy, yellow sailors
Plop! Plop! Plop! Plop!
With a stainless steel battleship
Embossed with his big-nosed reflection,
Sits unperturbed
Swinging new school shoes and socks
Thud thud! beneath the table,**

**And his thoughts,
*Failing to fasten to words, remain
Misty and nebulous
Adopting vague, amusing shapes*
Until they are all
Swallowed up**

--



A Girl Should Not Have a Strong Personality

**You've been teaching me this dish
For many years now
Although you do not give exact measurements
(one tablespoon of this, 20.25 grams of that
the way Westerners do)
Your recipe is fixed and certain
And always tastes exactly the same.
But I
Add *mali*¹⁷ instead of *moluge*
A foolish mishap
(an unacceptable lapse in propriety)**

**You frown from across the simmering pot
Disapproval more strong, more acrid
More pungent than that pickle you made
Thick, red, lemon peel, oil-drenched
Marinated in vinegar, garlic and chilli**

**The marinade has not soaked in deep enough
(that one you so carefully prepared)
It leaves me just as bitter**

**As you reach for the *thavi*¹⁸, you warn me
Never to add foreign ideas
To fish curry
Lest it overpower
The tumeric¹⁹.**

¹⁷ *Mali* and *moluge* are two different spices.

¹⁸ Ladling spoon

¹⁹ Tumeric – bitter, bright yellow spice used in most curries but also mixed with milk to make a paste which is applied to the skin to enhance complexion, e.g. of brides



The Debtor

**From birth was I bound
By blood, and that first, fluid cry:
My oral signature**

**Not in ounces, but in measures
Of guilt, is the debt between us
Repaid, and replayed, finely-tuned
For your satisfaction and
My listening pleasure**

**And though the scales may tip
The wayward daughter
Need not tremble, for
The needle of your law
Never wavers
In my favour**



An Unapology

**How repentant I am, Mother,
At the disappointment I turned out to be
I know when, aged two
I dismantled the corridor clock
You beamed at the neighbours and said,
“This one’ll be an engineer!”
And when I buried myself in books
You expected The Great Indian Novel
To seep and flow from my fingertips;
The juvenile scrawls of my haphazard print
To assemble into
Your notion
Of literary perfection
“Have you met my daughter?
A brown-skinned Brontë in the making!”**

**I’m sorry about that day
When your maternal pleasure
Bewildered me; I shrunk in the shame
Of my blood-stained underwear
I was too terrified
By the load of womanhood
That swung below,
The indignity
And all its associated anxieties,
To appreciate your rare embrace
Your swift smile at my entrance into
Your world**

**Oh, have mercy that today
I refuse to resign myself
To a well-educated man,
Homely and of ‘milky complexion’²⁰,
His assets pinned neatly to his
Middle-class suit
His respectable relations eyeing my
Ornaments, and
Confirming I can cook**

**Forgive me for wanting
My green-eyed bandit**

²⁰ A description like ‘milky’ or ‘wheaty complexion’ is frequently listed as an attribute (among academic qualifications and height) in Indian matrimonial sections of newspapers because a fair complexion is commonly prized as an ideal of beauty.



**Whose skin, not milky, but
Mildly pink, vows
Devotion to my own,
Whose fond acceptance of
My tempestuous
Lack of purpose,
Is all the security I seek**

**I cannot have him, nor can I
Consent, Mother, to your clown**

**Locked out of compromise
And entwined by pride,
I thrash stubbornly in your grasp
As you hiss scorn at my hopes
And like a serpent smothered in your coils
I will soon wrench free
And rise, hooded, to strike you.**



2. MINI DISSERTATION

Hindustani Hopes and Fears: Identity and Expectations in the Poetry of Kamala Das

By Ann Juli James

1. Introduction and Biography

"I shall die, I know. But only when I tire of love." – Kamala Das

The term 'gynocritique' was coined by feminist critic Elaine Showalter (1979:25) as 'the study of woman as the producer of textual meaning'. Thus this mini-dissertation is a gynocritique of Kamala Das²¹ (1934-2009), whose status as a producer of women's texts is undisputed, not to mention remarkable. Critic Vrinda Nabar (1994:20) acknowledges her as the first Indo-English woman poet 'to write *convincingly* of her femaleness.' Das, one of the best-known contemporary Indian women writers, wrote autobiographical novels, numerous essays on culture and society, several short stories in Malayalam,²² as well as a handful of well-received anthologies of poetry in English. Her works have been translated into nearly thirty Indian and foreign languages, and not only have many of her short stories been made into films but films have also been made of her life (Kohli, 2006:1).

Das has been considered an extraordinary voice of her generation ever since the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta*, in 1965. Her provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self, of female sexuality and of women's roles in traditional Indian society. She has often been lauded for her unusual imagery and her distinctly female and Indian persona. Das's strength lies in the spontaneity with which she records 'her most intimate responses, an uninhibitedness which even now is more or less unique in the Indian context' (Nabar 1994:19). While much of what she endured and wrote about in her poetry (issues such as child-marriage, marital rape and teen motherhood) is hardly uncommon in India, she contributes to modern Indian English poetry by making public intimate agonies and insights with regard to women's psychic experiences, much of which has lain hidden for centuries in the private female sector.

Das's first volume of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta*, (1965) was published by Everest Press in New Delhi and contained fifty poems, varied in range but with a dominant tone of bold exuberance. At this stage she had already been on the Indo-English poetry scene for some time, due to her inclusion in *An Anthology of Commonwealth Verse*, (1963) edited by Margaret O'Donnell and published by Blackie & Son, and that same year, her winning of

²¹ In 1999 Kamala Das officially changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya, however for the purposes of this mini-dissertation she will be referred to as Das, as it was under this name that her poetry was published.

²² Malayalam is the language of the Malayalees, an ethnic group from the province of Kerala in south-west India. She wrote these short stories under the pen name of Madhavikutty.

the Poetry Prize of the *Asian Anthology* (Vol. 1) published by the P.E.N. Philippine branch (Ash 2010:1). In 1967 Das's second volume of verse, *The Descendants*, was published by Writers' Workshop. It carried similar themes of love, sexual desire and the exploration of a woman's role, as expressed in her first volume, but had less of the uninhibited abandon and abundant enthusiasm for life than the first volume. Perhaps her growing responsibilities as a mother during her composition of *The Descendants* had a somewhat sobering effect, as many of the poems contain the shadow of suicide, disease and old age.

Her third collection, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, was published by Orient Longman in 1973. Nabar (1994:62) notes how it is clearly the book of an older woman: 'Even *The Descendants* had a certain "youthfulness" about it because disenchantment, cynicism and despair had been new emotions [...] This sense of novelty is absent in the third volume, where a definite feeling of having lived life in all its variety manifests itself.' Her autobiography contains numerous accounts of ill health throughout her life, which are likely to have influenced the increasing number of references to illness, fatigue and death in her poetry. *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), Das's fourth volume, was written during her sojourn at the Anamudi Hills in Tamil Nadu, after her defeat in the 1984 parliamentary elections (Ash 2010:1). These short poems rework the classical Tamil *akam* ('interior') poems that contrast the splendour and permanence of nature with the transience of humanity. This was followed by *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996), published by DC Books, and her last collection, *Ya Allah* (2001), which was written subsequent to her conversion from Hinduism to Islam.

Das's poetry has been widely anthologised in India, Australia and the West, and she received many awards and honours, including the Kerala Sahitya Academy award for her writing in Malayalam (1969), the Chiman Lal award for fearless journalism (1971) and the ASAN World Prize (1985). In 1984, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature ('Kamala Surayya', 2010:1). She is also the only Indian English poet ever to publish a full-length autobiography, *My Story*, which was first serialised in *Current*, a Mumbai-based weekly, and then issued in book form by Sterling Publishers in 1976 (Nabar 1994:109). Many critics have made connections between some of Das's poetry and particular incidents related in her autobiography; in fact, some poems are simply 'un-prose-d' versions of paragraphs in her autobiography. It has been claimed that Das writes autobiographical poems in an attempt to 'mythologize her personal life' (Mishra 1990:55). Because her work is so personal and often obviously autobiographical and because this mini-dissertation deals with identity, it may be enlightening to delve into her biography

and then attempt to consider how closely linked the identity of the speaker (or persona) in her poems is to that of the poet, bearing in mind that it is always problematic to assume a correspondence between the autobiographical self and the poetic persona.

Kamala Das was born into a Nair²³ family in Kerala, India, in 1934. Her maternal grandfather was a Raja, a caste of Hindu nobility. Her interest in poetry began at an early age through the influence of her maternal grand-uncle, Narayan Menon, a renowned writer, and her mother, Balamani Amma, a respected Malayalee poet. Das began writing at age six (her poems were about ‘dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless forever’ (Krishnan, 2010:1) and at fourteen she had her first poem published by P.E.N. India. She was also influenced by the poetry of the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of the Nairs.

Das’s father, a managing director for a British automobile firm, was descended ‘from peasant stock and favoured Gandhian principals of austerity’ (‘Kamala Das Introduction’, 2010:1). He pasted framed pictures of Mahatma Gandhi in every room of the house and forbade his wife to wear jewellery or anything but hand-spun *Khaddar* clothing. This ascetic outlook was at odds with young Kamala’s flair for the dramatic and her self-proclaimed princess complex; her maternal grandmother often reminded her of her ‘blue blood’ and she was terrified as a child that if she fell and cut herself, ordinary old red blood would flow out and expose her commonness! Accounts such as these that are related in her autobiography seem to suggest she was a precocious, ambitious and highly responsive child. It has been suggested that the combination of ‘peasant’ and ‘royal’ identities, along with the atmosphere of colonialism²⁴ and its pervasive racism, as well as general neglect from both her preoccupied parents, resulted in feelings of inadequacy and isolation in her (‘Kamala Das Introduction’, 2010:1).

Das attended an English Medium school where Indian children were often made to feel inferior by being called ‘Blackie’ by their English schoolmates and being pushed out of sight when important dignitaries visited the school. As she was an extremely sensitive child, she found it difficult, as she indicates in her account of her childhood, to mix with classmates and she often wished she had been born to what she probably assumed would be more ‘glamorous’ English parents. She was also educated at home in Calcutta and Malabar. In the mid-twentieth century when she attended school (and even these days,

²³ One of the higher of the Hindu castes.

²⁴ India achieved independence from British rule in 1947. Das grew up at a time in India when British rule was losing its hold on power. Social barriers showed signs of cracks but they rarely broke down completely.

albeit to a lesser extent), female education in India was supported by both progressive and orthodox reformers in the belief that social evils could be eliminated by education.

However, the concept of education ‘was limited to producing good homemakers and perpetuating orthodox ideology, as women were believed to support the traditional values of Indian society’ (Navarra-Tejero 2005:2).

Das did not receive a university education but at fifteen had an arranged marriage to Madhava Das, an employee of the Reserve Bank of India. He was thirty at the time of the wedding and did not live up to the fantasies which Das, who was at this stage an intense and emotional teenager with wildly romantic notions of love, had of life with a man. However she repeatedly claims that in the early days of her marriage she would have eagerly done anything he asked of her, but, if her accounts are to be accepted, he was vulgar, insensitive and incapable of even basic human decency. This view of an inadequate husband is reproduced in much of her poetry, where the poetic persona is often that of a victim-wife who struggles against the brute insensitivity of her spouse. Nabar (1994:10) notes how ‘the steady deterioration of Kamala’s marriage produced in her a kind of suicidal frenzy. Under its influence she wrote what seems to be her first serious poem: “Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay/Let nothing remain of that yesterday”’ (Wipe out, ll.1-2). She was sixteen when the first of her three sons was born; at eighteen, she was ‘a mother and a disgruntled wife’ (Nabar 1994:10) who began to write obsessively.

Although Das and her husband were romantically incompatible (Das’s autobiography controversially describes his homosexual liaisons, emotional abuse and neglect, as well as his supposed indifference towards her extramarital affairs) Madhava always supported her writing (‘Kamala Das Introduction’, 2010:1). His career took them to the more cosmopolitan cities of New Delhi and Bombay, and her poetry is influenced by urban culture as well as her emotional experiences of her inner-city life. Drawing on religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, her works speak of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood; her unsuccessful quest for love both in and outside of marriage; her frustration with the imposition of social conventions on her; and her life in rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home.

After the publication of her autobiography and of *Summer in Calcutta*, Das became a contentious figure among conservatives in India. She was shunned by many relatives and neighbours for shaming the family name in the revelation of her affairs. Despite this, she was popular among many who praised her outspoken opinions on issues relevant to women, such as arranged marriages, marital rape and teen motherhood. In addition to

writing poetry, fiction and autobiography, she served as editor of the poetry section of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. In 1981 she and her husband retired to Kerala where she ran as an independent for the Indian Parliament in 1984 ('Kamala Das Introduction', 2010:1).

After her husband died, Das again gained notoriety among the conservative Malayalee Hindu society by switching her religious allegiance from Hinduism to Islam, and later stating, 'I fell in love with a Muslim after my husband's death. He was kind and generous in the beginning. But now I feel one shouldn't change one's religion. It is not worth it' (Kohli, 2006:1). This statement and the fact that she went as far as to change her name officially to Kamala Suraiyya (an Islamic surname) imply that the conversion was undertaken emotionally and possibly impulsively – for the sake of a romantic relationship rather than a religious conviction. I believe this impetuous and passionate response to men and matters of the heart is vividly reflected in her poetry, as discussed further on in the mini-dissertation.

Das wrote a syndicated column on culture and politics until her death in May 2009, aged 75 ('Kamala Das Introduction', 2010:1).

2. The Female Writer and Das's Poetic Persona

“Poets ... cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their Mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality.” – Kamala Das

Virginia Woolf was of the opinion that any woman who set her pen to paper and, like her, embraced the writer's profession, was obliged to undertake two enterprises: the first was to kill ‘the Angel in the House’ and the second was to ‘tell the truth about [her] own experience as a body’ (Woolf 1990:538). She claimed to have succeeded at the first but admitted failure at the second: ‘[K]illing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet.’ Harish (1996:213) contends that Das is, thus far, the only Indian writer in English ‘to tread the untrodden challenging area of exploring and sharing one's experience as a body’ by ‘discarding the superficiality of others who try to grapple with the acute problems of their existence while avoiding any talk about their bodies.’ I agree that Das never shies away from confronting her body with unparalleled sincerity and candour. This blunt, confessional honesty serves as a foundation for her emotional, psychological, sociological and spiritual development. Woolf maintained that the second enterprise was more difficult because she felt that what men would say of a woman who tells the truth about her body and sexual desires would always hamper the creativity of a woman writer. However even a quick skim through Das's more erotic poems, or more so her autobiography, reveals her bold and decidedly unconstrained creativity in this area. What further adds to the uniqueness of her poetry is the high degree of intensity and the almost compulsive candour present in her poetic voice, as well as what Nabar (1994:19) describes as ‘a disregard for “nice” feminine concealments, and an aggressively independent assessment of the man-woman relationship.’

Das, had she undertaken Woolf's injunctions, would appear to struggle more with attempting to kill ‘the Angel in the House.’ Despite her rebellion against the norms of traditional Indian morality (with regard to her love life), she was always aware of her deviation from the expectations that her gender, society and role as a wife imposed upon her. Often she returns to her culturally defined self only to be reminded of her inability or unwillingness to live in accordance with the cultural prescription; as Harish (1996:213) observes, ‘from such a vacillation between the traditionally defined role model and her personal yearning to carve out an undefined, independent role for herself springs an

apparent inconsistency in her narrative, for which she has often been blamed.’ At times her writing can seem frustratingly equivocal but I think this inconsistency reveals the conflict within her. It also accounts for the fact that although she challenges certain popularly held cultural beliefs (such as those about arranged marriages and a woman’s role), her writing may still be interpreted as retaining a certain conservatism – what Harrex²⁵ (1986:173) calls ‘an Indianness of sensibility.’ Thus, despite her frequent criticism of restrictive socio-cultural traditions and norms in her work – which often gives her writing the impression of being rather liberal – at times her poems reveal that her own mindset is entrenched in similarly prejudiced ways of thinking, and thus, I believe, she is fundamentally more conservative than she may seem. Thus, while scholars such as Vimala Rao, Iqbar Kaur, and Vrinda Naur find Das's poetry, autobiography and essays ‘frustratingly inconsistent, self-indulgent, and equivocal’ (‘Kamala Das Introduction’, 2010:1) I think that her fluctuating stances are not a simply a fault but rather a characteristic of her work; she is consistently inconsistent. I believe this stems from the complexity of her identity, which will be discussed in more detail further in the dissertation.

Despite these inconsistencies, there is no doubt that compared to the generation of writers (and particularly among women writers) from which Das came, she was radical in her approach and content. Due to patriarchal assumptions about the superiority of male experience, the work of Indian women writers has traditionally been undervalued. Navarro-Tejero (2005:1) cites a contributing factor to this prejudice as ‘the fact that most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space, and the women’s perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of males who deal with “weightier” themes’. In addition, Indian women writers in English are subject to a second prejudice, this time from regional counterparts who feel that the English-writers are removed from the harsher realities of Indian life. This is because proficiency in English is available only to those of the educated and thus more affluent classes, and so a frequent judgement is made that both the writers and their works belong to a high (and thus more isolated or ‘Westernised’) social stratum. The English writers are, on the whole, western-educated, middle class women whose works typically depict ‘the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife, this subject

²⁵ This ‘Indianness of sensibility’ influences Das’s writing and I believe it is linked to a (perhaps more Eastern) socially-directed communalistic approach, as opposed to a more Western, individualistic approach. This is expanded on later.



matter often being considered superficial compared to the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes' (Navarro-Tejero 2005:1).

Thirdly, as a result of the imposition of the English language in Indian education and literature by British imperialists, Indian writers in English are sometimes frowned upon because many critics view their use of English as a postcolonial mimic activity (Navarro-Tejero 2005). Das herself dismissed the politics of language; in a pert reply to a question about the validity of English as a medium of poetic communication, she says: 'Why in English is a silly question. It is like asking us why we do not write in Swahili or Serbocroate. English being the most familiar, we use it. That is all' (Dwivedi 2000:53). Despite her insistence that politics does not influence her choice of language, Harrex (1986:163) observes that 'by choosing to write these poems in English, she is writing in a language of India which is sufficiently detached or distanced from cultural conventions to emancipate her into a mode of utterance in which she can be forthright, frank, critical, and ethically unconventional.' In her poem 'An Introduction' Das asserts her prerogative to write in a language of her choice:

Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? [...]
The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.

(An Introduction, ll.7-14)

Here the speaker of the poem reveals that honesty in speech is what she values; she seems to say that more important than, for example, the dialect, accent, or mannerisms of a language is the sincerity and openness with which it is spoken. She seems to indicate that 'honesty' is an important part of her value system and that it forms more of her identity than the 'status' of being an Indian poet who chooses to write in English. 'An Introduction' employs the confessional form and a rhetorical manner to direct pertinent questions relating to a woman's and an Indian poet's identity as an English-writer. In the poem Das responds to her friends, family and critics who cry, 'It is time to/ Choose a name, a role' (ll.42-42). They urge her to define (and thus limit) herself by transforming her alienation from them into a larger and more universal alienation.



What complicates Das's literary identity, therefore, is her bilingualism. Most of her prose, for which she uses the pseudonym Madhavikutty, is written in her mother-tongue, Malayalam, while her poetry is mostly written in English. Her poetry is thus able to address a more diverse audience. She continues in 'An Introduction' to define her speech as Indian-English 'in defence of a natural poetic, or a verse voice or language which is a natural, uninhibited expression of her personality' (Kohli 1976:173).

It is human as I am human [... it]
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of the rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral pyre.

(An Introduction, ll.15-24)

Here Das contends that her language, despite its 'distortions' and 'queerness' (l.12) is borne of a mind that is 'aware' (l.21). This reveals her awareness of the potential significance of a choice of language, despite her dismissal of the subject. Such, albeit small, contradictions are ubiquitous in the poet's stances from poem to poem and even within poems. On reading Das a striking impression we have is her engagement with her readers through means of her personality, or of her literary representation of it. 'A poet's raw material,' she asserts in *My Story*, 'is her personality' (Das 1976:165). Accounts from her autobiography often portray the poet as impulsive, passionate, sensitive, frank and unreserved. Thus such personality traits of spontaneity, blunt honesty, uninhibited confession and ruthless self-analysis as expressed in the poetic persona of her works appear to have strong affinities with Das's autobiographical voice. Critics have often termed her a self-indulgent and self-obsessed poet. This is hardly surprising, for as she indicates '[t]he source of my interest in literature is my interest in my life' (Das 1976:165). She admits in her autobiography to a polemical desire to convey her experiences to her readers and employs a bizarre metaphor to define her notion of herself as a confessional poet:

I have often wished to take myself apart and stick all the bits, the heart, the intestines, the liver, the reproductive organs, the skin the hair and all the rest on a large canvas to form a collage which could then be donated to my readers.

(*My Story*, p.217)

‘Confessional’ is the term first used to describe the kind of poetry Robert Lowell wrote in his *Life Studies* (1959). Confessional poetry has developed well-defined characteristics and is exemplified in, amongst others, the works of Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Allen Ginsberg. However, Lowell’s clarification of the confessional ‘I’ as not always factually true should be noted. He explains that elements such as biographical accounts may be over- or under-emphasised: ‘What the confessional poet gives us is a psychological equivalent of his mental state. By putting himself at its centre he imparts a unique authenticity to the poem’ (Ramakrishnan 1977:29). Thus, although the details of a confessional poem are not all necessarily accurate, the sentiments expressed are sincere, frank expressions of the genuine emotional and psychological state of the poet.

Several characteristics of confessional poetry are found in Das’s poems. For example, the private humiliations and sufferings she always deals with are stock themes of confessional poetry. The poetic persona is typically portrayed as a victim of circumstance or sexual degradation. Das’s unusual metaphors and lack of clichéd expression usually ensure that these intimate experiences are conveyed with apparent sincerity and without sentimentality. In the poem ‘An Introduction’ the speaker deals with various aspects of her identity which she struggles to maintain against ‘the categorizers’ who urge her to ‘fit in’ and ‘belong’ (ll. 37-38). It seems that by explaining herself to others, she attempts also to explain herself therapeutically to herself.

In confessional poetry there is generally a struggle to relate the personal private experience to the reality of the outside world, and evidence of such conflict is present in Das’s poetry. The painful admission, ‘I too call myself I’ (l.59), hails from ‘the predicament of the confessional poet in which the outer world is seen as hostile to the world of self’ (Ramakrishnan 1977:30). Although her experiences are neither uncommon nor extraordinary enough to confer upon her any unique identity, she insists that the ‘I’ who experiences them is separate and special. This, to her, is the only way to retain her sense of personal worth when surrounded by ‘categorizers’ (l.38). The confessional ‘voice’ of her poetic persona is dynamic and extroverted, as revealed in the psychological frankness of her bold sexual disclosures in lines like:

I am a freak. It’s only to save my face, I flaunt, at
Times a grand, flamboyant lust.

(The Freaks, l.19-20)



Love became a swivel door
When one went out, another came in.

(Substitute, l. 4-44)

Another major feature of confessional poetry is its continually altering moods. At the height of revelling in the most sublime of human experience the poet may become conscious of the most mundane as its counterpart. In the words of Dostoevsky, ‘his [or in this case, hers] is to have a great experience and be aware of its futility’ (Ramakrishnan 1977:33). Thus confessional poetry is marked by a succession of shifting moods and stances. In her poems, Das reveals her doubts, fears, failures, ignorance, disgust, shame and remorse, as all of them bear the brand of her personality. This is evident in this extract from ‘An Introduction’:

It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat.

(An Introduction, ll. 54-58)

Here no attempt is made to romanticize or glorify any aspect of the self; the speaker openly expresses her feelings of loneliness and her poignant regrets. Das candidly admits to numerous (unsuccessful) affairs in her autobiography, and in this respect, the poetic persona seems to draw very heavily on the autobiographical elements of the poet. Almost all of Das’s poems are written from the first person perspective, deal with personal grievances, and have an undeniably confessional tone. They frequently view the ‘self’ as a misunderstood or unheard victim of external factors (like neglect, the constraints of her marriage, or society); they encompass constantly shifting moods and disclose earnest, frank observations. Thus the identity of the woman-persona in Das’s poetry is seen to have affinities with the identity of Kamala Das herself, and for this reason a brief look at identity formation may enable a more in-depth understanding of her work.

3. Identity and Expectations in Das's Poetry

"I [...] have lost/My way and beg now at strangers' doors to/Receive love, at least in small change" – 'My Grandmother's House' (l.14-16).

In his collection of Indian Poetry, Rajagopal Parthasarathy (1976: 24) remarks, 'Kamala Das impresses me by being very much herself in her poems. The tone is distinctively feminine.' This comment again highlights what seems to be the clear autobiographical and personal nature of Das's poetry and additionally begs the question, whether it is chauvinistic for a male critic to label Das's poetry as 'distinctively feminine', or if there is validity in a claim to be able to differentiate whether writing is intrinsically 'feminine' or 'masculine'. What implications would it have on the conception (on the part of the poet) and the reception (on the part of the reader) of writing by women? Parthasarathy is not the first critic to notice a difference between male and female writing, and indeed many feminists, unable to deny a distinction, justify or embrace it. According to Judith Gardiner (1981:348), a common explanation of female difference 'posits a "female consciousness" that produces styles and structures innately different from those of a "masculine mind."' Thus an understanding of female identity can unlock an understanding of qualities unique to contemporary writing by women.

Identity shapes the people we are and manifests itself in aspects of our being, such as our ideologies, behaviour, personality and writing. Because Das herself claims that her personality is fodder for her writing, and because the personality of her poetic persona has been shown, for the purposes of this essay at least, to be heavily influenced by her own, an understanding of identity formation and female identity is valuable. As Kohli (1976:177) notes, 'If one is led to write about Kamala Das in psychoanalytical terms, it is only because, as she herself indicates [in *My Story*], she "must let [her] mind striptease" and "must extrude autobiography", but also because her poems, like Anne Sexton's, seem to be precipitated by the need to solve her personal problems through a kind of self-imposed therapy.' Thus I will embark on a short foray into psychoanalysis which can then be applied to literary criticism.

In order to reach a theory of female identity, identity theory as it is now constituted by male theorists (who assume a male paradigm for human experience) must first be understood and then adapted. To expound on identity theory, I draw on the influential psychoanalytic literary critic Norman Holland. He proposes that each person has a distinctive identity 'theme', in the same way a musical theme has variations. 'Identity

refers to the whole pattern of sameness within change which is a human life ... There remains a continuing me who is the style that permeates all those changes' (Holland 1978: 452). Using this theory, the critic can explain 'everything a person does,' because 'an author's writings exhibit the same identity theme as other forms of behaviour, like dreams, habits, speech and sexual acts. The critic can analyse an author 'in the same way that one explicates a literary text, looking for a single unifying theme' (Gardiner 1981: 351). Holland claims that this theory is the key to the 'personal' role in writing, reading, political choice, popular arts, and psychological experience.

An identity theorist who has significantly influenced Holland and literary criticism in general is Heinz Lichtenstein, who theorised that very early in life, every child forms a 'primary' identity in response to the expectations that are implicitly expressed by his or her first caretaker, who is usually the mother (Gardiner 1981:350). This core identity sets the pattern according to which the person thereafter relates to other people and to the world. In addition, it is on the stable identities of individuals that society as a whole depends. However, when the cultural storehouse of available roles falls short of fitting the identity themes of enough people, the 'mismatched' persons may suffer from identity crises. An 'identity crisis' is what modern identity theorist Erik Erikson (1950: 111) terms as the process 'through which perplexed youth passes on its way to adulthood'. The resolution of the identity crisis leads to 'final self-definition, to irreversible role patterns, and thus to commitments for life'.

I propose that the 'single unifying theme' of Das's poetry is her insatiable desire for love or emotional fulfilment, from which much of her angst and disgust arises. As she herself proclaims in 'An Introduction', 'I am every/Woman who seeks love' (ll.50-51). This quest for love is born of her expectations and fuelled by her desire. If Das were to be represented as a 'musical theme', I concur with Lim (1992:349) who suggests the 'pulsating rhythm of [the] popular 1960s rock-'n-roll song, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction"' as a track that seems to encapsulate the core of her poetic persona. Satisfaction encompasses the notion of sexual desire (a recurring theme in Das's poems) and emerges as a domain of female struggle in a dominantly patriarchal society. The expectations of others (such as her husband, lovers, and critics) shape her world as much as her own expectations of them and of herself do. It is the disparity between expectation and reality that is the cause of the pervading sense of despair in her poetry.

Lim (1992:352) claims that a dominant figure present in Das's poetry is that of the female as a 'desiring' subject. As the 'self' is constituted in desire, and 'desire is given

shape by the energy of an absence of satisfaction [be it] in innocent longing, brutalized sex, cynical promiscuity [or a] range of female sexual experiences’, in order to maintain her subject condition, the ‘desiring’ female cannot ever be wholly satisfied. Lim (1992:353) illustrates this in relation to *My Story*, (but I believe it applies also to her poetry) in this way:

Female ‘desire’ is figured in the psychological longing of the neglected daughter for a remote father, the physical drive of a virgin for sexual experience, the marital yearning of a young wife for emotional union with her husband, the ecstatic enjoyment of a mature woman with her lover, the depraved lust of a disillusioned older woman with a host of unloving and unlovely paramours, and finally as the ecstasy of the older devotee in the ancient worship of Krishna [...] ‘Desire’, as embodied in the autobiography, is multiply manifest, attending a range of female roles. [The speaker presents herself alternately as ...the dutiful housewife, the devoted spouse,] the naïve object of lesbian exploration, an innocent child bride, the victimized wife, adoring mother, sexual tease, easy lay, and spiritual goddess seeking union with the divine.

The poetic persona is also seen to live out these stereotypical roles in Das’s poems. Lichtenstein’s (1977:119) view seems to supplement Lim’s observation as he posits that the self is defined by ‘the total potential range of all possible variations of the individual which are compatible with its primary identity’, and that a person may risk death rather than give up identity. This brings to mind the poet’s lines in ‘The Suicide’: ‘If love is not to be had/I want to be dead’ (ll.54-55). This seemingly over-dramatic declaration is made more meaningful in the light of identity theory because her intense desire for emotional fulfilment shapes her beliefs about herself, her priorities and her perspective. Thus, though everyone has an invariable, early formed identity, it is nonetheless potentially fragile, as Lichtenstein (1977:78) asserts: ‘loss of identity is a specifically human danger, and maintenance of identity a specifically human necessity.’

The formulation of female identity is a process which highlights the fluid and flexible aspects of the primary identities of women. It is therefore unsurprising that the concept of self-hood is especially problematic for females and that contemporary writing by women reflects these dissonances. For example, a reflection of this fluidity is that ‘women’s writing does not conform to the generic prescriptions of the male canon. [...] and is] often called autobiographical. [...] Because of the continual crossing of self and other, women’s writing may blur the public and private and defy completion’ (Gardiner 1981:355). Thus we have writers like Dorothy Richardson and Anaïs Nin, whose lives,

journals, letters and fiction become nearly coterminous. Kamala Das may easily be added to this list.

In Das's poetry there is a distinct female persona who is like a fictional book character based on the poet. Gardiner (1981:357) suggests an approach to a text 'with the hypothesis that its female author is engaged in a process of testing and defining various aspects of identity chosen from many imaginative possibilities. That is, the woman writer uses her text [...] as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her emphatic identification with her character.' Thus the writer defines herself in the text through the creation of her female persona or character, because her speaker is constructed from representations of herself and of her ideals. Consider, for example, this extract from 'An Introduction' in which the speaker recalls the transition from childhood into womanhood:

I was a child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.

(An Introduction, l.24-31)

The clause 'they told me I grew' implies that due to the physical changes occurring in her body, 'they' (family, society, cultural expectations) instruct her that it is time to grow up and conduct herself in a manner befitting of a woman. However, despite physical maturity, she herself does not feel 'grown'; she is still an emotional child, tender and in need of love. As made clear in the last line, the physical attributes ('my breasts and womb', l.31) that 'make' her a grown woman oppress and burden her. According to Erikson, a young woman 'spends adolescence looking for the man through whom she will fulfil herself [because] the maturational stages of identity and intimacy are conflated for her,' (Gardiner 1981: 350). This certainly seems to be the case in the line, 'I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask for' (ll.26-28), in which the speaker's desire for emotional intimacy prompts her behaviour and responses, and thus is closely tied to her sense of personal identity.

The poetic persona then tries to use her 'woman-body' ('An Introduction', l.30) in her search for self-definition, as shown in the poem 'In Love':



Where
Is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each
Embrace a complete thing, a
Finished jigsaw, when mouth on
Mouth, I lie, while pleasure
With deliberate gaiety
Trumpets harshly into the
Silence of the room.
[...]
A million questions wake in
Me, and all about him, and
This skin-communicated
Thing that I dare not in
His presence call our love.

(In Love, ll.7-16, 24-27)

Here she considers whether sexual intimacy, which is what she turns to in her quest for love, really provides her with the fulfilment she craves. She longs to be a 'finished jigsaw' herself, and for her 'mouth on/Mouth' (l.11-12) embraces to define her identity as a lover. The 'million questions' (l.24) of this 'perplexed youth pass[ing] on [her] way to adulthood' reveal her doubts and anxiety as she ponders whether 'this skin-communicated/Thing' (l.26), the sexual act, is enough to complete her. However the abrasive, 'deliberate gaiety' of their pleasure insinuates that she tries too hard and wants too desperately, which results in strained artificiality. This is reinforced by the discordant connotations of the words 'trumpets harshly' (l.15). Such artificiality again presents itself in the poem 'The Freaks', in which the speaker meets with a lover. She yearns unsuccessfully for emotional intimacy but has to settle for physical intimacy. The poem addresses the hollowness of the gratification of mere physical love, the 'Skin's lazy hungers', (l.12) and the artificiality of such a relationship when longing for a deeper connection:

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where the stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire ... Can't this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more than the
Skin's lazy hungers?

(The Freaks, ll. 1-12)

A forced pretence at intimacy is evident in the lines, ‘our minds/ [A]re willed [...] towards love’ (l.6). These lines are followed by a significant ‘But’ (l.7) which is emphasised by the word’s position as the first syllable in the line. This highlights that their strained attempt at love is a sorry substitute; even their foreplay (‘his right/ Hand on my knee, ll.4-5) is conducted without genuine passion but with an air of desperate boredom. Physical features such as the ‘cheek’ (l.2) and ‘teeth’ (l.4) of the speaker’s lover are given overtly negative and even distasteful connotations such as ‘stained’ (l.1) and ‘uneven’ (l.4), while his mouth is compared to a deep, dark, cold cave (l.3) – hardly the attractive or erotic description generally expected in a description of a lover.

Here the speaker’s expectations of love fuel her desire, but the words ‘wander’, ‘tripping’, ‘idly’, ‘puddles’ and ‘lazy’ connote a tedium or disillusionment in the lack of passion, of which unnatural or forced (‘willed to’, l.6) sexual arousal is but a poor substitute. The recurring plosives in the first three lines (in words like ‘talk’, ‘cheek’, ‘dark’, ‘cavern’ and ‘stalactites’) seem to start the poem off forcefully. However, these harsh sounds soon give way to softer, sluggish-sounding vowels and sibilants as the speaker becomes more bored and exasperated. The desire for an emotional liaison and the persona’s failure to establish one are the central burden of Das’s poetry. The poet’s awareness of the chasm between her expectations of love and the reality of the situation ‘lends a grim tragic force to her works. Her poems epitomise most powerfully these sorrows and failures’ (Rahman 1981: 8), as expressed by her lament and confession in the rest of the poem:

Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence ...
I am a freak. It’s only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times a grand, flamboyant lust.

(The Freaks, ll. 12-20)

Here her lover’s contact with her is so superficial that it glances off the skin without stirring any emotion deeper than bored and weary desolation (‘long hours’, l. 16).

These ‘long hours’, coupled with the words ‘waiting’ (l.15) and ‘silence’ (l.17) suggest a lack of interpersonal communication that adds to the speaker’s sense of isolation. In a memorable metaphor, she compares her heart to an ‘empty cistern’ (l.15). Diction such as ‘cistern’ and ‘coiling snakes’ (l.17) brings to mind excreta, and highlights the wasteful and repulsive nature of strained artificiality in keeping up appearances. This in turn echoes the start of ‘In Love’:

Of what does the burning mouth
Of sun, burning in today’s
Sky remind me ... Oh, yes, his
Mouth, and ... his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust.

(In Love, ll. 1-7)

Both these poems reveal the gap between the sensuous completeness of sexual love and the ‘sad lie’ (l.6) of her gaudy lust, which is ‘unending’ (l.7) and perpetually unsatisfied for as long as she is human. It is through these sexual encounters that she seeks self-definition; to fill this gap is to resolve the identity crisis within her. However, all she finds is disillusionment in sexual desire; her rhetorical questions highlight her underlying awareness of the inherent futility of her endeavours. Since the early nineteenth century ‘self-discovery’ or ‘a search for identity’ seems to have been a dominant theme in women’s writing. The word ‘identity’ is in itself paradoxical, as Gardiner (1981:347) observes: it ‘denotes both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when applied to women.’ In summarising the quandary of female identity, Gardiner (1981: 348) continues:

In a recent anthology of feminist criticism, one scholar claims that “a feminist critique ... is helping women to recognise themselves”; a second says that fiction by women reveals “a fear of losing ... one’s unique identity”; a third believes “feminist poets” equate “consciousness of oppression; consciousness of identity.” Thus the quest for female identity seems to be a soap opera, endless and never advancing, that plays the matinees of women’s souls. A central question of feminist literary criticism is, Who is there when a woman says, “I am”?

Certainly, all three scholars touch on aspects of the female writer’s quest for identity, but the debate remains open and highly subjective. Das’s persona is ever-present, playing in diverse roles which define her as a woman, wife and sexual partner. In striving to achieve self-definition in various ways, including those which go beyond romantic

encounters, she also attempts to realise herself as an individual through empathy with other women. In ‘An Introduction’ the poetic persona identifies herself in terms of a generic woman, one who experiences emotions deeply and indulgently, both as a victim and as a victor:

I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by his name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love.
[...] Who are you, I ask each and everyone
The answer is, it is I. [...]
It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed.

(An Introduction, ll.48-60)

On the whole, Das’s love poetry embodies purely personal grievances, but here the woman-persona speaks as ‘every woman’. In doing so, she turns personal into public, by generalising; she invites other women to embrace her experiences of shame, guilt, hurt and bliss as their own, in the same way that she offers to embrace theirs. This identification with or call for unity with other women is also evident in ‘The Descendants’ in her sardonic address to a married lover:

What I am able to give
Is only what your wife is qualified
To give.
We are alike,
We women,
In our wrappings of hairless skin.

(Composition, ll.116-121)

Here the speaker seems to have sympathy for or acknowledge some kind of bond with the wife, despite her own position as the mistress. Through this the poet seems to suggest that their shared gender (‘we women’, l.120), confers upon them a stronger, more fundamental bond than either the marital or romantic/ sexual relationships they have with the man. The speaker again appears as an Everywoman in the poem ‘The Looking Glass’ in which she addresses other women on ‘getting a man to love you’ (l.1):



Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier ... admit your
Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. 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.

(The Looking Glass, ll.1-16)

The lack of the article 'a' before the word 'woman' (l.3) may be dismissed as Das's Indo-English, but I think that here (placed so prominently at the start of the line and with a first-syllable-stress) it is deliberately used to reinforce a sense that the speaker does not speak of any women as individuals (i.e. *a* woman). Rather, in the lines 'your wants as/ Woman', the poet uses the singular form of the noun to refer to all women collectively, in the way a title would. This, I believe, stresses the unity of a shared gender and allows for emphatic identification with all women readers. Similarly, in the lines 'all your/ endless female hungers' (ll.15-16) the speaker implies that all women have these hungers in common due to the fact that they are female. In her poetry Das habitually distinguishes between the '*fact* of femaleness and the *notion* of femininity' (Nabar 1985:164). Her femaleness is what the poet equates with physical attributes of her body, represented somewhat conventionally in this poem by 'long hair', 'breasts' and 'menstrual blood'. The poetic persona seems, as will be explored later, to reject some aspects of femininity in other poems, but here her 'femaleness' is embraced.

In 'The Looking Glass', a note of wryness may be detected as the speaker divulges that stroking a man's ego is the easiest way into his heart: 'Stand nude [...] / So that he sees himself the stronger one / And believes it so' (ll.3-5). The words seem to have a dry, experienced humour to them, but insightfully acknowledge that overcoming a sense of physical and/or sexual insecurity is crucial in a relationship of this nature. Her overall tone throughout the poem is intimate and frank as she advises women to be unreserved about their bodies ('Gift him all', l.12). This advocacy of emotional and physical abandon was particularly daring, unusual and significant as her poetry was mostly read by Indian women

with traditional backgrounds or by conservative academics who often considered women speaking openly about sex to be taboo.

According to Gardiner (1981:360), ‘a woman’s sense of her gender, her sexuality and her body may assume a different, perhaps a more prominent, shape in her conception of herself than these factors would for a man.’ This is in part because women are often encouraged to judge their ‘inner selves’ through their external physical appearance and to equate the two. Simultaneously, they are taught to create socially acceptable images of themselves by manipulating their speech, dress, and behaviour – perhaps with the intention of making and maintaining their image as ‘softer, younger, lovelier’ (l.6).’ Das acknowledges the physical charms that ‘make you woman’ (l.13) but, as expressed in ‘An Introduction’, she also rebels against the social conventions of what ‘femininity’ entails:

Then ... I wore a shirt and my
Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer,
Be quarreller with servants.

(An Introduction, ll.33-37)

Here the traditional roles of a woman, especially in the culturally-bound context of India, are almost humorously summed up in the stereotypical tasks of wearing sarees, doing needlework and being at loggerheads with the servants. The speaker expresses her contempt at these restrictions that limit her sense of ‘womanliness’ (l.35) by trying to ignore them and by changing her outward appearance. However, limitations of the mind are far more severe than those of the body. Although Das defies some of these cultural expectations, she is also bound and oppressed by them. For example, one of her most effective poems, ‘The Old Playhouse’, portrays the female as subservient to male tyranny:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
Offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse,

ll.12-16)

In an interesting use of fairytale and story motifs, the speaker describes herself as a kind of Alice in Wonderland who submissively eats some magic food and shrinks, psychologically and emotionally (l.26). This transformation into a ‘dwarf’ (l.16) relates

how the poetic persona's sense of identity changes – under the 'monstrous ego' (l.15) of the male it is grotesquely altered and reduced. The word 'saccharine' (l.13) instead of the simpler, more commonly used 'sugar' creates a sense of distance and formality, as do the other multi-syllabic words in close proximity, like 'vitamins' and 'cowering' (l.14). Likewise, structurally long lines (for example, there are fourteen syllables in line 14) reinforce the speaker's feelings of alienation.

As suggested by the bitterness in the line, 'You called me wife' (l.12), the speaker seems to say that her choice in the matter was limited – the role of 'wife' and all that the role entailed were expected of her. She implies that she does not necessarily define herself in that role but rather is subject to it. In her autobiographical writings, Das emphasizes how she resented the unglamorous duties of a housewife. She relates in *My Story* (Das 1976:103) how her husband forbade her to go to her much-cherished play rehearsals because he felt her domestic responsibilities were more of a priority: 'You must remember you are a wife and mother, he said.' This resentment seems to have influenced her poetry; in 'Gino' the poetic persona describes the domestic routine with a trace of dry humour, gloomily foreseeing herself destined to a series of undignified menial tasks: '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,' (ll.42-44).

Gardiner (1981:354) explains that 'children and adolescents learn various social role and group identifications around which their sense of identity, that is, their self-concept, consolidates. These social roles are highly polarised by gender, with a broader variety of acceptable roles available to boys than to girls.' The two chief roles that are available to women are, unsurprisingly, those of wife and of mother. These roles denote a personal status as well as assuming an occupational status. 'These roles then become confused and conflated with the girl's infantile identification with her mother, since being properly female in a society usually involves both doing the sorts of things mother does and being the sort of woman she is' (Gardiner 1981:354). This accounts for the dutiful (albeit resentful) serving of tea and the offering of supplements in 'The Old Playhouse' as it is expected of the wife to provide nourishment for her husband and children.

However, fulfilling the roles of wife and mother does not mean that women are exempt from personal identity crises. A girl may achieve her socially accepted roles through marriage and motherhood but these are social and biological events that may occur independently of a personal identity crisis, and do not require its resolution; indeed, they are frequently factors which contribute to the crisis. Thus, despite experiencing both

marriage and motherhood by the age of sixteen, the poet remained desperately unfulfilled. It is without doubt that women's experiences differ from men's in both profound and quite ordinary ways. Critics find imagery and distinctive content in writing by women: for example, imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of child care. This is certainly the case with Das, as many of her poems deal with a sense of being oppressed by her role as a wife, as seen for instance in 'The Sunshine Cat', which includes the lines: 'Her husband shut her/In every morning; locked her in a room of books,' (ll.14-15).

The topic of gender difference has recently been a goldmine for feminist theorists and many have posited comprehensive psychoanalytic explanations of female identity. Nancy Chodorow (1978: 6), in her analysis of 'how sexual asymmetry and inequality are constituted, reproduced, and changed,' asserts that the focus should not be on biological differences or even on role training, but rather on 'social structurally induced psychological processes.' She argues that 'girls' personalities take shape differently in that, throughout women's lives, the self is defined through social relationships; issues of fusion and merger of the self with others are significant, and ego and body boundaries remain flexible' (quoted in Gardiner 1981: 352).

This may be valuable in understanding Das's work. All her poems deal with social relationships and most have sexual undercurrents. The poet views sexual intercourse as a 'fusion' or 'merger' in her (sometimes humiliating) attempts to find emotional fulfilment. The flexibility of identity in women may also be seen in the 'fluid' imagery in her poems. Note the contrasts, for example, between fluidity and solidity in this extract from her poem 'The Stone Age':

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby room,
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,
You stick a finger in my dreaming eye. And
Yet, on daydreams, strong men cast their shadows, they sink
Like white suns in the swell on my Dravidian blood,
Secretly flow the drains beneath ancient cities.
When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.
Through peep-holes, the neighbours watch,
They watch me come
And go like rain.

(The Stone Age, ll.1-16)

Here the husband is seen as an ‘old fat spider’ (l.2) that confines the woman persona within the dull, hard walls of domesticity, smugness and passivity. He is a perpetual irritant, an unwelcome intruder into the privacy of her mind, ‘You stick a finger into my dreaming eye’ (l.7). Due to his neglect and insensitivity, the poet is emotionally turned into stone. Her mind is haunted by other men; in the intimate depths of her fantasies, images of ‘strong men’ sink in her ‘Dravidian blood’ (ll.8-9). The elemental quality of this experience is reinforced in the sexually-tinged image of the secretly flowing drains beneath sacred cities. The words ‘settler’ (l.1), ‘stone’, ‘granite’ (l.3) and ‘room’ (l.4) give an impression of stagnant solidity and are used in connection with the husband, while the words ‘blood’ (l.9), ‘flow’, ‘drains’ (l.10), ‘sea’ (l.12) and ‘rain’ (l.16) are used in connection with the woman-persona, who longs for the freedom to ‘flow’ as she chooses. In this way the binary opposites solid/fluid in the poem highlight contrasts such as passive/dynamic, indifference/passion and husband/wife.

Such contrasts bring to focus a theme that preoccupies many modern women poets, that is, the conflict between passivity and rebellion within a patriarchal system. Poets like Sylvia Plath (a contemporary of Das’s and with whom comparison has been drawn in other studies) were also deeply concerned with the simple intolerability of being a woman. Das’s tone of voice and the nature of her experience – both its spontaneity and its candid treatment of a woman’s experience – belong to a growing trend in which there has been a keen interest in the work and achievements of women, particularly that of women writers. The central issue is the manner in which a woman writer is able to redefine herself and her world by breaking away fully and fiercely from the conventional roles of women.

Though Das deals with these conflicts, her poetry is not, on the whole, a scathing diatribe against men in general. Rather, she writes intensely personal poems; any hostility or resentment is aimed either at herself or at specific men in her life, for example her husband or a lover. This marks Das as essentially ‘a poet of the modern Indian woman’s ambivalence’ (Kohli 1976:173), a position that many contemporary female writers, particularly those from traditional backgrounds, find themselves in. She is certainly conventional to a certain extent, and so relates well to the common woman and her fundamental needs for love and security. However, she cannot help but simultaneously express an ambivalence that proceeds from her own duality.



For example, despite her bitterness due to the emotional and sexual incompatibility between her and her husband (against which she attempts to revolt through extramarital affairs) the ‘freedom’ she strives for does not satisfy her permanently any more than the bonds of a love-less marriage do. This is clearly expressed in ‘Composition’:

When I got married
My husband said,
You may have freedom,
As much as you want.
My soul balked at this diet of ash.
Freedom became my dancing shoe
How well I danced,
Until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
And I began to have doubts

(Composition, ll.54-63)

The metaphor of freedom as a ‘diet of ash’ is effective as the word ‘diet’ could connote reduction, limitation and restraint – this is ironic in the light of ‘freedom’ (l.56) connoting release and indulgence. In addition, ash is a light, dirty, powdery substance left over after something has been burnt; in this way the speaker implies that an overdose of freedom is harmful, it ‘burnt’ her emotionally and left her feeling insubstantial and sullied. This is reinforced by the ominous-sounding word ‘until’ (l.62) positioned at the start of the line for emphasis, and the word ‘grimy’ (l.62); even the gaiety of dance has worn her out, all that remains is dust and ‘doubts’ (l.63). A key factor in these doubts is, I believe, Das’s identity as an Indian. In his thought-provoking study on differences between Africa and the West, Van der Walt (1997) notes that the two are very different in their understandings of reality (ontologies), their views of humankind (anthropologies), their views of society, and their norms and values. They are often diametrically opposed due to the fact that generally, in Africa, human community is most valued, whereas in the West, the individual is most important.

I propose that the same differential characteristics lie between India and the West, and so Van der Walt’s observations may be similarly applied to understand the struggle within Das. The poet was caught between her traditional Indian upbringing and the Western influence of British imperialism in India; between the ascetic simplicity of Gandhian principles and the fast-paced opulence of the urban life and the cosmopolitan society she encountered during her stays in Mumbai and Delhi; between the ingraining of social conventions and her own outgoing personality, not to mention her unconventional (or ‘Western’ in the context of a culturally-bound community) opinions.



Van der Walt (1997:31) differentiates between socially directed Communalism – ‘First the community, then the individual; I am because we are’ – and Western Individualism: ‘First the individual, then the community or social relationships; we are, because I am.’ Indeed, due to increasing acculturation between Indian and Western cultures, many contemporary Indians (such as Das) and first-generation non-resident Indians find themselves needing to negotiate the claims of these two radically opposed approaches. Das is caught in a conflict between these two outlooks. Often her poems deal with a need for independence and a release from the pressures society exerts on her as opposed to a desire for security and comfort in the arms of a man.

The path to freedom is seen, in poem after poem, to be a demanding, painful and irregular process. In ‘I Shall Some Day’ the poet imagines how one day she shall leave the ‘tired lust’ (l.4) of the domestic ‘cocoon’ (l.1), and take wing ‘free in air’ (l.6). However she also, somewhat despairingly, predicts that she will eventually return to the comfort of familiarity:

Too hurt by fierce happiness to want
A further joint or a further spell
Of freedom, and I shall someday see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
Just a skeletal thing, then shut my
Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,
Here in your familiar nest of scorn ...

(I Shall Some Day, ll.11-17)

Here, barely a breath after blaming her husband for her disenchantment with life and after a brief spell of the ‘fierce happiness’ (l.11) of ‘freedom’ (l.13) (presumably here she refers to the temporary pleasures of sexual indulgence) the speaker resigns herself to a passive approach – to shut her eyes and seek comfort in her husband’s ‘familiar nest’ (l.17). She seems so accustomed to his scorn that she prefers it to the violence or danger (connoted by the word ‘fierce’, l.11) of too much freedom. Unable to break free completely, or to find contentment in her relationship with him, she remains trapped in bleak discontent. In ‘The Sunshine Cat’, she similarly holds her husband, or, at least, the men in her life, completely responsible for her status as a victim:

They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band



Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget,
To forget, oh, to forget ... and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you...
They let her slip from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use; I shall build walls with tears;
She said, walls to shut me in... Her husband shut her
In, every morning; locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door, like
A yellow cat, to keep her company, but soon,
Winter came and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

(The Sunshine Cat, ll. 1-22)

Again, her own role is wholly passive, as conveyed by the nature of verbs applied to the woman-persona: 'she [clung]' (l.5), 'she burrow[ed]' (l.5) and 'she lay there weeping' (l.12); as well as by the lines, 'They did this to her' (l.1) and 'They let her slide from pegs of sanity' (l.11). The speaker claims that her pain is mostly caused by the callous neglect of her husband who does not even 'use' (l.22) her as the young men do. Somewhat frustratingly for the reader, she consciously chooses to cling to 'the cynics' (l.5) – whom she knows have neither the capacity nor the will to provide her with the love she craves – and then bemoans her sorry state. Likewise, in 'A Man is a Season' she denies any personal responsibility in her 'victim-status', saying: 'You let me toss my youth like coins/Into various hands' (ll.3-4).

However, Das may well quite deliberately be using the technique of identification through use of defensive narrative, that is to say, allowing female readers to relate to her poetic persona, and thus grow in self-awareness because of their rejection or acceptance of the actions of the persona. The inconsistency in attitude and response is also in itself an expression of the struggle for a meaningful identity. Many recent women writers portray in their works 'the growth of women's self-awareness in the characters' minds and also work to create that awareness. The woman writer allies herself intimately with her female reader through this identification' (Gardiner 1981:358). Together the writer and reader can explore the public and the private in the character's or persona's and then in their own lives, and decide what they will reject and what they will reflect. As an example, Gardiner

(1981:358) relates how this concept works through the works of Jean Rhys, who provides a good illustration of how a woman writer can control emphatic identification by using a defensive narrative strategy:

Jean Rhys' heroes criticize the active male quest through their submissiveness. They repel many readers by their passivity, particularly since they are considered autobiographical. These characters seem to reflect an oppressed, early stage of female self-awareness. They are poor, improvident, economically dependant, sexually humiliated. They drink. They are losing their looks. They want love they can never get. Yet these sad women are not 'failures of imagination'; they are complex triumphs in the management of readers' feelings. Although we readers do not want to be like these women, we are forced to recognise that we are or could be like them in similar circumstances. We become angry, then, both at the women and their oppression ... Thus as readers we oscillate between transient emphatic identifications with these characters and defences against them, defining ourselves through them in the process.

The characteristics of Rhys' heroines in this extract are in abundant evidence in Das's poetry. For example, the persona is emotionally destitute: 'My love is an empty gift, a gilded/empty container' (Captive, ll.12); she is often imprudent: 'I want your photo, lying down, he said [...] will you? Sure. Just arrange my limbs and tell/me when to smile' (The Testing of the Sirens, ll.37-40); and she is sexually humiliated: 'This body I wear without joy, this body/Burdened with lenience, slender toy, owned/By a man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with/my darling's impersonal lust' (Gino, ll.47-50). She drinks alone 'at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns' (An Introduction, l.55); she unflatteringly describes herself as 'widowed and diabetic/wrinkling like a bitter gourd' (A Feminist's Lament, ll.11-12) and is filled with self-disgust at 'the sad lie/of my unending lust' (In Love, ll.6-7). Many more lines throughout Das's poetry add to the overall impression of the pitiful and sometimes seemingly self-inflicted wretchedness of the poetic persona. All this accounts for an undeniable sense of frustration that often follows reading much of Das's poetry, which has resulted in critics dismissing her writing as repetitive, self-indulgent and whiney.

However, I believe the poet was conscious of the pathetic nature of her persona and deliberately attempted to evoke emotions of disgust and pity in her readers. Kohli (1976:173) adds to this notion of female readers being able to define themselves through fictional ones by remarking on what the editors of *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness* (1973) discovered: 'in searching for mythic ancestresses, women poets reject images glorified by the male imagination, such as Aphrodite, Helen and Eve – those

dual-natured archetypes of beauty, virgin/seducers, and purveyors of man's joy and destruction. Instead, they find their psychological ties with figures such as Leda, Cassandra, and Lot's wife – all victims of the gods or society, struggling to comprehend their circumstances and to express themselves.' I will attempt to show how Das is one such woman poet, as revealed through her choice of references to Hindu mythology.

Since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), a considerable number of Indian writers have portrayed women as long-suffering wives and mothers subjugated and silenced by the dominant patriarchy. Such women comprise – as discussed earlier – what Woolf (1990:538) describes as 'the Angel in the House' – an 'intensely sympathetic, immensely charming and utterly unselfish' woman who 'never had a mind or a wish of her own.' According to Navarro-Tejero (2005:6), in India 'the ideal of the traditional, oppressed woman persist[s] in a culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands. The Hindu goddesses Sita, Savitri and Draupadi serve as powerful cultural ideals for women.' Mythologically, the dominant feminine prototype is Sita – the chaste, patient, faithful and self-denying wife.

Das was raised a Hindu, and the Hindu moral code known as The Laws of Manu denies women an existence apart from that of their husbands or his family. However, in the last few decades, female writers have veered away from the customary portrayals of women as enduring and self-sacrificial towards the depiction of conflicted female characters who are searching for their identity and are no longer defined simply in terms of their status as a victim. When Das mythologizes her search for true love, it is not with the ideal Sita that she relates to. Rather Das identifies herself with Radha who 'in Hindu mythology relinquishes the ties of marriage in search of Lord Krishna, the true and eternal lover who is also the epitome of the fullest consciousness that a human being can contemplate' (Navarro-Tejero 2005:6). This 'fullest consciousness' that Krishna represents is what Das would equate to lasting and deep emotional fulfilment – the satisfaction she so desperately desires. What the poet experiences daily pales in comparison to all the expectations she has of love. This is expressed in 'The Maggots', where the speaker feels completely unresponsive to her husband's embraces in contrast to her blissful union with Krishna:

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...
That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt



So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

(The Maggots, ll.1-7)

This short but effective poem captures Radha's apathetic response to her husband's advances after consummating her love with Krishna, i.e. after experiencing perfect and complete satisfaction in love. The ellipsis at the end of line two seems to express her lingering traces of languorous contentment. The change of setting in the next line is introduced by the adverbial phrase of time, 'that night' (l.3). Here the 'night' perhaps connotes emotional darkness and death, as opposed to the romantic (and thus, possibly, idealistic) 'sunset' scene in line one. In a vivid metaphor, the speaker compares Radha's body in bed with her husband to a corpse and his inadequate kissing to maggots eating away at her dead flesh, which is suggestive of her indifferent heart.

It is also not insignificant to note that mythologically, Radha was not only a married woman, but a common milkmaid, as well as older than Krishna, the lover for whom she risks social acceptance, and her very life, to seek. This psychological identification with Radha instead of the more conventional Sita is the first way in which Das inverts the traditional stance in her poetry. The second way is the poet's stripping of these stories of their original religious and devotional nature. Almost all poetry dealing with Hindu mythology, such as that written by the well known woman poet Sarojini Naidu, is devotional. These are often Romantic or pastoral ballads, which make use of pleasantly flowing rhyme and rhythm. They are laden with nature imagery and detail the beauty of Krishna and the joyous purity of worship. According to Blackwell (1977:11), 'a favourite motif of the medieval *bhakti* or devotional poets of India [...] was the *abhisarika* – a woman going to meet her lover, braving the elements, blackness of night, and dangers of the forest [...] It is all metaphorical of the soul's (Radha) quest for God (Krishna).'

However, Das's short, intense poems, with their free verse, inconsistent and unmeasured rhythm, arresting imagery and sexual undertones cast Das's Radha not as a religious devotee but rather as a very human lover, as expressed in her poem 'Vrindavan' (another name for Krishna):

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind,
And the flute, luring her
From home and husband
Who later asks her of the long scratch on the brown

Aureola of her breast, and she shyly replies,
Hiding flushed cheeks,
It was so dark outside, I tripped and fell over
The brambles in the wood.

(Vrindavan, ll.1-8)

The many alliterative ‘l’ sounds make this short poem sound lyrical. This is fitting as, with the words ‘the flute, luring her’ (l.2), Radha claims that Krishna (who is commonly depicted in pictures as playing his flute and surrounded by adoring *gopis*²⁶) seduces her with his sweet melodies. Alliteration is also used successfully to link the words ‘home’, ‘husband’ (l.3) and ‘hiding’: beneath a façade of innocence (expressed by the words ‘shyly’ (l.5) and ‘flushed’ (l.6), as well as her unlikely excuse – surely brambles are more likely to scratch a more exposed area of the body than the breast) lies the secret of Radha’s adultery.

It is clear that this is more a poem about a woman’s private affair than about either Vrindavan or Radha as they are portrayed, with obvious spiritual subtexts, in Hindu mythology. Das uses these religious characters as literary motifs; her concern may be existential but it is not devotional in the traditional sense of the word (Blackwell 1997). This de-spiritualising reflects her attempt to challenge cultural symbols and ground myth in a natural, personal, relatable context. This links to the final way in which she reverses conventional mythology – through writing her poems from a distinctly woman’s perspective, as opposed to either a detached omniscient perspective or from that of Krishna, as in most poetry with mythological motifs. By letting her poems speak from the female and not male viewpoint, Das inverts the Radha-Krishna tradition and so her poems ‘re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions’ (Brewster: 1980:99).

In spite of all this subversion, it may be argued that the poet remains entrenched in convention because her Radha simply replaces the husband with another lover (albeit Krishna, whom the poet idealises as the perfect lover), and this mere turning to another man for fulfilment, I think, still involves a living through of conventional roles. Harish (1996:222) notes that although there are traces of the feminist enterprise in Das’s poetry (namely, an attempt to create a woman’s text) nowhere in her writing ‘do we come across a suggestion of the feminist commitment with correcting, modifying, supplementing or attacking the male culture.’ Any opposition on the poet’s part is personal; as suggested

²⁶ The Sanskrit word for cowherd girls.



earlier, she only directs it at specific males and not the system of patriarchy; she never criticises the fundamentals of the marriage institution, merely the emotional trauma it can create in an individual. In addition, although defying problematic marital bonds and patriarchal conventions, Das herself has consistently and vociferously denied being a feminist. She seems to believe a solution lies in the personal effort of the parties concerned (effort on the part of the male, in particular) rather than a more radical redefining of social conventions.

Nonetheless, her suggestions as to the nature of the ‘personal effort’ to be made should perhaps be considered with care: in ‘Composition’, the speaker exhorts the woman bored and afraid of old age to ‘Fall in love with an unsuitable/Person/Fling yourself on him/Like a moth on a flame’ (ll.212-215). Implicit in her metaphor is the unfortunate outcome (for the scorched moth and for the reader who may take her advice) of so reckless an endeavour. She appears to take her own advice in ‘The Stone Age’; when the husband leaves home, the speaker drives along the sea shore and climbs ‘the forty/ Noisy steps to knock at another’s door’ (l.12-13). She remains undeterred by the disapproval of neighbours who, ‘through peepholes’ (l.14), watch her ‘come/ And go like rain’ (l.15-16):

Ask me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price...

(The Stone Age, ll.16-22)

The repetition of the imperatives ‘ask me’ conveys the proud, reckless defiance in the speaker’s tone. Despite her post-coital belligerence, with the word ‘price’ she cannot but admit that idealising love comes at a cost. The cost turns out to be the resulting despair when love does not live up to her expectations, which is conveyed through diction like ‘felled’, ‘slumps’ (l.20), and the woeful trailing off of her voice – represented by the ellipsis at the end of the poem. This undercuts her earlier false, or at least, short-lived, bravado. Her pride does not cause her to fall without first providing a warning: like the ‘flame’ (l.215) on which the moth in ‘Composition’ is burned, in the above extract, the words ‘lion’ (l.17) and ‘hooded snake’ (l.18) connote a menacing sense of danger.

This alienation that the poet feels towards the end of ‘The Stone Age’ is also represented in her poem ‘The Corridors’. Here, the mantra-like repetition of the phrase

‘Why do I’ that starts each stanza creates a feeling of melancholic longing and regret; this coupled with the alliterative ‘l’ sounds gives the poem the overall sound of a lament:

Why do I remain ever
A stranger, tramping the lost
Lanes of a blinded mind [...]

Why do I so often in
Dreams linger at strange doorways,
Lonely to the bone, feeling
Like an imposter

(The Corridors, ll.10-13, 24-27)

Here ‘the lost/Lanes of the blinded mind’ (ll.12-13) the ‘naked walls’ (l.18) and the ‘strange doorways’ (l.25) signify the range of restraints imposed upon her by the inescapable duties of a housewife and mother, as well as those implied by the expectations of friends, relatives and readers. This isolates and depresses her; she feels that any involvement on her part must be a conscious adoption of a role, which turns her into an ‘imposter’ (line l.27). She is aware of occupying the world as one would inhabit a house, ‘where daily activities are impressed on the mind as mental and emotional routines. [...] This existential awareness of man as the sum of his actions and as deeply responsible for himself marks the climax of Das’s angst’ (Brewster: 1980:99). Such extreme despair is the inverse of her vivacious and profuse celebration of the pleasures of sensuality; each hinges on, and defines the course of, the other.

Thus old structures, whether classifying the terms on which a marriage functions, on which a woman negotiates her self-concept, or upon which traditions are founded, must in time yield to new structures. Das is conscious of this incessant transmutation of traditional forms, as evident in ‘The Snobs’, where the speaker projects this yielding process onto her future relationship with her children. In the poem, ‘the weary herdsmen/Singing soft Punjabi songs’ and girls ‘paus[ing] shyly at our gate’ (l.6) fill her with nostalgia, but all she has to offer at the ‘shrine of peace’ (l.10) (which represents the traditional past) are ‘my smile, a half dead fraudulent/Thing’ (ll.8-9). and ‘my constant,/Complaining voice,’ (l.11). She recognises that:

We must move on and on, until
We too, someday, by our children
May be disowned.

(The Snobs, ll.7-9)

The speaker seems to have accepted this inevitable process; her use of the word ‘may’ (l.9) lends the thought a sage objectivity. However, she is not always so accepting of the process of history; she frequently expresses her regrets about her past. For example, in the poem ‘Loud Posters’ she bemoans what other people’s inaccurate interpretations of her writing impose on her: ‘I’ve stretched my two dimensional/Nudity on sheets of weeklies monthlies/Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice’ (ll.9-11). Here the word ‘nudity’ could imply that this is what she feels has been popularly emphasised about her works, which accounts for accusations from critics and the public that her poetry and autobiography are sensationalistic. She seems to recognise that in stretching her ‘two dimensional/Nudity’ and revealing her most intimate hopes and desires in print for all to dissect, she has ‘in some way violated herself, even perpetuated a sad sacrifice’ (Nabar 1994:23). In ‘Composition’, the speaker acknowledges:

I know it is no use regretting now
Or feeling ashamed.
I also know that by confessing,
By peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
And
To the bone’s
Supreme indifference.

(Composition, ll.150-157)

Here the poet uses ‘indifference’ (l.157) to qualify the word ‘bone’ (l.156) (as opposed to the more abstract ‘soul’ in line 154), perhaps implying that expectations of the physical body will always result in emotional barrenness. After her many experiences of ‘peeling off’ (l.153) physical layers (i.e. those of her clothes) to find fulfilment in a romantic relationship, she realises and then asserts that the goal of her confessional poetry is to ‘reach closer to the soul’ (l.155). From this meta-physical desire she initiates a new quest for identity.

I believe Kamala Das used poetry in an attempt to bring herself a step closer to attaining her desires of emotional fulfilment, and quelling within her the conflict between warring aspects of her identities. Thus the poet remains ever the seeker, sometimes exhilarated, more often lachrymose, but always insatiable.



4. Conclusion

In this mini-dissertation we have seen how female identity is a process, and how primary identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men, but female social roles are more rigid and less varied than men's. It has been argued that the overall and unifying theme of Das's poetry is her insatiable desire for love. In her poem 'The Bangles', she reveals the desperate loneliness of an unfulfilled marriage and of adultery:

Where does a woman go who is
Loved but finds love not enough,
To a flatlet away from town.
Drapes her windows darkly to make
The lonely noons lightless like
Wombs... and sobs piteously in
Afternoon sleep.

(The Bangles, ll.1-7)

A 'flatlet' (l.13) is an inexpensive, hired apartment away from the city centre and, by implication, an ideal location for bored and lonely housewives to have extra-marital affairs. Here the speaker describes her dark flatlet as a 'womb' (l.6) – a common literary metaphor for comfort and safety. I think that Das's poetic persona, who here longs for the emotional refuge of a womb, is encapsulated by the self-definition, 'a woman who is/ Loved but finds love not enough' (l.1-2).

In highlighting the value of writing such as Das's, Gardiner (1981:361) says, 'contemporary women's literature promises that a sense of full, valued and congruent female identity may form in the continuing process of give and take that re-creates both self and other in a supportive community of women.' Throughout her poetry, the use of informal and often conversational language, her intimate and frank tone, and the confessional content of her poetry, make her persona's desire for fulfilment one that the poet's readers can easily relate to.

Das's fears and hopes may be succinctly summarised by a fellow woman poet, Anne Sexton, who writes in her poem 'The Lost Ingredient' (Sexton et al., 1988:25):

Today is made of yesterday, each time I steal
toward rites I do not know, waiting for the lost
ingredient, as if salt or money or even lust would

keep us calm and prove us whole at last.

(The Lost Ingredient, ll. 21-24)

The poetic persona in Das's poems attempts to use many of these 'ingredient[s]' (l.23). Her poems are like personal testimonies of her experiences in sexual encounters, betrayals, the manipulation of desire power, the lure of urban living and the relief of death. They detail her yearning to be content or 'calm' (l.24) and explore how romance, tradition, social conventions, excessive freedom and lust cannot satisfy her or ever prove her emotionally 'whole at last' (l.24).

In general, the work of Indian women writers is significant in making their society more aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression. Kamala Das's writing is significant in that her honest investigation of her 'self' and her search for identity as expressed through her poetry bring us as readers to a new understanding of the complex nature of 'endless female hungers' (The Looking Glass, l.16).

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